

Religious Approaches to Environmental Conservation: What is common and what is accomplished

Emilio Chuvieco

Department of Geography,

University of Alcalá, Spain.



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- Importance of religions for environmental conservation.
- Main religious traditions related to conservation.
- Do they make a difference?
- Conclusions.



Why religions affect environmental conservation?

- Religion matters for many people:
 - Only 2.3% Atheists and 11.9% Nonreligious (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005).
 - Religious views should be considered in defining social policies.
- Relations Religion-Environment:
 - Conceptual level: Religions provide a cosmological explanation on human-nature relations.
 - Practical level: Religions shape moral standards (behavior).



Why religions affect environmental conservation?

- "Religions suggest how we should treat other humans and how we should relate to nature. These values make up the ethical orientation of a society. Religions thus generate worldviews and ethics which underlie fundamental attitudes and values of different cultures and societies" (Tucker and Grim, 2003:xvi).



However... Religions are not environmental philosophies

- Religions are Theocentric, not ecocentric.
- Environmental implications are secondary to other issues:
 - Relations to God: prayer, worship.
 - Relations to other humans: moral values.
 - Visions about the “eternal-life”.



Goals

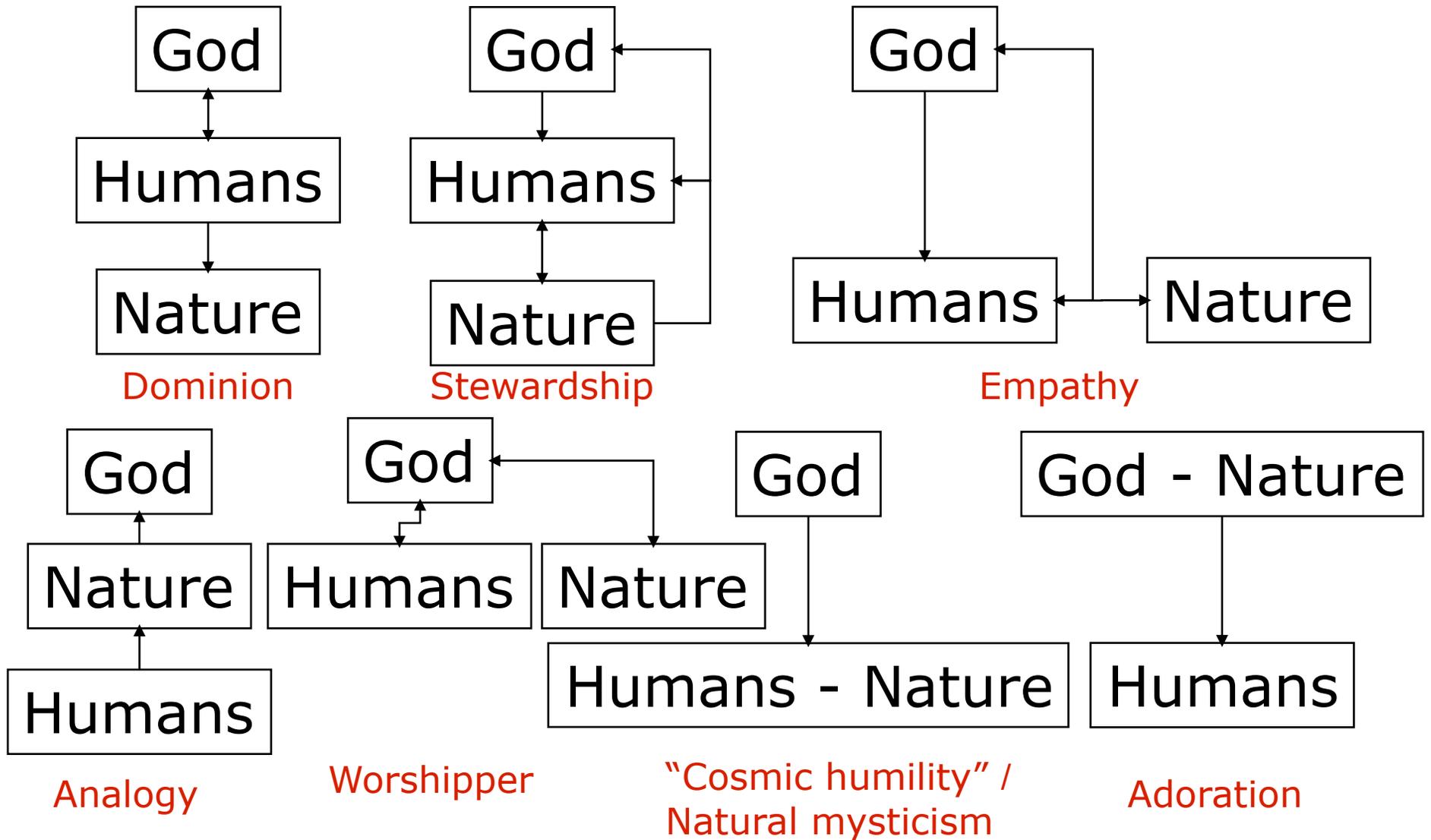
- Review different religion traditions related to environmental conservation. No mention to non-religious environmental ethics.
- Focus on Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Buddhism and Hinduism are less documented. Only brief references to Neo-paganism.
- Brief analysis on whether different religious values have practical implications in environmental policies.



