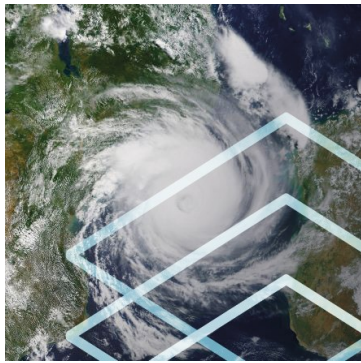




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Religion and Climate Change

Willis Jenkins, Katherine Tarrant, Robin Globus Veldman, Devin Zuckerman

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Abstract

This article describes ways that understanding religion can advance understanding of climate change. It assesses the state of research on three central questions: (a) whether religions (generally or diversely) contribute to the causes of climate change; (b) how religious institutions, ideas, and practices shape responses to climate change; and (c) whether climate stresses may be causing changes in religion. Working with multiple scholarly approaches to the study of religion, it sketches the fields of inquiry that have developed around those questions in the 21st century, often in subfields focused on particular traditions or regions. This synthetic overview focuses on methodological challenges and the formation of shared research problems. The article shows how research on religion bears implications for key areas of understanding climate, including the cultural politics of skepticism, relations of science to values, ideas of responsibility and justice, connections of ritual to ecological change, affective experiences of environmental change, and cosmological frames for interpreting this moment of planetary history.

Keywords: [religion](#), [culture](#), [ethics](#), [values](#), [Buddhism](#), [Christianity](#), [Hinduism](#), [Islam](#), [Indigenous Traditions](#)

Subject: [Communication Studies](#), [Earth Sciences and Geography](#), [Environmental Thought and Ideology](#), [\(Social Science\)](#)

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Introduction

In its Sixth Assessment Report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for the first time discussed the social and cultural importance of religion in human responses to climate change. Writing that “religion could play an important role in enabling collective action on climate change by providing cultural interpretations of change and institutional responses,” the IPCC described religion as a “cultural resource” to the transformations necessary to mitigation, observed responses to climate change as well as counter-movements in several religious geographies, and called policymakers to involve religious constituencies (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022, p. 556).

The IPCC’s brief, ambivalent paragraph raises a nest of questions. What is religion and how is it different from other cultural elements? What kind of roles could it play in collective action and social transformation? What roles has it actually played in energy behavior and climate politics to this point? Who are religious constituencies and how should researchers understand the diversity of their interpretations of climate change? What do the wide range of responses to climate indicate about religions?

Pursuing those inquiries is critical for climate research to meaningfully engage religious people and perspectives, yet the questions are difficult to frame well because the concept of religion is employed in a variety of uses. The plural “religions” typically refers to a (longer or shorter) list of special cultural formations, sometimes “world religions,” that have historically been designated as distinct from other spheres of social life recognized by modern thought. Yet the adjective “religious” applies to a broader range of cultural phenomena and psychological experience, often beyond the bounds of the recognized religions. Meanwhile, the singular “religion” may refer to something else again: perhaps to a universal domain of human existence that exceeds the other two uses or, more critically, to a social operation authorizing certain cultural expressions as special and normative. Ambiguity of the terms may be one reason why climate researchers have tended to avoid engaging religion. Another may be that in secular discourses the category of religion is sometimes employed to designate phenomena arrayed opposite to reason, science, or pluralist politics. Religion thus can seem undefinable or irrational; either way, it seems irrelevant to a science-based understanding of climate change.

However, ignoring religion can lead researchers away from widespread forms of social organization; from norms and values influential for many people; from traditions, knowledge, practices, and places that orient a sense of meaning in many contexts; and from constellations of narrative, identity, and power that shape political relations. To ignore religion in climate research would be to attempt to explain how humans interact with planetary systems without accounting for relations by which most of the world’s humans understand themselves.

Research in this area emerges from about three decades of organized comparative scholarship on religion and environment (sometimes “religion and nature” or “religion and ecology”), which has developed multiple methods for analyzing patterns of interaction and interpretation with more-than-human relations. Cosmologies, in that broad sense, have often been its focus. Contemporary work sometimes extends that focus by treating climate change as a symbol of the broader theme of nature and culture or of the human place amidst all kinds of environmental injustice. The focus here is more specifically on research about religion-related interactions with atmospheric functioning, related social and ecological impacts, and political responses. The article mostly leaves aside the great body of work on cosmologies and nature-related religiosity and can merely note intersections with the related subfields of religion and animals, religion and extinctions, religion and political ecology, and religion and technology.

Asking about religion and climate change puts critical pressure on both terms. “Climate change” in religious studies research does not always align within its referent in scientific discourse. It sometimes refers to a locally specific problem (e.g., adapting to glacier retreat) and other times to planetary shift, to the challenge of global coordination and to a regional political discourse, to a suite of technological solutions and to an

intergenerational project of cultural transformation, to a shared human challenge and to a neocolonial imposition. The different senses of climate change call for different methods and scales of analysis. Some researchers inquire about religious changes of the sort that unfold over months (e.g., opinion surveys targeted to political cycles), others about those unfolding over decades (e.g., climate-involved alliances of political party and religious institution), and others about those unfolding over centuries (e.g., shifting emphases in doctrine).

Meanwhile, attending to climate change puts pressure on modern concepts of religion. This article notes how Indigenous climate knowledges sometimes create friction with the idea of religion, how nature-based spiritualities sometimes present themselves outside of religion, and where scholars call for new methods and questions to account for the new worlds being made on a warming planet. Who represents religion for a research context is always important to ask. Some scholars attend to official leaders or interpretive elites, others to everyday participants and lived experience. Some have in mind the life of a local community, others a regional expression, others a global institution or network.

This article cannot encompass all the diversities of tradition, community, and geography gathered under the term *religion*. Rather, the article sketches key research questions relevant to many contexts. This approach illustrates how the academic study of religion sheds light on climate change, variously understood. Building from earlier work to shape this field (Haluza-Delay, 2014; Hulme, 2017; Jenkins, 2021b; Jenkins et al., 2018; Veldman et al., 2012), for reasons of scope the article focuses on recent English-language research and on emerging lines for future research. The article also explains how the volume of research focused on Christianity and the North Atlantic has disproportionately shaped the field and therefore the article pays particular attention to how research with other traditions and regions bears on key research questions.

Across methods and perspectives introduced here, the article advances the basic claim that understanding human dimensions of climate change requires understanding religious dimensions of human experience. The causes and impacts of anthropogenic global warming, as well as responses to its manifestations, are conditioned by various ways that human life is entangled with religion. How people interpret, feel, or act in regard to climate change is often shaped by religious formations, whether explicit or implicit, official or popular, avowed or inherited. What policies or other collective responses are possible can be constrained or expanded by religious institutions, and what social transformations seem possible may be impeded or inspired by religious imaginations. There can be no adequate understanding of climate change without engaging the study of religion.

Do Religions Contribute to Climate Change?

Whether religion affects attitudes or behaviors that are involved in causing or perpetuating anthropogenic climate change is a key question for understanding religion/climate interaction. Attending especially to social science research, this section uses three schema—timescale, context, and mechanism—to organize the literature. In terms of *timescale*, disciplines make different assumptions about the relevant temporal scale at religion might act to influence behavior. In terms of *context*, researchers highlight how religious influence is moderated by cultural context. In terms of *mechanism*, researchers have proposed various features of religion that could account for its ability to shape behavior. Woven across these sections is a fourth factor, *strength*: researchers describe religious influence with varying levels of causal efficacy, from nearly determining environmental behavior to (more weakly) providing interpretations that compete with scientific theories or interact in complex ways with other social bases for climate action.

