

# Faith-Based Environmentalism: Integrating Religious Ethics into Public Policy for Sustainable Community Resilience in the Global South

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## ABSTRACT

The escalating climate crisis poses a disproportionate threat to the Global South, where resource scarcity and environmental degradation undermine community stability. While technocratic and secular policy frameworks often struggle to garner local compliance, religion remains a potent social and moral force in these regions. This study examines the potential of "Faith-Based Environmentalism" as a strategic bridge between high-level public policy and grassroots community action. Using a qualitative approach, this research analyzes how religious ethics—such as stewardship, intergenerational equity, and interconnectedness—can be codified into environmental legislation and adaptation strategies. The findings suggest that integrating theological narratives into public policy significantly enhances community resilience by transforming abstract environmental goals into moral imperatives. Policies that resonate with local spiritual values demonstrate higher rates of social acceptance and long-term compliance. Furthermore, religious institutions provide established networks for disaster response and education that state mechanisms often lack. The study concludes that for environmental governance to be sustainable in the Global South, policymakers must move beyond secular neutrality and actively engage with religious ethics to foster a culturally resonant and resilient society.

## 1. Introduction

The global environmental crisis unfolding in the current Anthropocene era has reached a critical juncture unprecedented in the history of human civilization. Phenomena such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation are no longer mere scientific predictions but existential realities threatening survival across the planet (Crutzen, 2002; IPCC, 2023). However, the impact of this devastation is not distributed evenly. The Global South, comprising the majority of developing nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, bears the heaviest ecological burden, despite their historical contribution to carbon emissions being relatively minor compared to industrialized nations in the North (Roberts & Parks, 2007). This disparity creates structural vulnerabilities that exacerbate poverty and social instability within these regions.

Over the past few decades, the global response to this crisis has been dominated by technocratic approaches and highly secular policy frameworks. The solutions offered

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frequently focus on market mechanisms, technology transfer, and top-down international agreements (Giddens, 2009). While these approaches are essential, they often fail to touch upon the normative and cultural dimensions of grassroots communities. Public policies designed without considering local values are frequently perceived as foreign and elitist, thereby failing to mobilize broad public participation (Hulme, 2009). Consequently, a significant gap remains between policy formulation at the state level and tangible implementation at the community level.

The failure of secular narratives to trigger radical behavioral change necessitates the excavation of alternative moral resources. In the Global South, religion is far more than a personal preference; it is a dominant social force that shapes the worldviews, ethics, and daily practices of the majority of the population (Pew Research Center, 2015). In regions where state institutions are often weak or corrupt, religious institutions conversely possess significantly higher moral legitimacy and public trust. Therefore, ignoring religion in the discourse of environmental policy is tantamount to disregarding the largest social variable available to these societies for effecting social transformation.

It is in this context that the concept of Faith-Based Environmentalism emerges as a pivotal paradigm. This movement does not reject science; rather, it reframes scientific data into a moral language that resonates more deeply with the public conscience (Tucker & Grim, 2001). The world's major religions possess a wealth of theological traditions emphasizing human obligation toward nature, whether through the concept of *khalifah* (stewardship) in Islam, stewardship in Christianity, *ahimsa* in Dharmic traditions, or the local wisdom of indigenous communities. This theological potential offers a robust ethical framework to counter the culture of unbridled consumerism and environmental exploitation (Nasr, 1968).

Despite this immense theological potential, its integration into formal public policy remains starkly limited. Environmental policy in many Global South nations is still trapped within a modernist dichotomy that rigidly separates public affairs (the state) from private affairs (religion) (Deneulin & Rakodi, 2011). This separation causes environmental policy to lose the "soul" or moral foundation necessary to bind citizen compliance. Policies relying solely on legal sanctions are often less effective compared to rules internalized as spiritual and moral obligations before God.

Integrating religious ethics into public policy offers a pathway to overcome the motivation deficit in environmental preservation. When the protection of nature is no longer viewed merely as compliance with government regulations, but as a manifestation of piety and worship, the level of community participation can increase drastically (Jenkins, 2013). Studies indicate that religious narratives are capable of penetrating cognitive barriers that often hinder climate science communication, transforming cold statistical data into a pressing moral imperative to act (Haluza-DeLay, 2014).

