

Awakening of the Self to the Interconnectedness of Things: Stewardship and Caring for Creation through Religious Lens. Review of *Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing: A Humanist Relational Approach*, by Anthony Le Duc

Przebudzenie jaźni do wzajemnego powiązywania rzeczy: zarządzanie i troska o stworzenie z perspektywy religii. Recenzja książki autorstwa Anthony Le Duc pt. *“Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing: A Humanist Relational Approach”*

Vien V. Nguyen

Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology, Hales Corners, WI, USA

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2229-4056> • vnguyen@shsst.edu

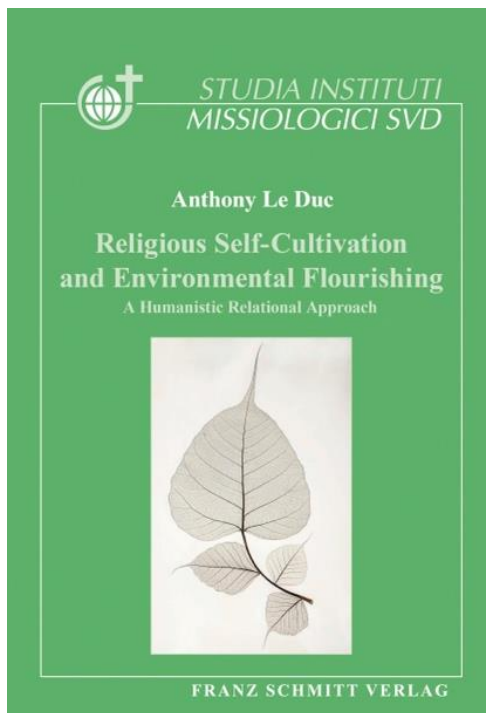
Received: 18 Sep, 2024; Revised: 30 Oct, 2024; Accepted: 08 Nov, 2024;

Pre-published: 13 Nov, 2024

Religion has been central in shaping people’s attitudes, perspectives, behaviors, and lifestyles. It provides principles and moral frameworks for faith followers to attain right relationships with the divine, humanity, and nature/creation. However, its role in addressing the current global environmental crisis has often been underutilized, underacknowledged, and underappreciated mainly because of false or inaccurate assumptions and suspicions, e.g., religious intolerance, religious extremism, and the perceived irrelevance of religion to modern life. Humanity’s survival and ability to avert self-destruction and ecocide will depend on individual and collective actors, including religion, working together at the local, national, and international levels toward environmental consciousness, sustainability, and stewardship for humans and the natural world.

In his well-researched and lucidly written work, *Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing: A Humanist Relational Approach*, Anthony Le Duc, Executive Director of Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication, cogently argues that tackling the environmental crisis and caring for our common home is not the task of government or religious institutions alone. Instead, it is a collaborative, holistic, and comprehensive response involving people of all faiths and cultures. The book provides a spiritual framework for readers to recognize the interconnectedness and mutual entanglements of all life forms. It inspires

reverence for nature and reorients readers toward environmental protection, starting at the



individual level and progressing to the community level. Le Duc advances these objectives through the lens of religious self-cultivation. He writes, “At its core, this book invites us to see religion as a window and gateway to our true potential and purpose. We are not alone in this vast and mysterious universe, but we are also not insignificant. We are part of a cosmic web that connects us to everything else. Religion helps us to remember this cosmic interconnectedness and to act with wisdom and compassion. It inspires us to achieve the best possible version of ourselves, to live fully and joyfully, and to share this gift with others” (Le Duc 2024, 28).

The book consists of ten chapters and is organized into two parts, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion. The concluding chapter calls on believers to be a prophetic voice in environmental care by engaging with communicators and policymakers and by speaking forth and speaking out.

Becoming Human: Authentic Personhood

How can religion help address the growing environmental issues facing the planet? Le Duc contends that with over eighty percent of the world’s population affiliated with a faith tradition and with religion’s credible power and trust, the role of religion in impacting people’s attitudes and actions toward combating environmental problems is immense. It can play an integral part in cultivating transformation of consciousness and encouraging collaboration with others to address the long-term health of our environment and, thus, the sustainability of all life on our planet. It offers deep spiritual and religious insights into the interconnectedness of nature and humans. It provides a moral compass on ecological issues and principles of environmental stewardship. It inspires believers and decision-makers to make conscientious pro-environmental values and choices inspired by the sanctity of creation, as taught in sacred texts and emphasized in religious teachings.