No organizational schema can fully capture the underlying literature because the many contributing research fields employ distinct methods, assumptions, and scopes. Even important work on this topic often garners few citations because the study of a particular religion in relation to climate change is often read only by specialists. Necessarily selective in treatment, this section identifies influential ways of studying possible effects of

religion on climate change, drawing from empirical approaches in the fields of religious studies, sociology, anthropology, history, and political science.

Timescale

Religions operate at different timescales, from providing overarching beliefs which last millennia to forming believers' political views over decades, to shaping their perception of social issues on daily, monthly, or yearly basis (Wood, 2008). Much of the earliest work on how religions might shape environmental attitudes and behavior focused on the long term, understanding religions as acting over centuries to orient humanity. In a foundational paper, Lynn White (1967) argued that the modern environmental crisis was set in motion by anthropocentrism embedded in a version of the Christian salvation story. White blamed medieval European Christianity ("the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen") for a worldview of human domination. The "Lynn White thesis" set the agenda for research on religion and the environment for decades, and its assumptions remained foundational for later research on religion and climate change.

A second major theory from this period attributed the environmental crisis to the Scientific Revolution. The hypothesis was that, in the rise of modern science, nature was reconceptualized from sentient, living relations into the terms of an inert machine, opening it to full human control (Merchant, 1980). While citing different time periods and mechanisms, both White and Merchant attributed modern environmental exploitation to a shift in European thought from nature as alive and communicative to inert resource. Some scholars have linked that shift and its long-term impact on climate change to displacement of animist and Indigenous traditions by otherworldly religions (Taylor, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). On that account, the otherworldly Christianity authorizing colonialism abetted the disruption and stigmatization of Indigenous forms of governance organized around kinship and moral reciprocity with nonhuman entities, which is now culminating in reckless disregard for the atmosphere (Whyte, 2017).

White and Merchant followed the scholarship of their time by searching for the historical origins of the environmental crisis over the long term. Interest in this timescale has been revived by scholars in the "energy humanities" studying how fossil fuel use shapes culture. Key works in this area have shown how British Presbyterians, American Calvinists, and American mainline and Evangelical/fundamentalist Protestants were active in developing and championing energy industries, industrialism, and Anglo-American imperialism (Daggett, 2019; Dochuk, 2019; Stoll, 1997). In the United States, from the 19th to the 21st century, various Protestant denominations justified different forms of oil extraction, the profits from which were often plowed back into missionary work, thus increasing American Christianity's global reach (Dochuk, 2019). Some scholars in this field also point to the entanglement of Christianity with colonialism, drawing a causal line from the Doctrine of Discovery (15th-century papal teachings that gave European colonists the right to subjugate and exploit lands not ruled by Christians) to a modern energy culture centered on global resource extraction (Rowe, 2023). At the timescale of centuries, it is impossible to separate Christianity from the historical processes that led to the modern world's dependence on fossil fuels.

At the timescale of decades or less, the internal divisions and ambivalence within Christianity become clearer. Beginning in the 1990s, scholarship on Christianity treated as a single, internally consistent tradition gave way to more granular analyses of *Christianities*—specific traditions in particular places and times. Yet empirical scholarship continued to focus on the United States and on Christianity, with implications that have become evident as research with other regions and traditions reconsiders key questions. The context to that scholarly turn in the early 2000s was the emergence of politically active religious environmental movements and a powerful climate denial movement within the United States, along with increased efforts toward global cooperation on climate change in which the United States was a key player. These several pressures led social scientists and environmental activists alike to search for predictors of climate concern within the U.S. electorate, including religious belief, behavior, and belonging.

Some scholars began to ask if a “greening of religions” movement was under way (Kearns, 1996; Taylor, 2011). In support of that hypothesis, by 2005 all of the major religious traditions in the United States had visibly engaged with climate concern. Others observed, however, that in none of these traditions did climate concern predominate; rather, it usually ranked below the many other social issues that religious organizations address (Veldman et al., 2014). Empirical work has so far failed to find strong evidence for the greening of religion hypothesis (Clements et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2016).

One of the most significant phenomena for researchers to understand—highly visible at the decadal scale—is the emergence of an Evangelical climate denial movement. For most of the surveyed religious traditions in the United States, association with climate skepticism drops out once statistical controls are added, but for Evangelicals, the association remains (e.g., Ecklund et al., 2016; Veldman et al., 2020). This and the tradition’s size (as of 2025, it was the largest Protestant tradition in the United States) have led scholars to make Evangelicalism one of the most active areas of research. Historical and contemporary work shows that while an Evangelical environmental movement began to institutionalize in the early 1990s, leading to Evangelical climate initiatives in the early 2000s, the Evangelical mainstream never embraced those initiatives as it became increasingly influenced by the Religious Right. This exposed conservative Evangelicals to strong antienvironmental currents within the Republican Party, partially accounting for their eventual embrace of climate skepticism (Pogue, 2022; Veldman, 2019; Wilkinson, 2012). So rather than showing a general greening trend, research suggests that conservative groups within religions have gravitated toward skepticism or indifference to climate change, while liberal groups have gravitated toward acceptance and, in some cases, activism (Veldman et al., 2014). Yet political affiliation does not fully explain climate views; survey research from the United States shows that politically liberal Evangelicals, Black Protestants, and Catholics less likely to be concerned than nonreligious liberals (Arbuckle, 2017). Across Evangelical, Catholicism, and Jewish groups in the United States, theological traditionalism is a strong predictor of climate skepticism (Kearns, 2012; Kellstedt & Guth, 2024).

At the timescale of years or months—a crucial timescale in election cycles—researchers ask how religious discourse may shape adherents’ climate attitudes via cues from religious elites, religious news media coverage, coverage of religious activism in the secular news media, and social media activity. For example, some papers tested for a “Francis effect”: that is, whether Pope Francis’s climate change encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, influenced Catholics’ attitudes. Research finds some general effects on raising climate awareness (Maibach, 2015) but also that local cultural and political context matters. In the United States, *Laudato Si’* had an impact on those who already approved of Pope Francis’s leadership but was more limited in influence on those who did not, including conservative and white Catholics (Buckley, 2022; Jones & Cox, 2015; Wilkins, 2020). On the other hand, for Q’eqchi’-Maya Catholics in Guatemala, there is evidence that the message resonated with religious leaders and laypeople alike (Hoenes del Pinal, 2019), while in Africa researchers observe that the encyclical prompted conferences and workshops but that activism was limited by political conditions (Nche, 2022).

In sum, these findings suggest that, even for a single religious tradition, the causal arrow can point in different directions depending on the timescale of analysis.

Context

As research has expanded globally, researchers have increasingly documented the extent to which cultural context matters. Work on Evangelical Christianity demonstrates this point well. In the United States and Australia, Evangelicalism is associated with higher levels of climate skepticism (Pepper & Leonard, 2016; Morrison et al., 2015). Yet studies of Evangelicalism in Europe and Latin America do not find the same association (Björnberg & Karlsson, 2022; Ecker et al., 2024; Smith & Veldman, 2020). Research from Africa is mixed, sometimes linking evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity to reduced conservation practices and sometimes to adaptive resilience in the face of climate impacts (Chérif & Greenberg, 2014; Murphy et al., 2016; Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2014). Even in the United States, when one shifts from asking about basic attitudes toward climate change to local responses to risk, phenomena that generally correlate with lower climate concern (church attendance and strong sense of divine action) may be significant for understanding how a specific community organizes in response to coastal vulnerability (Miller Hesed et al., 2020).