Environmental Religions traditions

- Preliminary thoughts:
 - All religions have many common views.
 - Most religions are not homogeneous, they include different perspectives (within the Reformed Christianity, more than 28.000 denominations).
 - Within each religion, there are different traditions, even overlapping in time.

Environmental Religions traditions





(1) Dominion

- Only humans are “image of God”, and only they have direct communication to God.
- The main purpose of the other creatures is to serve human needs, and therefore the resources may be exploited for humans’ only benefit.
- The only limitations would be the respect of other humans needs, both present and future.



(1) Dominion

Judeo-Christian

- 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.' God also said, 'Look, to you I give all the seed-bearing plants everywhere on the surface of the earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit; this will be your food. And to all the wild animals, all the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that creep along the ground, I give all the foliage of the plants as their food.' And so it was" (Genesis 1, 28-30).

Islamic

- "O men, adore your Lord who has created you and those who were before you, and fear God, who has made the earth a carpet for you and of the sky a castle, and has made water come down from the sky with which to extract from the earth those fruits that are your daily food" (Quran 2, 21-22). "It is He Who has made the earth subservient to you, to walk through its tracts and eat of His provided sustenance" (Quran 67, 14)



(1) Dominion

■ Impacts:

- Only humans are worth to preserve.
- Every human need is more important than any conservation goal.

■ Criticism:

- Lynn White.
- Scripture scholars.
- Deep ecology: humans are just an animal species.



(2) Stewardship

- Humans have a delegate dominion over Creation
- God makes human responsible and accountable for our use of natural resources.



(2) Stewardship

Judeo-Christian

- Yahweh God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being (...) Yahweh God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it" (Genesis 2, 7-15).
- "Man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption. Yet it was the Creator's will that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble *master* and *guardian*, and not as a heedless *exploiter* and *destroyer* (John Paul II, 1994:15).
- "When God created the first human beings, God gave them the Eden garden and said: "look to my Works! See how beautiful are. I have created them for your own good. Do not destroy my World, because if you do so, there will be nobody to repair it" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah).

Islamic

- Caliph Allah (vice-chancellors)
- "He has raised the heaven on high and created the balance: don't ever tamper with this balance. Therefore, you also establish weight with justice and do not give less measure" (Quran, 55, 5-9).

Hindu

- Human care is especially critical with trees, with are the main reservoir of life. Chipko and Appiko movements.

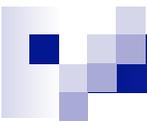
Buddhist

- Humans loose their links with nature, destroying valuable resources as a result of our greed. Overcoming greed will provide us with a better internal equilibrium, as well as a more sound approach to preserving natural resources.



(3) Empathy

- Nature follows moral behaviour of humans.
- Humans and nature share a similar dependence from God, and are dependent of each other.
- However, only humans have free-will and therefore are the only ones able to challenge God's designs.
- When humans do so, the Nature is affected as well by the human weakness, and consequently, the ideal equilibrium between human and nature vanishes.
- Following this tradition, humans would be somehow the "principals" of Creation, and our decisions would affect the moral well-being of the environment.



(3) Empathy

Judeo-Christian

- 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, Accursed be the soil because of you! Painfully will you get your food from it as long as you live. It will yield you brambles and thistles, as you eat the produce of the land. By the sweat of your face will you earn your food, until you return to the ground, as you were taken from it" (Genesis 3, 17-19).
- "Israelites, hear what Yahweh says, for Yahweh indicts the citizens of the country: there is no loyalty, no faithful love, no knowledge of God in the country, only perjury and lying, murder, theft, adultery and violence, bloodshed after bloodshed. This is why the country is in mourning and all its citizens pining away, the wild animals also and birds of the sky, even the fish in the sea will disappear" (Hosea 4, 1-3).
- Messianic scenario of Isaiah, when nature will be restored

Hindu

- The earth answers as a living organism to humans' way of using its resources, being gentle and fertile when they take proper care of her, and violent and cruel otherwise.
- When humans abuse their privileged position, the Earth produces all sort of natural disasters (droughts, earthquakes, floods and epidemics).