Spiritual and moral decay are the roots of social and environmental woes, posits the author. This is where religion can help save and restore the human-nature relationship, halt the

spiritual and moral decline, and work toward a sustainable future. Religion's primary concern is the believers' spiritual well-being, integrity, and maturity. Spiritual maturity involves commitment and discipline in caring for others and creation, which begins with the self, the central focus of the book's first part, "Becoming Human." In this part, Le Duc discusses self-cultivation and human transformation rooted in one's chosen spiritual or religious tradition and its teachings as the starting point for personal transformation and environmental flourishing. By self-cultivation, he means developing a deep sense of oneself, unlocking one's potential to lead a good human life, and pursuing harmony with the natural environment. He explores the concept of self-cultivation through the lens of Theravada Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity (Catholic tradition). Le Duc examines the sacred texts of these four representative world religions or faith traditions to understand the human-nature/creation relationship and recover their religious environmental teachings to inspire self-transformation in recognizing the natural world and the cosmos as our home.

The goal of human life in Buddhism is to attain perfect enlightenment or Buddhahood and avoid the perilous cycle of birth, suffering, and rebirth. To achieve these, one must detach oneself from the impermanence of worldly things plagued with dissatisfaction and suffering and cultivate right attitudes and actions to preserve the intricate web of life. The ecological crisis humanity faces today is believed to stem from three unwholesome roots or poisons – greed, delusion, and heedlessness – both at the personal and collective levels, with far-reaching consequences. The Buddhist approach to overcoming these toxic poisons requires cultivating compassion, renunciation, and harmony in the human-nature relationship. Le Duc's expertise in Theravada Buddhism is evident in this chapter, as seen in his presentation of Buddhist teachings and practices on ecological mindfulness.

Confucianism greatly emphasizes harmony between humankind and nature. All things in nature exist together and depend on each other to attain balance and thrive in accordance with the law of nature. Le Duc contends that the Confucian worldview revolves around the notion of authentic personhood. Authentic personhood or fully realized humanity comprises five cardinal virtues: *ren* (humanness, benevolence, goodness, kindness), *yi* (rightness, righteousness, justice), *li* (ritual, propriety, decorum), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (trustworthiness, integrity, authenticity). A highly cultivated person, or *junzi*, is imbued with these virtues and strives to live in perfect harmony with Heaven (cosmos force or principle), Earth (nature), and humans. Moreover, exercising critical moral reasoning and adhering to social norms are

essential to authentic personhood and environmental flourishing as envisioned by Confucianism, according to Le Duc.

Both Islam and Christianity emphasize creation as an act of God and divine revelation. Humans were not created as owners of nature but as stewards responsible for treating creation with care and respect. In Islam, the whole cosmos is a theophany or manifestation of God's presence and attributes, and humans are created to act as God's representatives, i.e., khalifah or viceregents. They are accountable to the Creator by upholding the sacredness of God's creation, preserving the earth and its resources on behalf of God, and helping the natural world flourish. Self-cultivated individuals worship God alone and submit to God's will (accountability to God), maintain physical and spiritual well-being (accountability to oneself), care for family members and the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized (accountability to society), and maintain harmony and justice in all aspects of life (accountability to creation). Since everything in the universe reflects God's wisdom and greatness, protecting the environment is a sacred duty.

In Christianity, humans are believed to be created in God's likeness and image - *imago Dei*. The planet is a part of God's divine plan and a sacred gift bestowed on humanity that deserves respect and safeguarding, not to be dominated or exploited for human needs and desires. A spiritually self-cultivated and ecologically conscious person recognizes the intrinsic worth of every created being and the sacredness of all creation. Through union with Christ and in imitation of Christ's humble service, such a person lives out the vocation of being a good steward of the world that God created and entrusted to us. They embody the divine image from within and reflect God's attributes in their relationships with creation and one another. Christian spiritual self-cultivation in the context of environmental care can be achieved through countless ways, such as prayer, Bible reading and study, worship, fellowship, and service. Throughout this chapter and the book, Le Duc often cites Catholic sources, e.g., papal encyclicals, the teachings of Council Fathers, and Catholic theologians, demonstrating his background and familiarity with Catholicism.

Becoming Relational: Creaturely Interconnectedness

Caring for our common home is a vocation lived in continual interaction with others. In the second part of the book, "Becoming Human," Le Duc explores and proposes how a spiritually transformed, cultivated person can nurture meaningful and transformative interrelationships with others and the natural world. Becoming human is tied to becoming intercultural, interreligious, and inter-creational.