Studies of Islam similarly demonstrate findings that vary by context. Research focusing on Europe found that Muslims were more concerned about climate change than Christians were, while the nonreligious were more concerned than both (Van Praag & De Coninck, 2025). However, research focusing on the Middle East found that Christians were more concerned about climate change than Muslims were, and the highly religious (whether Muslim or Christian) were more concerned than the nonreligious (Mazaheri, 2024). The latter finding is complicated by data showing that respondents who favored Islamist governments were more likely to be skeptical of climate change, which they may see as a Western stratagem designed to undermine the power of Islamic countries (Koehrsen, 2021; Mazaheri, 2024). In coastal Tanzania, Muslims interpreted declining soil fertility and drought as the withdrawal of God's blessing (Raycraft, 2021), although elsewhere those same ideas have been shown to mobilize climate adaptation measures (Koehrsen, 2021).

There is some evidence, albeit thin, that affiliation with Buddhism, Confucianism, or Daoism correlates with higher climate concern. A survey from Australia found that Buddhists were more concerned about climate change than was any other religious group, including atheist/agnostic (Morrison et al., 2015). Research in China reports that people with "traditional Eastern beliefs" were more likely than those with Western beliefs or with "no religion" to exhibit willingness to sacrifice for environmental action (Yang & Lu, 2024). To answer the question of whether and where religions have an effect on climate action, one needs more cross-national survey research, especially involving Asian contexts and traditions. One can at least say, however, that patterns found in the United States are not reliable as universal hypotheses. While in the United States people who are less religious tend to worry more about climate change, survey data from other geographies find higher climate concern among people who are more religious (Kvaløy et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2019; Tsimpo & Wodon, 2016). Global traditions do not have a uniform impact on climate attitudes; context matters.

Mechanism

Following the trajectory set by discussion of the White thesis, early scholarship tended to focus on belief as the key mechanism of religious influence on environmental behavior. Numerous papers have tested whether beliefs about dominion, apocalypticism, individualism/antistructuralism, biblical literalism, or science reduce climate change concern among U.S. Christians. These studies suppose that religious belief operates in a strong or direct sense to shape climate attitudes by sanctioning exploitation or apathy. Findings from studies around the world find religious interpretation shaping climate action in a weaker or indirect sense. Apart from explicit religious opposition to climate action, some researchers find that religions undermine science-based climate actions by convincing people that their experiences of negative environmental change are caused by something other than greenhouse gas emissions (e.g., immoral behavior, declining religious observance), that natural entities are too powerful to be harmed by human activities, or that prayer and repentance will solve the problem (Drew, 2012, 2021; Haberman, 2021; Johnson, 2012; Rudiak-Gould, 2013; Taylor et al., 2016). At the same time, these responses may sometimes be an attempt to maintain a basis for meaningful responsibility. Especially in communities experiencing climate impacts yet exercising little global political influence, attributing environmental changes to local moral actions may be a way to reclaim a sense of agency from overwhelming accounts of planetary forces and global politics (Jenkins, 2021a). In Oceania, for example, Cecile Rubow (2021) finds increased storminess and agricultural changes attributed to the local community's relationship with God. Complicating that finding, however, Rubow finds that Christians involved in regional or international networks enacted religious ideas of responsibility more compatible with climate science (Rubow, 2021).

As researchers begin to question the assumption that religions influence environmental behavior primarily in a cognitive manner, interest grows in how the social aspects of religious life shape attitudes and behavior. Research on this mechanism has shown that social norms within congregations and the kinds of habitual practices that are cultivated there can be more influential than a tradition's explicit teachings about climate change (Djupe & Gwiasda, 2010; Vaidyanathan et al., 2018). Social and behavioral norms have been shown to be powerful factors sustaining climate skepticism within both American Evangelical and Catholic communities (Veldman, 2019; Vincentnathan et al., 2016). Work informed by affect theory has argued that religious shaping of emotion and mood, rather than formal beliefs, better explains how people receive climate science (Schaefer, 2022).

Ritual is another mechanism by which religions might shape adherents' attitudes or behavior. Ritual has long been investigated for its potential role in helping societies stay in balance with their local environments (e.g., Lansing, 2009; Rappaport, 1967). Many ethnographers report that, in regions experiencing adverse shifts in climate, people are initiating rituals in hopes of restoring balance or divine favor (Bell, 2014; Carreño, 2021; Paerregaard, 2021; Rudiak-Gould, 2013). A challenge for local rituals developed amidst slower rates of social change is responding to landscape changes caused by global capitalism and planetary climate change (Gagné, 2021). Rituals of confession and absolution may be taking new forms as religion-like rituals to negotiate dynamics of climate guilt develop in online spaces (Fredericks, 2021).

Directions for Future Research

In the 21st century, some scholars have questioned assumptions that shaped initial empirical research on religion and climate. Many have questioned the methodological influence of White's critique of Western Christianity (e.g., Whitney, 2016), while others note the influence of Western environmentalist attraction to Indigenous and Buddhist ideas and critique environmental readings of religious traditions that differ considerably from how insiders understand and enact their traditions (Baugh, 2020; Gade, 2019; Tomalin, 2009/2016). Other scholars have argued that nonmodern conceptions of personhood, familiar to religious studies from traditions in which nonhuman beings exercise agency or make moral claims, should have a stronger methodological role in how research is designed and pursued (Bacigalupo, 2024; Jenkins, 2023; LeVasseur, 2021; Todd, 2016).

As prospects for international cooperation in climate change have dimmed and autocracy has risen, research on religion and climate has turned increasingly toward analyzing the political realm (Berry, 2022; Drew, 2017). At the national and transnational scale, 21st-century work argues that political opportunity structure matters more than a religion's normative commitments for its ability to affect climate policy (Berry, 2022). A related area of research growth has been in religious nationalism (Veldman et al., 2024). In Europe, Brazil, and the United States, far right parties and allied religious actors have been generally skeptical of anthropogenic climate change (dos Santos & Kearns, 2024; Fiorino, 2022; Forchtner, 2019). A number of scholars find elective affinities between white supremacy, anti-immigrant views, and support for fossil fuel use in the United States and Europe (Hartman, 2024; Malm & The Zetkin Collective, 2021; Rowe, 2023). On the other hand, research on Hindu nationalism in India finds strong affiliation with climate change politics and renewable energy production (Sharma, 2025; Tomalin, 2024; Vedwan, 2022).

For future research, several directions are important. First, to better understand under what circumstances and via what mechanisms religions contribute to climate change, one needs more and better research from outside the United States and Global North and, relatedly, more and better research about all non-Christian religions. Comparative studies of single traditions across contexts are especially needed (e.g., Islam compared across climate contexts of West Africa, Persian Gulf, and Oceania). On Christianity, there is a need for more empirical work from Latin and South America, Eastern Europe, Africa, Central Asia, and East Asia. Second, while the dominant religion in one of the global superpowers, U.S. Christianity, has been analyzed extensively in existing research, the major religions of two other superpowers have received comparatively little attention: studies of climate change among the Eastern Orthodox in Russia and among the multiple religious formations in China are almost nonexistent. Finally, following innovative studies of how religious elements interact with climate discourse media and internet, there is a need for more work that investigates the religion–climate change nexus in online spaces (see Fredericks, 2021; Taylor, 2019).

How Does Religion Figure in Responses to Climate Change?

When the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report recognized that support for government policies and other forms of collective action is shaped at least partly by religion, its description disclosed several assumptions about religious responses. By observing that "religion could play an important role in enabling collective action" and by calling for policymakers to engage religious constituencies, its phrasing implied three suppositions about religious responses: that they are *instrumental* to achieving shared goals but not formative of those goals, that they have *not yet* played an important role but could do so, and that religious responses are *marginal to the secular, mainstream standpoint* of the IPCC. Some religious responses agree with those suppositions and work accordingly, but this section also shows some responses that contest them. They may hold that their work is not instrumental to extrinsic goals but morally valuable in itself and contributory to shaping globally shared goals. While they sometimes regard their climate responses as new developments in their traditions, they sometimes present them as continuous with long-standing practices or teachings. Third, they sometimes regard their values as corrective to mainstream or secular standpoints on climate change.