Buddhist

- "Self-growing rice appeared on earth and, out of laziness, people began to hoard food rather than collect each meal. As a result, the growth rate of food could not keep pace with demand. Therefore land had to be divided among families. After private ownership of land became the order of the day, the more greedy people started robbing from others lands. When they were detected, they denied that they had stolen... The richness of the earth diminished and self-growing rice disappeared. People had to till the land and cultivate rice. This rice grain was coated in chaff; if needed cleaning before it could be eaten" (Digha Nikaya quoted by Thakur, 2003, 59).



(4) Analogy

- World's wonders are a manifestation of God's power and bounty. Acknowledgment of the immensity, bounty and beauty of the created world inspires a similar recognition of the Creator.
- God manifests himself through His word, but also through His works. Observation of Nature is a natural way of approaching God.



(4) Analogy

Judeo-Christian

- "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (13, 4-5).
- "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1, 20).
- Jesus used many images in his preaching: lilies of the field, doves, mustard tree, wheat-chaff.
- Jewish tradition: Maimonides (1134-1204), philosophy.

Islam

- "Surely, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of the night and the day, in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind, in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, with which He revives the earth after its death and spreads in it all kinds of animals, in the change of the winds and the clouds between the sky and the earth that are made subservient, there are signs for rational people" (2, 164).

Hindu

- Gods can be revealed in animals or plants, in the form of different icons (avatars). One of the sacred texts of Hinduism portrays this very graphically: "In the kingdom, the rivers are the veins of the Cosmic Person, and the trees the hairs of his body. The air is his breathing, the hills and mountains are his piled bones and the passing ages his movements" (quoted by Narayan, 2003, p. 33).



(5) God worshipper

- Nature has an intrinsic value beyond serving human needs, since it gives glory to God.
- God wanted each creature and has a specific meaning, showing the power and perfection of God.



(5) God worshipper

Judeo-Christian

- "Praise Yahweh from the heavens, praise him in the heights. Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all shining stars, praise him, highest heavens, praise him, waters above the heavens. Let them praise the name of Yahweh at whose command they were made; he established them for ever and ever by an unchanging decree. Praise Yahweh from the earth, sea-monsters and all the depths, fire and hail, snow and mist, storm-winds that obey his word, mountains and every hill, orchards and every cedar, wild animals and all cattle, reptiles and winged birds, kings of the earth and all nations, princes and all judges on earth, young men and girls, old people and children together. Let them praise the name of Yahweh, for his name alone is sublime, his splendour transcends earth and heaven" (148, 1-13).

- "You are a simple-minded theologian if you do not know that inanimate creatures, devoid of sense and life, speak to God and praise to God. What else is the meaning for use of the Hymn of the Three Children and the very last praises in the Psalms where all creatures are invited to praise God?" (Idung of Prüfening, 1153-1174).

Islam

- Nothing created is a fruit of a random process, but has been wanted and has a particular purpose to achieve.
- Everything glorifies God in its own way: "The seven heavens, the earth and all beings therein declare His glory. There is not a single thing but glorifies Him with His praise, but you do not understand their hymns of His glory" (Koran 17, 44).



(6/7) Cosmic humility / Natural Mysticism

- Nature is beyond human comprehension
- Union with God is accomplished through contemplation of the created world.



(6/7) Natural mysticism

Judeo-Christian

- Jewish tradition of “radical admiration”, meaning a deep sense of interior humility as a result of difficulty in understanding the created world.
- "Do you know when mountain goats give birth? Have you ever watched deer in labour? Have you ever counted the months that they carry their young? Do you know when they give birth? They crouch to drop their young, they get rid of their burdens and the calves, having grown big and strong, go off into the desert and never come back to them. Who has given the wild donkey his freedom, who has undone the harness of the brayer?" (Job 38-39).
- Jasidism tradition: "What do you do and where do you direct your thoughts when you pray? He answered: "I bind myself to everything of individual vitality which is present in all created things. For in each and every created thing there must be a vitality which it derives from the divine effluence. I unite with them when I direct my words to God in order by my prayer to penetrate the highest regions"" (Schwartz, 2002:101)
- S.Francis Assisi: Canticum of Brother Sun:
"We praise You, Lord, for all Your creatures,
especially for Brother Sun,
who is the day through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great
splendor,
of You Most High, he bears your likeness.
We praise You, Lord, for Sister Moon and the
stars,
in the heavens you have made them bright,
precious and fair.
We praise You, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,
fair and stormy, all weather's moods,
by which You cherish all that You have made".