Interculturality aims to foster interrelationships, transformation, and growth among people of different cultures, as they interact with each other's culture and diversity and mutually benefit from each other's knowledge and experiences. Le Duc identifies three ways interculturality can positively contribute to ecological consciousness and flourishing. It can raise greater consciousness and understanding of how individuals and communities adapt to their environment and live harmoniously within the intricate web of life. It can facilitate a deeper cultural perception and understanding of the environment. The exchange of knowledge and experience between cultures and peoples can enrich the cultivation of environmental conservation and harmonious coexistence with nature. It can also serve as a means for individuals and communities detached from nature to rediscover its beauty and sacredness and reconnect with it.

Interreligious dialogue can promote spiritual communion. It brings together people of different religious traditions, perspectives, and sensibilities to speak and listen, discern and engage with each other respectfully in addressing environmental issues. Le Duc notes that all people and religions are responsible for caring for the planet. Moreover, interreligious dialogue counters the image of interreligious conflict and the negative impact of religious climate change skeptics. It shows religion's interest in temporal issues that have the potential to impact the well-being of individuals and communities. It conveys our witnessing to the value of finding common ground. Effective interreligious dialogue requires a common language and framework that respects the diversity of religious views and values. It should be practical and action-oriented when addressing specific environmental challenges. Moreover, it involves a representation of a diversity of voices and a plurality of perspectives. According to Le Duc, the four forms of interreligious dialogue are dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of religious experience, and dialogue of theological exchange.

Inter-creationality emphasizes the inherent interconnectedness and interdependence of all creation, aiming to transcend humans' egotistic and anthropocentric tendencies, explains Le Duc. Humans are simply a part of a more extensive interconnected web. This understanding can significantly affect our self-perception, place in the world, and relationship with the world around us. When discussing inter-creationality from the Theravada Buddhist notion of enlightenment, the Confucianist notion of *qi* (life force that binds all things), and the Abrahamic tradition's notion that all things originate from God, Le Duc stresses the shared bond between human and non-human entities and explores the essential moral virtues that are necessary to facilitate the intricate inter-creational relationship between human and non-human entities, as

taught by various religious traditions. These moral virtues stress humans' moral responsibility toward protecting non-human creation from senseless harm, which includes gentleness, compassion, moderation and contentment, reciprocity and mutuality. The meaning of inter-creationality will be elaborated later in the review.

Religious Teachings: Influence and Limitation

The book contributes to a timely discussion on the role of faith and religion in influencing people's behaviors and actions toward living responsibly and building a sustainable future. It could be argued that numerous multilateral and bilateral environmental agreements have been promoted by scientists and signed by industrial and political actors, resulting in tangible outcomes. Yet sadly, climate change, deforestation, air pollution, and biodiversity decline continue to be today's pressing environmental degradation issues. We concur that addressing the ecological crisis is everyone's responsibility, not just that of industrial and political decision-makers.

Although religion, in general, has been involved in the discussion of care for creation, we see in recent years or decades that religious leaders have been at the frontlines of spreading environmental awareness, fighting against environmental problems, and articulating a moral voice on ecological preservation and restoration. They integrate scientific and religious knowledge to promote environmental concerns, facilitate mitigation efforts, and provide religious ecological ethics. They seek to influence individual and collective human behavior. We could find many formal public declarations from different religious leaders and organizations, including "The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change," "Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change," "The Hindu Declaration on Climate Change," "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action," and "Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action," which call on people of goodwill to respond to care for the earth. The underlying message among these formal declarations is that nature is suffocating. Our daily actions impact the environment and all living things, and the time to mitigate our environmental impact is now before it is too late. We could postulate that the Laudato Si' Action Platform sponsored by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development is a key example of integral ecology, mobilizing pragmatic goals and contributions to environmental well-being. A website is designed to help institutions and individuals implement environmental projects and pursue integral ecology.

It appears that these statements are widely known and extensively discussed within academia. But we wonder how familiar people of goodwill are with these declarations. Their

implementation at the local level and their impact on laypeople's behaviors and environmental actions are difficult to measure. Moreover, we wonder how often local religious leaders incorporate environmental issues in their preaching and teaching and engage people in educational programs and public pro-environmental projects. As mentioned previously, with over eighty percent of the world's inhabitants adhering to a faith tradition and religion being an integral part of every human society, we wonder whether/if people take ecological concerns seriously and commit themselves wholeheartedly and passionately to the call from religious leaders for ecological conversion and care with a new lifestyle.