Those divergent perspectives only strengthen the basic IPCC claim that climate researchers need to understand religious constituencies. At the same time, they demonstrate the importance of critical reflection on what *religion* means for different users of the term and how "religious constituencies" are identified. In some cases, the terms *religion* and *climate* may be the researcher's concepts for constructing relations understood in different terms by the people they research. This section offers several ways of identifying religious constituencies and multiple methods for engaging the significance of climate change in their worlds. The section synthesizes the research on religious responses under four questions developed from *descriptive* anthropological approaches to religion and climate that identify issues for comparative analysis. The section includes within that synthesis scholarship emerging from within specific religious communities as an expression of their perspective ("*confessional*") and scholarship engaging with specific religious practices or ideas for analytic interpretation of climate change ("*constructive*"). The section also notes where research construes religious constituencies by membership in a *tradition* and where it does so instead by *geography*, perhaps informed by multiple traditions (see Jenkins, 2017a).

For researchers who find religious interpretations of any sort difficult to engage, the framework of "relational values" may help. Arising from global sustainability sciences, relational values refer to culturally particular preferences for specific human–nature relationships (Chan et al., 2016). Considering, for example, the sacred status of the Ganga River within Hinduism or the constituting relation of the Tlingit nation with salmon as relational values affords a way for global change researchers to recognize the contextual value a particular community has for certain more-than-human beings or processes. Religion-related climate values thus can be approached in a pluralist frame of inquiry as locally normative, culturally specific interpretations of human–nature interactions.

How Are People Drawing on Religious Ideas or Practices to Interpret Climate-Related Changes?

This question asks how people work with the elements of a religious world to make sense of puzzling landscape changes or unusual moral relations with weather. People who understand themselves to be members of a religious community have an ostensible commitment to interpret their life and world in terms of a shared tradition. For example, some ethnographic research depicts Himalayan Buddhist communities drawing on Vajrayana Buddhism to incorporate new vulnerabilities to glacier instability within traditional frameworks and practices for interacting with landscape beings (Allison, 2015). Ethnographies from contexts of global Christian Evangelicalism describe communities sometimes interpreting rising seas as a sign of divine judgment, sometimes inscribing climate action into neighbor love, sometimes appealing to divine providence to dismiss climate concerns. Such interpretations are most identifiable when they take the form of a statement from an official body, so this article (a) notes some shared qualities of recent official statements before (b) distinguishing constructive scholarly interpretations of traditions and geographies, (c) explaining how Indigenous climate responses challenge methods of research, and (d) considering research on nature-based spiritualities.

Official Statements

Without reviewing all the formal statements from religious bodies in the decades since international recognition of climate change as a global challenge, this section notes some thematic foci shared across tradition and organization, with particular attention to statements published for or since the 2015 Paris Conference. While each reflects the particularities of the body which issued it, early 21st-century statements have tended to converge on (1) multidimensional valuation of the Earth, (2) affirmation of moral responsibility for climate change, and (3) the pursuit of social, spiritual, and ethical transformations.

First, many statements demonstrate awareness of the material value of natural resources and the economic calculations involved in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts while calling for recognition of other kinds of value. The World Council of Church's (2022) statement, "The Living Planet," calls for the global adoption of carbon taxes and new international debt forgiveness mechanisms to promote climate resilience, while it also recognizes inherent value for creation. Many statements articulate intrinsic or spiritual value for nature or relational value for ecological connections of communal life. In keeping with the interpretive frameworks of their source traditions, some statements argue that the Earth and the networks of life it supports should be regarded as sacred. For example, in their statement to the Twenty-First UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) Conference of the Parties (COP), the Indigenous Elders and Medicine Peoples Council refers to sacred places, sacred life, and the "sacred cooling system of Mother Earth," arguing that humanity's survival in an age of climate change depends upon the recognition and protection of these spiritual value centers (Looking Horse et al., 2016). Other statements attend to the neglected value of the Earth by framing anthropogenic climate change as the rejection or misuse of divine gifts. In his statement to COP 24, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I wrote: "the way we relate to nature as creation reflects the way we relate to God as Creator," framing the Earth and its vulnerable inhabitants as core participants in the relationship between the divine and human persons (Bartholomew, 2018).

Second, many statements affirm human responsibility for climate change and condemn neglect. How they articulate responsibility varies with the diversity of religious discourses around duty, harm, guilt, selfhood, and related concepts. The statement "The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change" (2015) positions climate change as "the ecological consequences of our own collective karma," a large-scale manifestation of the "three poisons" of greed, ill will, and delusion. Working with a different theological language, the United Methodist Church's Resolution #1035 (2016) asserts that climate change is a manifestation of humanity's "sinful disregard for creation" rooted in the vices of "neglect, selfishness, and pride." By framing

the climate crisis as a new manifestation of ancient moral problems and perennial liabilities of human nature, religious authorities can apply lessons from traditional sources of wisdom. For example, “Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth,” a teaching document developed by a team of Islamic scholars and diplomats, provides a theological account of humanity’s proper relationship to the Earth, from which it critiques objectification of the Earth and misconceptions about the nature of development and wealth. Like many such statements, “Al-Mizan” states that responsibility for climate change is not shared equally across cultures, classes, or nations, and affirms that the act of taking the responsibility to address climate change is a human duty (Al-Mizan, 2024).

Third, many statements call for transformation or a paradigm shift, although they differ in how they describe the needed transformation. Some religious authorities assert that humanity must experience a collective internal transformation of the mind or heart in order to meaningfully confront ecological crises. For example, the first “Hindu Declaration on Climate Change” (Convocation of Hindu Spiritual Leaders, 2009) argues that human survival hinges on our ability to make a “major transition of consciousness,” setting aside strife and the spirit of competition in favor of cooperation and holism. Alternatively, other statements focus on more material transformations in behavioral patterns or systems of production. The 2019 “Jain Declaration on Climate Change” (JAINA: Federation of Jain Associations of America, 2019), for instance, encourages believers to be mindful in their energy consumption, politically advocate for reforms to industrial farming, and apply the Jain principle of *Aparigraha* (nonpossessiveness) in their daily consumption habits. While statements differ in their emphasis on either internal or external modes of transformation, many call for a broader shift in shared social values.

Perhaps the most visible formal statement of this kind so far has been *Laudato Si’*, issued by Pope Francis in 2015. This encyclical argued that “the technocratic paradigm”—a dominant worldview which exalts technological power and progress—produces insufficient valuations of the natural world and obscures the Global North’s responsibility for climate change (Francis I, 2015). Accordingly, Francis called for a transformation of individual mindset and behavior and a broader societal turn toward the pursuit of justice in all relations. In a subsequent document titled *Laudate Deum* (Francis, 2023), the pope called for a new “framework for effective cooperation” across faiths and global stakeholders. Desire for this kind of cooperation was also expressed in an interfaith statement presented by religious authorities present at COP 28 Global Faith Leaders’ Summit (2023). Issued “in the spirit of unity,” this statement calls for the global embrace of a “new inclusive and just development paradigm” grounded in diverse forms of religious and scientific knowledge.

In some cases, these institutional statements prompted the creation or reinvigoration of religious climate action organizations. Pope Francis’ encyclical led to the formation of the *Laudato Si’* Movement, a network of Catholic communities which pursue political advocacy, fossil fuel divestment, and sustainable transitions. Inspired by the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, international nongovernmental organization Islamic Relief applies the legal principle *Waqf* (charitable endowment) to combat poverty by funding green agricultural and small business development. Guided by their own founding statement on the link between economic and ecological justice, the Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition offers participants funding for climate advocacy efforts in coordination with climate education programming.