(8) Worship: Adoration

- Nature is sacred, part of God.
- Hindu: “The earth, which possesses oceans, rivers, and other sources of water and which gives us land to produced food grains and on which human beings depend for their survival. May it grant us all our needs for eating and drinking: water, milk and fruit” (Gosling, 2001:22).
- Pagan religions: Celtic and native American.



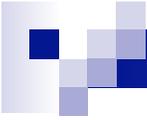
(8) Worship: Pantheism

- Strongly opposed by the Monotheistic religions:
 - “You shall not have other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2); “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the place of slave-labour. You will have no gods other than me. You must not make yourselves any image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you must not bow down to these gods or serve them” (Deuteronomy 5, 6-9).
 - “In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. All praise is for Allah, the ‘Lord’ of the Worlds. The Compassionate, the Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment. O’Allah! You Alone we worship and You Alone we call on for help (Koran, 1, 1-5).



Actual impact of religions

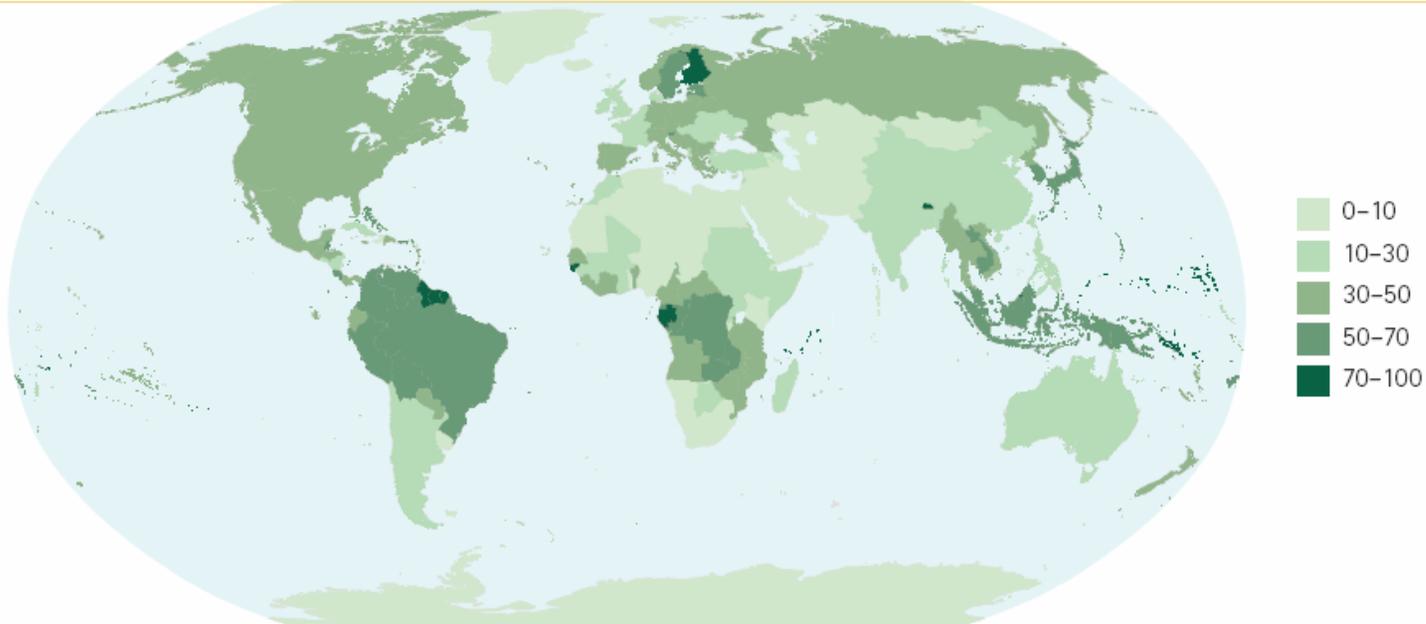
- Is environmental conservation different in countries with social majority of Christian-Hindu-Buddhist traditions?
- Does USA (mostly, a Christian country) have worse environmental policies than Saudi Arabia (a typical Muslim country), China (a predominant Buddhist country) or India (a stereotypical Hindu)?