It could also be argued that there exist dissenting voices, small but vocal, from religious groups skeptical of the climate science behind the ecological crisis. They object to the "greening" of religion, arguing that theologians and religious environmentalists deliberately reinterpret or misconstrue specific sacred texts from an environmental perspective to advance eco-theology or impose contemporary concerns and Western concepts of environmentalism onto ancient sacred texts (Koehrsen 2021, 4). Additionally, they maintain that these sacred texts do not provide clear and coherent religious environmental spirituality and ethics of environmental responsibility. Some regard environmentalism as neo-colonialism, perceiving it as "poisonous knowledge from the West" (Khan 2014, 261) or as a Western conspiracy to weaken Muslim-majority countries (Yildirim 2016, cited in Koehrsen 2021, 6). Some believe that a controlling God determines what happens in the world, including environmental problems. Some stress that the ecological crisis is a divine punishment for human sins rather than a result of human activity. This belief signals the imminent eschatology (or "end-time") and discourages engagement in addressing the increasing environmental challenges (Koehrsen 2021, 6)¹. Others maintain that the environmentalists' goals contradict God's desire for humans to multiply and exercise dominion over the earth, as described in the Book of Genesis (Cornwall Alliance n.d.).

In recent years or decades, religious leaders and religious-based organizations have been proactively involved in the environmental movement, utilizing scientific data to support their understandings and teachings of ecological sustainability and calling on all people of goodwill to solve critical environmental problems. Scientific and religious approaches to ecological concerns are not antithetical but rather complementary to each other. Science and religion

¹ Koehrsen, Julia Blanc, and Fabian Huber discuss the four types of tensions of religious environmentalism that hinder religious efforts to address environmental issues. They are intradenominational tensions, interdenominational tensions, interreligious tensions, and religious-societal tensions (Koehrsen et al. 2022).

approach humans' relationship and interaction with creation/nature from different perspectives. But the end goal is the same: environmental flourishing. It is a hopeful sign when science and religion recognize each other's contribution to solving the ecological crisis, as discussed in Chapter 10. As Le Duc noted, work must be done on both sides to inspire greater environmental awareness and responsibility, tackle misinformation/disinformation, and engage policymakers.

Religious Environmentalism: Anthropocentrism

Throughout both parts of the book, Le Duc offers a compelling and holistic interreligious and interdisciplinary approach to addressing ecological issues and promoting environmental flourishing, emphasizing human value, the integrity of creation, human agency, scientific evidence, and the role of religion. He engages with other interdisciplinary scholarships for dialectical and dialogical conversation with religious texts. As is often the case, indigenous peoples' voices are often excluded from the ecological crisis conversation and decision-making. We wonder how indigenous cultures and religions have contributed to the environmental care conversation. Moreover, how have indigenous tribes been impacted by the disruption of the human-nature relationship due to their embrace of modernity? Le Duc has already acknowledged that incorporating indigenous voices for a more comprehensive examination lies beyond the scope of this book. These prospective research areas are something for Le Duc and other scholars to engage indigenous peoples, cultures, and religions in dialogue with world religions to address the environmental concerns plaguing humanity.

Le Duc deserves commendation for his discussion on anthropocentrism and inter-creationality. Anthropocentrism is an ideology referring to humans as the center of creation or the reference point for other beings. In this human-centered framework, Le Duc explains, all beings are a means for human interests without considering other life forms. These anthropocentric attitudes and behaviors are the source of environmental issues, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. For critics of anthropocentrism, religious environmentalism is anthropocentric. Any attempts to protect and preserve the natural world are for human needs and desires at the expense of other beings. In this perspective, religious environmentalism is ego-centric and self-serving. Le Duc is correct in questioning how environmental crises can be addressed independently from our human perspective or human existence².

² Mariya Yarema similarly echoes this question by arguing that humanity is not a threat to the natural world but rather an intrinsic part in evaluating it, taking responsibility for their deeds, and, and treating the ecosystem with

Secular environmental philosophy and religious environmentalism, as well as human-centered and non-human-centered environmental ethics, differ in their approaches to the ecological crisis. While differences exist even within these respective environmentalist worldviews, we see a genuine common concern for creation. In response to the criticism of religious environmentalism as anthropocentrism, Le Duc does not dismiss the anthropogenic cause of the ecological crisis and the fact that religiously inspired environmentalism would be perceived as anthropocentric in some way. The negative connotations and implications of anthropocentrism can thwart or create barriers to religious environmental motivations and efforts. To shift the focus away from the anthropocentrism vs. non-anthropocentrism debates, he proposes that we approach religious environmentalism from a humanistic perspective, a widely accepted concept in both religious and secular spheres that seeks greater mutual understanding, commitment to dialogue, sincere dedication to the common good, and pursuit of collegial relationships. With humanism, the implication is that one becomes the best version of oneself or becomes authentically human.