Constructive Interpretations

Beyond official statements of institutional bodies to climate change, there are also many religious responses produced by scholars or religious members. These works sometimes speak in a confessional voice, appealing to a particular community’s sources of authority for the sake of its self-understanding. Sometimes they speak more broadly, analyzing climate relations as interpreted through a religious community for the sake of more adequate understanding across contexts. In both modes, these interpretations work constructively with religious content to advance understanding of climate relations.

For an example of a scholar reworking traditional wisdom to instruct broader social contexts, Laurie Zoloth (2023), in *Ethics for the Coming Storm*, argues that Jewish scriptural, rabbinic, and philosophical traditions offer an existential account of exile and a corresponding ethic of radical hospitality that should inform Western responses to climate migration and mass deprivation. Other scholars work differently with the sources of Jewish law, emphasizing how rabbinic tort structures can be adapted to deal with cumulative harms of climate change (Mayse & Weisberg, 2022). Yet they share a commitment to interpret climate change through arguments over how to interpret Judaism (see Krone, 2024). Similarly, in *Signs on the Earth*, Islamic ecotheologian Fazlun Khalid (2019) argues that a set of scripturally derived Islamic principles he calls “*Ilm’ul-Khalq*” (Knowledge of Creation)—including *khilafa* (responsible stewardship), *mizan* (natural balance), and *tawhid* (unity)—can provide a moral foundation for efforts to confront climate change in the Islamic world. Again, others engage climate change differently by interpreting Islam differently (Koehrsen, 2021), as in the emphasis on specific carbon policies in some Indonesian Islamic schools working through traditional methods of Islamic jurisprudence (Sobirin & Khasanah, 2023). A similar constructive approach can be found in many works developed from Christianity; for example, theologian Jürgen Moltmann’s (2020) argument in *The Spirit of Hope* develops an account of hope in times of suffering and instability from reflection on Christian virtues like mercy and solidarity.

Constructive interpretation may also arise from a shared geography rather than a shared tradition. For example, the volume *African Perspectives on Religion and Climate Change* (Chitando et al., 2022) stands out for convening a range African academics and religious practitioners to comment on how climate change is engaged across the continent’s diverse religious landscapes. Like many constructive works arising from Global South regions, the scholarship here foregrounds the impacts of colonization. Anticolonial responses to climate change include movements to secure the legal rights of sacred landscapes. In 2010, the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia issued the “Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth” (2010), demanding legal rights for Earth as a “living being.” A global movement for the rights of nature as a response to climate change, often based on the spiritual and political significance of particular lands or rivers to Indigenous communities, has since advanced (Fuchs, 2025).

Indigenous Traditions as Religion?

Geography-organized research often finds people drawing from multiple religious traditions as they work to make sense of climate change. Researchers in Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan note the combined influence of Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indigenous land protocols (Chakraborty et al., 2021). In South America, they find people working with Christian beliefs and Indigenous cosmopolitics and sometimes developing new rituals shaped from both inheritances (Paerregaard, 2013). In some contexts, climate responses may reactivate tensions between so-called “world religions” and the preexisting land protocols or spiritualities whose authority they sought to dislodge or subsume. Across contexts, there is some evidence of work to recover Indigenous or nature-based spiritualities in response to climate-stressed political ecology pressures.

Those cases raise anew the question of whether Indigenous knowledges and practices should be studied as religion. Indigenous traditions have become prominent in response to climate change as global Indigenous coalitions have developed shared voice and politics. Should those traditions be regarded as religions? The dilemmas of the question are made by colonial purposes of the modern category of religion, with particular consequence in the case of climate change. Modern ideas of religion were developed alongside the category of animism. Those ideas of religion helped justify colonial mandates to subjugate societies seen as less developed societies—and they can continue to operate that way in relation to Indigenous climate perspectives. Classifying Indigenous ecological knowledges as religious or spiritual, as opposed to secular and scientific, has been used to marginalize their ecological observation as unscientific and so inessential to policy.

In the early 21st century, climate science bodies have worked to remedy that exclusion by recognizing Indigenous knowledge. However, if Indigenous representatives present their climate knowledge as scientific, it can be subject to rules that strip away the sacred relations from which the knowledge is produced and has its significance. In that case, the category of religion may help articulate the cultural significance of impacts on Indigenous lifeways. Insofar as understanding impacts of climate change requires recognizing the more-than-human relations and cultural practices that carry Indigenous ecological knowledge and collective survival, appealing to the idea of the sacred, and thus to religion, can indicate the depth of meanings at stake. It may help suggest that procedural justice requires the right to describe climate impacts and responses in sacred terms. Blackfeet historian of religion Rosalyn LaPier takes this approach, arguing that climate impacts threaten sacred relations and that Indigenous protest should be rightly regarded and protected as religious expression (LaPier, 2017).

That approach, however, must navigate postcolonial uses of religion that continue to undermine Indigenous sovereignty. Religious expressions of land protocols may be taken by modern states to operate outside the bounds for religion constructed by secular states. Settler states have used categories of religion and politics to dismiss Indigenous claims that their sovereignty includes relations with nonhuman kin, with the practical consequences that lands and waters remain open for extraction (Deloria, 1973/2023; Lloyd, 2022). Or, in a different way of being victimized by settler ideas of religion, environmental conservationists may premise their support for Indigenous land claims on the assumption that lands they hold sacred cannot be used for anything other than practices that settlers recognize as spiritual. Either way, non-Indigenous premises about religion can wrest territorial sovereignty away from Indigenous peoples. In short, when researchers describe communities working with Indigenous traditions to respond to climate change, they need to examine how those traditions interact with modern categories of religion and to what purposes. Indigenous communities may work with the terms “religion,” “sacred,” “animism,” and “tradition,” in different ways, according to the needs and possibilities of their context.

Nature-Based Spiritualities

Another group with an ambiguous relation to the category of religion are the many participants in nature-based spiritualities. Some of these participants present themselves as neo-pagan or animist and so as belonging to a religious world. However, sometimes participants disavow a connection to religion, presenting their relations with nature as grounded in science, shaped by the Romantic imagination, or informed by Indigenous traditions. People sharing a sense of nature as sacred often incline to the category “spiritual but not religious” in order to signal their disaffiliation with conventional religion. When they do so in response to climate stresses, perhaps because they seek a more fitting spiritual or affective life in ecological relations, the emergence of ecological spiritualities can be understood as a form of religious response to climate change.

When “flowing from a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred and interconnected,” Bron Taylor describes their convergence into he calls “dark green religion” (Taylor, 2009, p. 13). Taylor thinks these spiritualities may be converging into a new kind of global Earth religion, partly in response to a sense of a planet in peril. Other scholars find people concerned about environmental stress developing new forms of ritual and multispecies moral community, sometimes through creative recoveries of pre-Christian animacies (thus the recovery of *pagan* as a self-identifying term) or in distinctive modern Buddhist approaches to deep ecology (Macy & Brown, 1998). Less formally, scholars of popular spirituality find flows of nature-oriented veneration throughout media that may also be related to elevated levels of cultural concern about climate (Taylor, 2019).

The main points here are that religious responses to climate change may include cultural formations not consistently categorized as religion, that people may draw from multiple religious traditions in their responses, and that religious responses include hybrid, syncretic, and novel deployments from multiple cultural flows. For

each case, researchers develop a way to ask how people work with the elements of a religious world to make sense of moral and political relations with climate.

How Are Traditions Changing as They Respond to the New Problems and Relations of Climate Change?