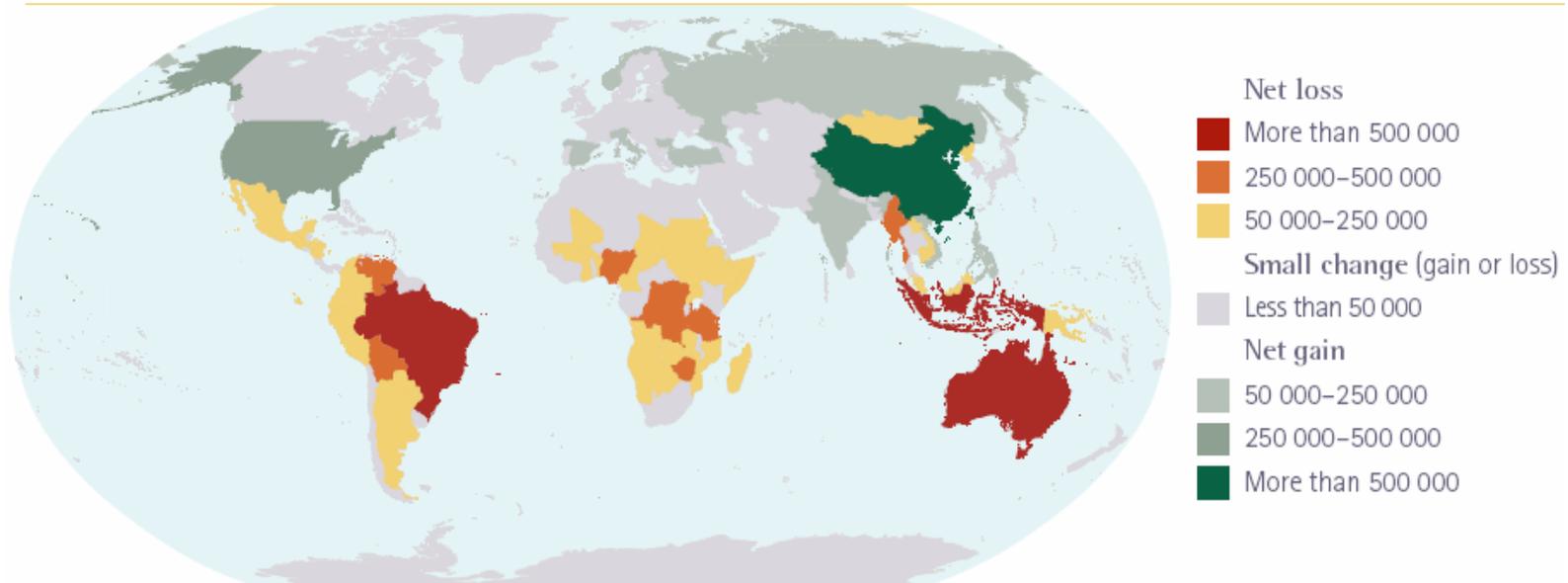
Some common problems

	USA	Saudi A	China	India
Land degradation	+	+++	++	++
Water pollution	+	++	+++	+++
Deforestation	-	NA	+	+
Acid rain	+++	+	+++	++
Urban pollution	+	++	+++	+++

Forest area as percent of total land area by country, 2010



Net change in forest area by country, 2005-2010 (ha/year)



FAO, Global Forest Resources, 2010



Most polluted cities by PM

<u>Particulate</u> matter, $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (2004)	City
169	<u>Cairo, Egypt</u>
150	<u>Delhi, India</u>
128	<u>Kolkata, India</u> (Calcutta)
125	<u>Tianjin, China</u>
123	<u>Chongqing, China</u>
109	<u>Kanpur, India</u>
109	<u>Lucknow, India</u>
104	<u>Jakarta, Indonesia</u>
101	<u>Shenyang, China</u>

[World Bank Statistics](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/table3_13.pdf) http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/table3_13.pdf



Causes?

- Religions are not in fact affecting the countries policies – social values.
- Environmental concerns are not priority issues for any religion:
 - "When one studies the Islamic view of nature and humankind's relations to the natural environment, as well as the way classical Islamic civilization created a society and especially an urban setting in harmony with nature, and when one compares these realities with the situation in the Islamic world today, it becomes obvious that neither governments nor most people in Muslim countries are following Islamic principles in their treatment of the natural environment" (Nasr, 2003:87).



Final thoughts

- Religious values provide cosmological frameworks to explain human-nature relations.
- Religious moral standards give sound reasons to promote changes to more sustainable behaviors:
 - Poverty is a Christian virtue: consumerism.



Final thoughts

- Further efforts should be dedicated to analyze religious impacts in environmental conservation and to promote greater importance of these issues in religious messages:
 - John Paul II: Message on the world peace day, 1990.
 - Benedict XVI:
 - Message on the world peace day, 2010.
 - Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009.