Environmental Flourishing: Humanism and Inter-creationality

Religious environmental humanism is a notion that emphasizes human responsibility, not human superiority over nature, and that humans are a part of and not apart from the natural world, explains Le Duc. It centers on the belief that humans caused the ecological crisis and are responsible for resolving it. Religion plays a vital role in this process. It teaches the followers to be good stewards of the earth and its resources, yet humanity fails to fulfill that role. Le Duc amplifies the call to protect and preserve humans and non-human beings by centering on human potentiality, agency, and shared responsibility to heal the environmental damage inflicted. Human beings, devoid of chauvinism, recognize that they are just one constituent part of creation, take responsibility for their impact on the environment, and prioritize the preservation and restoration of the whole ecosystem. Authentic humanity and environmental flourishing are deeply intertwined, the point envisioned by the four representative religious traditions examined in the book. Some theologians have argued that returning to theocentric environmentalism, i.e., humans preserving nature as God designed it, would be the key to resolving the environmental crisis.

care. For her, humanity is necessary for nature's well-being. The issue is not the presence of humans on earth but rather the individualistic and selfish behaviors toward nature she also argues that natural forces independent from human activity are also contributors to the ecological disasters (Yarema 2021).

Le Duc's concept of inter-creationality centers on (re)defining what it means to be human and transcending beyond self-referentiality. According to this theory, humans do not exist in isolation but are part of a larger fabric of coexistence and ecosystem, a point emphasized throughout the book. Humans share both existential reality and destiny with all forms of beings. Every being is uniquely created with its intrinsic goodness and value. This profound creaturely interconnectedness binds all beings together, where the joy and suffering, life and death of one being affects others. Causing harm to others, both humans and non-humans, is ultimately causing harm to ourselves as well. Thus, it would be hard for humans to find purpose, meaning, happiness, and peace when others suffer. Failing to recognize and acknowledge the intrinsic link between humans and nature/creation may lead to indifference, resulting in fragile relationships with all beings, nature, and the cosmos. Conversely, when individuals recognize their interconnectedness with all beings and help others develop their potential, they also develop their potential and enhance their well-being. Humans need to cultivate interculturality, which entails practicing self-transcendence and overcoming human tendencies toward egotism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism. The inner journey to recognizing that we are part of the broader universe, engaging in environmental flourishing, and making room for a profound ecological conversion begins with religious self-cultivation.

This book challenges both scholars and general readers to be awakened to the suffering of the world and participate in addressing ecological concerns. It is highly recommended for ecologically conscious individuals and those inspired to care for our common home. General readers will benefit from having a better understanding of the role of religion in inspiring environmental action.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Cornwall Alliance. n.d. "The Cornwall Alliance Declaration on Environmental Stewardship." Accessed December 29, 2023. <https://cornwallalliance.org/landmark-documents/the-cornwall-declaration-on-environmental-stewardship/>.
- Khan, Naveeda. 2014. "Dogs and humans and what earth can be: Filaments of Muslim ecological thought." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(3): 245-264. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau4.3.015>.

- Koehrsen, Jens, Julia Blanc, Fabian Huber. 2022. "How 'Green' Can Religions Be? Tensions About Religious Environmentalism." *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 6: 43-64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-021-00070-4>.
- Koehrsen, Jens. 2021. "Muslims and climate change: How Islam, Muslim organizations, and religious leaders influence climate change perceptions and mitigation activities." *WIREs Climate Change* 12(3): e702: 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.702>.
- Le Duc, Anthony. 2024. *Religious Self-Cultivation and Environmental Flourishing: A Humanist Relational Approach*. Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag.
- Yarema, Mariya. 2021. "Denial of Human Superiority Over Nature as the Denial of the Value of Nature." *Studia Ecologiae et Bioethicae* 19(4): 5-15. <http://doi.org/10.21697/seb.2021.19.4.01>.
- Yildirim, Kadir A. 2016. "Between Anti-Westernism and Development. Political Islam and Environmentalism." *Middle Eastern Studies* 52(2): 215-232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2015.1124414>.