A separate line of investigation asks what happens to the inherited ideas and practices of a tradition or geography as they are applied to the relations and problems of climate change. For example, David Haberman has investigated how forms of Hinduism along the River Ganga interpret climate-accelerated flooding, finding that, for some people, there is a shift in affective experience of the divine Ganga, which becomes also a shift in how they experience divine forgiveness and divine judgment (Haberman, 2021). Haberman finds that people sometimes appeal simultaneously to scientific and divine orders of causation to explain the flooding, which suggests there may be shifting tensions in the competing orders of interpretation from religion and science. While these are broad epistemological and normative tensions that affect every religion, this section brings them into focus by foregrounding scholarship on Asian religions. The section first (a) reviews how research on Asian traditions and climate change has developed and then (b) explains its significance for comparative inquiry across religious contexts.

The Study of Asian Religions & Ecology

Research on Asian traditions and climate change emerges from a modern history of scholarship with an ambiguous relationship to ecological concerns. A generation of scholarship on Asian religions was shaped by the methodological influence of environmental critiques of Christianity, most influentially expressed in White's thesis that the roots of modern ecological problems lie in a Western Christian worldview of anthropocentric domination. In some cases, Western scholars turned to Asian traditions for alternative cosmologies or ethical orientations; in some cases, they brought terms from the critique of Christianity to assess those traditions or decide what elements of a tradition to bring into focus. Early 21st-century research has raised questions about the depictions of Asian religions developed from those investigations and offered different ways to track religious changes in response to climate change.

English-language scholarship on Asian religions and ecology was catalyzed by a field-defining series of conferences at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions in the late 1990s. Those conferences led to the volumes *Buddhism and Ecology* (Tucker & Williams, 1997), *Hinduism and Ecology* (Chapple & Tucker, 2000), *Jainism and Ecology* (Chapple, 2002), *Confucianism and Ecology* (Tucker & Berthrong, 1998), and *Daoism and Ecology* (Girardot et al., 2001). These volumes sought to identify a common ground among traditions that could support mutual understanding, interreligious dialogue, and coordinated action on environmental issues. In service of that goal, they focused on worldviews and emphasized the doctrinal and textual readings that could support sustainability transformations. This "retrieval" model included Asian voices and scholars yet was shaped by a concern to find universal teachings that could be applied to what was understood as a global cultural crisis.

The priority for scholarship focusing on doctrinal wisdom over lived practice influenced the subsequent development of climate-engaged Buddhist thought. In North Atlantic scholarship, the most visible forms of Buddhist environmental practice have been significantly shaped by North Atlantic converts, often adapting Buddhist teachings to advance environmental concern. Figures like Joanna Macy (1991; *World as Lover, World as Self*) and David Loy (2019; *Ecodharma*) as well as edited volumes like Allen Badiner's (1990) *Dharma Gaia* and Stephanie Kaza's and Kenneth Kraft's (2000) *Dharma Rain* have emphasized the resonance between Buddhist philosophies and ecological thought. They consequently downplayed scholarship describing how Buddhist communities historically aligned with state and economic powers.

There are also significant movements of Asia-based Buddhist figures developing constructive ecological interpretations of their traditions. Thich Nhat Hanh, a major figure in the Engaged Buddhism movement, wrote extensively about climate concerns. In *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* (Hanh, 2021), he emphasized how Buddhist practices of mindfulness can promote personal ecological responsibilities. The 14th Dalai Lama (b. 1935), a spiritual lineage holder of the *Gelug* school of Tibetan Buddhism and political leader of the Tibetan government in exile, has frequently linked climate protection with Buddhist principles of compassion and nonviolence (Dalai Lama, 2018). The prominence of climate engagement in contemporary Buddhist discourses thus reflects a modern reinterpretation of Buddhist ethics connected to a shift in the broader religious and political terrains in which Buddhism now operates.

There are analogous tensions in the scholarship on how Hinduism may be changing through responses to modern environmental problems. Here, the scholarship has a longer record of attention to lived context and political power. Some early scholars of religion and environment presented Hinduism as broadly proecological (Callicott, 1994), while others argued that its traditions generally share an orientation to liberation from the material world, making it less amenable to environmental ethics (James, 2000). Writing from within that tension, Anil Agarwal, an Indian thinker and activist, writes that although Hinduism symbolically venerates nature—as evident in the sacred status of rivers, trees, and cows—such reverence is increasingly undermined by state-led modernization projects. Yet, at the same time, Agarwal argues that some Hindu traditions of emphasizing a transcendent Self discourage forms of public responsibility. To confront the modern development driving climate change, thinks Agarwal, Hinduism needs spiritual practices aligned with broader forms of community and care (Agarwal, 2000).

An influential precedent for broader forms of political responsibility grounded in reverence is the Chipko movement. This grassroots resistance to commercial forestry, in which rural women in Uttarakhand embraced trees to protect them, drew inspiration from Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* as well as earlier tree-protection movements by Bisnhoi activists for whom forests were sacred (James, 2000). Following its early successes in Uttarakhand, the Chipko movement expanded to include broader critiques of resource exploitation and continues to serve as a model in contemporary debates over large-scale hydropower projects.

Those debates represent a critical nexus for the political interpretation of Hindu traditions in the context of green energy decisions. The Indian state has sometimes presented hydropower as an expression of Hindu veneration of divine rivers and as central to its climate policy. Former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru rather famously referred to large-scale dams as the “temples of modern India” (Khilnani, 1998). When protestors critique that stance, they make green energy policy the site of contest over interpretation of Hindu traditions. A great body of scholarship focuses on conflicting and shifting interpretations of rivers and divinities, with potential implications for the direction of climate policies in India (Drew, 2017; Halperin, 2019).

Religion-involved arguments over green development projects can be found across the region. For example, Gergan (2016) explains why Indigenous communities resist hydropower development in Sikkim: hydropower not only poses material risks but also would disrupt the spiritual balance of the land. Their resistance intensifies commitment to a respectful relationship with the deities who inhabit the land. Thus, not only climate change impacts but also proactive climate policies may activate change within religious traditions. Scholarship on Bhutan depicts state climate policy that explicitly draws from canonical Buddhist texts. Known as the world's only carbon-negative country, Bhutan negotiates geopolitical and climate vulnerability with an integrated environmental and religious ethos, reflected in economic policy and cultural policy. Its concept of “Gross National Happiness,” which has long been a counterpoint to Western development criteria, now explicitly informs both its climate policy and state support of religious and cultural practices (Branch, 2013).

Among the findings that have emerged from research in Southeast Asia has been the role of monks and monastic institutions in shaping religious change through its entanglements with climate, ecology, and economic development. For example, in Thailand, some Theravada Buddhist monks organize teaching and

rituals to help local communities interpret moral and spiritual dimensions of the ways their lives intersect with global capitalism and science-based accounts of climate change (Darlington, 2012). Of broader significance than the institutional involvement is the changing interpretation of the systems and powers that shape one's life. Research traces "cosmopolitical shifts" at play in everyday interpretations of air quality in Thailand, as variously informed by climate discourse, agricultural policy, views of capitalism, and declining land rituals (Cassaniti, 2024).

Comparative Inquiry Into Religious Change

Research on religion and climate in Asia demonstrates the importance of continually revisiting the topics and concepts of cross-tradition, cross-border inquiry, informed by strong contextual description. As the field investigates how climate change may be entangled in dynamics of religious change, key points for inquiry include how a tradition's ideas and practices may be changing differently in different climate and energy contexts. Scholarship on interpretive responses to renewable energy projects across Asia should inform better comparative research in other regions. For example, Christian responses to climate change clearly differ between carbon-polluting and climate-vulnerable contexts; do they correlate to different accounts of divine will or divine love that are being forged through those different responses? How do Islamic interpretations of balance (*mizan*) and stewardship (*khilafa*) differ across oil-producing and climate-vulnerable contexts? In what ways do practices of Vajrayana Buddhism in carbon-negative Bhutan differ from their reception in high-polluting contexts of China and in the United States? Do meditation practices differ according to climate context?

Answering those questions requires reckoning with alliances of religion and political power. Religious responses to climate change are shaped by political power at local, national, and global scales, often carry implicit evaluations of politics, and may be directed differently toward political ends at a local or global scale (Berry, 2022). A particularly important nexus for future research is interactions of nationalism, religious interpretation, and responses to climate change. India and Bhutan present two different cases where new religious interpretations support nationalist climate and culture policies, whereas the United States hosts new forms of religious nationalism that regard climate policy as a threat to its goals. All three contexts also see dissent from nationalist climate politics shaped by appeals to religious tradition. How traditions are changing in response to climate change, in other words, is invariably influenced by how they interpret and interact with the political powers of their context.

How Do Religious Sources Interpret Justice, Responsibility, and Moral Agency?

Across contexts, researchers ask how religious responses construct forms of responsibility. Of particular importance are how they construe justice in the challenges of allocating responsibility for ending atmospheric pollution, adapting to impacts, compensating for damages, or repairing social and ecological systems. A fundamental question in climate ethics is: who is responsible for climate change? Because any answer must take into account intergenerational actions, historical economic structures, contemporary inequalities in power and capability, and complex structures of agency, it often challenges received accounts of justice. How accounts from religious ethics negotiate those challenges is significant not only for people who hold those teachings as authoritative for their own lives but for everyone working out what justice should mean in the difficult relations of climate change (Jenkins, 2013).

Ideas and practices of justice are as diverse as the moral worlds from which they arise, yet they often converge on identifying systemic sources of violence or instability. Kyle Powys Whyte (2018) explains how Indigenous conceptions of climate justice focus on settler colonialism as a central driver. Scholars from India demonstrate how a traditional Adishaiva knowledge system diagnoses intersecting injustice to all creatures (Muthukrishan & Datta, 2023). Christian ethicist Kevin O'Brien (2025) reimagines the Christian critique of "powers" to frame

fossil fuel corporations as a spiritual enemy, perpetrating multivalent injustice but capable of transformation through human and divine endeavor.

Secular climate ethics often ignores religion-related accounts in its debates over responsibility. In doing so, it not only misses contextual sources of motivation for many people but also ignores non-Western sources for thinking about the shape of justice. Indigenous, African, and Asian bodies of normative thought have often been ignored by Western philosophy, sometimes because it regards them as “religions.” For example, the ethics sections of the IPCC reports have ignored the body of Confucian and Daoist climate ethics (e.g., Wong, 2015; Xia & Schönfeld, 2013) that articulates how climate responsibilities may be grounded in Chinese moral traditions.

People also sometimes draw on religion to construct morally acceptable evasions of responsibility. Insofar as those people belong to carbon-polluting societies, the evasion often seems unfair. But religion can also be involved in a converse unfairness: taking on disproportionate moral blame for causal structures that seem far beyond their actual fault. While standard accounts of anthropogenic climate change debate point to aggregate emissions from global economic activity, and sometimes to powerful states or industries or networks, some research on religion finds people attributing climate impacts to local moral failures. Across continents and traditions, one pattern of religious response to climate change is localization of responsibility. For example, researchers have found people in South America and in the Himalayas blaming glacier retreat on lapsed performance of ritual. Insofar as they involve local and relatively disempowered communities blaming themselves for impacts caused by global powers, those interpretations seem unfair. Note, however, how they also retain for their participants a sense of agency in their landscape, of being able to meaningfully interact with the beings and powers that shape their experience of a place (Jenkins, 2021a).

Both modes of response (creating or evading responsibility) may be important for how communities sustain their sense of moral agency through bewildering shifts. Those cases thus point to a broader research question: how are people drawing upon religion to construct possibilities of moral agency in response to climate instability? One of the bedeviling features of climate change is the way it seems to overwhelm possibilities of moral responsibility. In some research, the more people know about the standard model of climate change, the less they feel capable of finding meaningful responses to it (Norgaard, 2011). How religious responses interact with dynamics of climate anxiety is central to the next question.

How Does Religion Shape Experiences of Climate Change?

Religion-informed scholarship into how people experience climate change has been significant for the emergence of research into climate anxiety—generally referring to feeling helpless, sad, angry, fearful, or guilty about ecological trajectories and failing responses to them (Kurth & Pihkala, 2022). Especially as people witness inadequate or perverse political responses to climate destabilization, they may find depressing not only the loss of their own moral agency but that of their society’s or even of humanity in general. Researchers are just beginning to ask how involvement in a religious community or participation in spiritual exercises may condition experiences of climate anxiety or practices of response (Cairns & Pihkala, 2024; Obiri-Yeboah et al., 2025; Toros, 2025).

Some studies find that mindfulness practices or contemplative prayer seem to moderate distress while sustaining engagement with climate change, but other studies find a negative correlation, where mindfulness increases anxiety. Do specific elements of practice correlate with discrete outcomes? Is there any difference between secular practices (e.g., mindfulness-based stress reduction) and practices embedded in a broader religious context (e.g., Buddhist meditation or Islamic prayer)? Some research suggests that practices embedded in broader patterns of meaning-making and relational connection may be comparatively more effective for moderating distress and sustaining positive moral agency (Clayton, 2020). However, it is unclear whether that correlation holds generally for practices embedded in any religious or spiritual community or

whether specific interpretive contexts foster positive responses more readily than others. More research, especially long-term empirical studies that work from expertise in the lexicons of emotion curated in particular religious worlds, is needed here.

Not all climate-related experience is about anxiety. For example, in work emerging from Himalayan scholars, there is an emphasis on the lived environmental ethics involved in interacting with a range of nonhuman agents in a landscape (Bhutia, 2021). In some Tibetan Buddhist communities, mountains, rivers, and pastures are understood to be inhabited by *metapersons*—nonhuman beings with whom humans live in moral and ritual relationship. Their experiences of degradation—including from rare earth mining to support renewable energy development—are interpreted from within those relationships. Weather and landscape change may be inscribed within interpersonal relationships of karma, interdependence, and reciprocity. Rather than approaching climate change as a problem to be solved through technology or policy, they often advocate for frameworks that recognize a landscape as kin, teacher, and sacred presence. Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia's work on the *Riwo Sangchö* ritual in the eastern Himalayas illuminates how offerings and acts of spiritual purification mediate and seek to heal ethical relationships between humans, animals, spirits, and the landscape (Bhutia, 2021).

Concepts from ethnographies of religious experience and anthropology of ethics are beginning to illuminate how everyday life may be suffused with meaning-laden categories connected to climate relations. For example, discussion of weather extremes may carry tones of guilt, impurity, lament, apocalyptic hope, or apocalyptic fear (Bergmann, 2020). For another example, some researchers show how cultural work happening in climate protests deploys symbols and discourses of the sacred or involves rituals adapted for a new kind of religious work (Pike, 2024; Skrimshire, 2019). They show that one need not identify with one of the named religions in order to share in an affective experience that some of its historical concepts help name and possibly ameliorate. People may understand experiences of collective guilt and shame through inherited religious vocabularies and might work with religious ritual to support collective responsibility (Fredericks, 2021). Other scholars have begun to pay attention to how religious facilities for temporal complexity may allow the formation of moral worlds that can accommodate the unique temporal experience of climate change (Dimitrova, 2021; Verchery, 2023; Winter, 2021).

Finally, it is important to note that not all climate-related experience is thematized by subjects as having to do with climate (Jenkins, 2017b). Cultural stresses from global climate change may exert more subtle shifts in how people experience decisions around social reproduction in, for example, family formation or foodways (Del Vecchio, 2024; Sasser, 2024). With food and sex being perennial loci of religious attention, some researchers are asking how climate-shifting perceptions of humans and nature inflect these quotidian components of everyday life. While mobility and migration are perennial features of human life, how do people involved in climate-pressured movements and displacements draw on religious narratives to find the meaning of their movement? What happens to notions of diaspora, exile, and homeland; of sanctuary, refuge, and hospitality; of pilgrimage and sacred site; of crossing and dwelling?

Is Climate Change a Factor in Religious Change?

Research on contemporary interplay between religion and cultural change has led historians of religion to pay more attention to how climatic shifts may have played a role in major periods of religious change. Scholars have begun asking, for example, whether the Protestant Reformation in 16th-century Europe may have been conditioned by the transition from the Medieval Warm Period (10th–13th c.) to the Little Ice Age (16th–17th c.). Bruce Campbell's (2016) *Great Transition* sees 14th-century weather shocks contributing to disease and economic crises that contributed to erosion of the Roman Catholic Church's authority. Wolfgang Behringer's (2010) *Cultural History of Climate* links interpretations of crisis to the specific religious ideas of the Reformation, noting that Martin Luther lived through famines caused by unexpected cold. Geoffrey Parker's (2017) *Global Crisis* describes how Catholic/Protestant conflict was then exacerbated by the full onset of the Little Ice Age in the 17th century. Histories of religion have dimensions of environmental history (Sonnabend, 2012). In many geographies and time periods, adverse changes in landscape or atmosphere may have raised questions that could erode trust in interpretive schemes and perhaps even destabilize institutions of moral authority. The adoption of Buddhism in China seems to have been shaped by a disruptive period of cooling (Barrett, 2007). If the tumultuous early history of Buddhism in Tibet was shaped by intense social questioning of failing crops and deteriorating climate (Zou et al., 2024), then reading the texts that arose from that context requires, at least, understanding the landscape anxieties from which they arose and their religious implications.

How far can causal connections be established between religion and environmental change? Daring hypotheses sometimes seem to rely too much on correlation, as when Philip Jenkins (2021a) links the spread of Islam to a 7th-century volcanic eruption. Even so, Jenkins traces a series of historical ironies that could reframe how one thinks about the relation of contemporary climate to specific religions. The Wahhabi Islam that now rules a great petro-state may have arisen in response to the climate crisis of the 14th century, and the religious tradition in America whose members are most skeptical of climate change can trace its roots to “born again” Christian pietists who were forced to emigrate to the United States because of climate stress (Jenkins, 2021a).

However, Degroot et al. (2021) argue that scholars have relied too much on correlative hypotheses without robust accounts of causation. They present a framework for strong causal claims and, against the grain of the literature, argue that weather shocks and climate disruptions have not always led to destabilization and collapse. Sometimes social responses include strengthened resilience and adaptive cultural forms, such as innovative water management systems or new transportation routes (Degroot et al., 2021).

Religious archives can offer valuable documentary evidence for answering questions about the historical impact of weather and climate. For example, ecclesiastical records of prayers for rain can be used to help establish a record of regional change (Domínguez-Castro et al., 2021). Reading historical religious texts as climate records, as Jobbová et al. (2018) do for classical Mayan records and Brázdil et al. (2018) do for weather-related rituals, may in turn open new hypotheses about how to interpret changes in the tradition.

A critical topic for more robust research is the question of whether historical climate changes have led to sectarianism and violence. Scholars have linked climate shocks to anti-Jewish pogroms, to European persecution of supposed witches, to fantastical religious inventions of the Inquisition, to Hindu–Muslim conflict and the rollback of religious pluralism in the 17th-century Mughal Empire, and to the rise of apocalyptic sects undermining the Ming emperor's divine mandate (Campbell, 2016; Jenkins, 2021a; Parker, 2017). Will contemporary climate disruptions similarly fuel disruptive or violent religious expressions?

Answering that question entails facing several methodological challenges to drawing predictive hypotheses from religious histories. Is contemporary anthropogenic climate change continuous with previous cultural reckonings with adverse environmental change or does it represent a unique set of factors? Either way, research on contemporary interactions of religion and climate insecurity remains surprisingly underdeveloped (Tarusarira et al., 2024).

Other scholarship investigates how climate change may be changing religions in the present. For example, among the Tungus of Siberia, a ritual that involved depositing animal remains within the practitioner's camp had to be changed because climate-induced fires destroyed the local forest and drove predators into camp, putting people at risk (Lavrillier, 2013). In the Canadian Arctic, the appearance of new species and other changes were interpreted by some Inuit through an insurgent Evangelical movement that explained the changes in spiritual terms (Johnson, 2012). In Bhutan, some research argues that religious life is substantively changing as it responds to climate stresses (Allison, 2023; Branch, 2013; Kusters & Wangdi, 2013). Here again, not all religion-related responses to climate change are ecologically thematized. Climate stresses may be indirectly linked to shifts in foodways, child-rearing, or, still more subtly, the affective texture of a religious world.

Intensifying the significance of climate change for future changes in religion, some Anthropocene thinkers have suggested that the contemporary climate crisis can be understood as religious in dimension because it challenges shared senses of reality and delegitimizes sources of social authority. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has famously argued that climate change destabilizes modern historiography by challenging history to integrate species-level planetary forces with the histories of particular worlds. For Chakrabarty, key modern concepts for investigating the latter, like the concept of freedom, arose with cheap fossil energy and may stand in tension with conceptual needs for interpreting planetary changes (Chakrabarty, 2009). As Chakrabarty explores climatic stress on components of the modern imaginary, he begins to suggest that contemporary climate change is a civilizational crisis with religion-like scope, in the sense that it calls into questions the ideas and stories by which moderns make sense of their inheritances. Bruno Latour makes a similar point, arguing that the climate crisis compels moderns to realize that there are specific religious cosmologies underpinning their concepts of order—and that they are under fundamental pressure (Latour, 2017). In that case, one should expect climate to cause cosmological ferment. Historian Prasenjit Duara (2015) argues that, as Asian societies recognize climate change as a civilizational challenge to global modernity, they have begun to reconstruct cosmology with Asian religious sources for the sake of more sustainable forms of civilization. The novelist and literary scholar Amitav Ghosh (2016) holds that understanding climate change requires an epic scope of interpretation that resides in archives regarded as religious.

Those who see climate change as having cosmological implications suggest that it could erode senses of authority not only in the conventional religions but also in ideas or ideologies with great organizing power—like capitalism or progress or liberal freedom. Those pressures, speculates Bronislaw Szerszynski (2017), may drive cosmological shifts analogous in civilization-altering trajectory to those of the Axial Age. Perhaps future historians of civilization will see this century's climate stresses as an accelerator of deep cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Understanding human dimensions of climate requires understanding religious dimensions of human experience and action. The article has depicted what researchers are learning about human–climate interactions by asking (a) if and how religions relate to causes of climate change; (b) how religious institutions, ideas, and practices are responding to climate change; and (c) whether climate stresses change religion. While no general relation of religion and climate appears in answer to those questions, the article has shown how much can be learned about political action, social behavior, cultural values, and psychological experience by investigating how climate relations are interpreted and lived within specific worlds of religious life. The article has also argued that, in a field historically shaped by interest in North Atlantic Christianity, much more research is needed from other geographies and traditions, in comparative work between traditions, and on religious experience across climate contexts. As this broader research exerts more critical pressure on what scholars do with the terms *religion* and *climate*, it may lead to more integrated and satisfactory accounts of the interplay between cultural transformations and ecological shifts.

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