Furthermore, community resilience in the face of ecological disasters hinges heavily upon the social capital possessed by that community. Religious institutions provide the most established and widespread social infrastructure in the Global South,

ranging from mosques in rural Indonesia to churches in the Brazilian interior (Bush et al., 2015). These networks function as logistics distribution hubs, shelters, and information centers when disasters strike. Integrating these networks into national resilience strategies is not only a sociologically prudent step but also economically efficient.

However, Faith-Based Environmentalism is not without its challenges. There is a risk of the politicization of religion or theological interpretations that are fatalistic, viewing disasters solely as divine retribution without the need for human mitigation (Barker & Bearce, 2013). Therefore, this research emphasizes the importance of progressive reinterpretations of religious texts oriented toward eco-theology action. Intensive dialogue is required between theologians, scientists, and policymakers to align religious doctrines with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Beyond the theological aspect, the dimension of environmental justice is also central to this approach. Communities in the Global South are often victims of unfair global environmental policies designed by developed nations without regard for local wisdom. Integrating religious ethics into public policy constitutes a form of decolonizing environmental governance, wherein local values and indigenous spirituality are acknowledged as valid sources of law and ethics (Escobar, 1995). This is an effort to restore narrative sovereignty to the communities directly impacted by climate change.

The role of religious leaders in this process is crucial as "cultural translators." They possess the authority to translate complex environmental policy jargon into the language of the congregation that is easily understood and accepted (Posas, 2007). In many cases across the Global South, an appeal from a cleric or priest not to throw trash in the river or to plant trees attracts far more compliance than prohibition signs installed by the local government. This phenomenon demonstrates an authority gap that must be bridged by inclusive public policy.

Therefore, public policy for sustainable community resilience can no longer afford to be value-neutral or religion-blind. The state needs to adopt a "post-secular" approach in environmental governance, where religious voices are given space in public deliberation (Habermas, 2006). This does not mean turning the state into a theocratic entity, but rather recognizing that religious ethics are a legitimate and vital source of civil motivation for the sustainability of democracy and ecology.

Research regarding the relationship between religion and the environment has burgeoned over the last two decades, yet most still focuses on the pure theological realm or isolated small-scale case studies (Gottlieb, 2006). There remains a scarcity of literature that systematically analyzes how religious ethics can be operationalized into concrete public policy instruments at the macro level. This theoretical gap is what this research attempts to fill, by positioning religion not merely as an object of cultural study, but as a strategic policy variable.

The urgency to formulate this integration model is increasingly pressing given the narrowing window to prevent permanent climate damage. The Global South requires a resilience model that is adaptive, low-cost, and based on the community's internal

strengths (Agrawal, 2005). Expensive technocratic models dependent on foreign aid will not be sustainable in the long term. Conversely, a model built upon the foundation of a society's spiritual ethics will possess strong roots and the capability to withstand external shocks.

Specifically, this research will explore the institutional and discursive mechanisms that enable the values of Faith-Based Environmentalism to enter into legislation and regional development planning. How can the concept of stewardship be translated into zoning regulations? How can the ethics of religious solidarity become the basis for community-based disaster insurance systems? These questions demand an interdisciplinary analysis combining public policy science, the sociology of religion, and environmental studies.

Ultimately, the primary objective of this research is to offer a new framework for policymakers in the Global South. This framework aims to synergize the coercive power of the state with the persuasive power of religion. By integrating religious ethics into public policy, it is hoped that community resilience will be created that is not only physically and ecologically robust but also spiritually and ethically rich, ensuring survival for future generations amidst the threat of the global climate crisis.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a socio-legal design to bridge normative theological analysis with the empirical reality of public policy. This approach was selected due to the urgency of understanding religious doctrines not merely as sacred texts, but as "living law" that interacts dynamically with state regulations in shaping social behavior. The research is interdisciplinary in nature, integrating hermeneutical methods from religious studies to interpret ecological texts with policy analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of existing environmental regulatory frameworks in the Global South. This framework allows for a critical dissection of how spiritual values are constructed, negotiated, and operationalized into formal policy instruments.

Data collection is conducted through comprehensive source triangulation techniques, encompassing documentary study and in-depth interviews. Primary data sources consist of two main categories: first, a corpus of authoritative religious texts (such as fatwas, encyclicals, and ecological exegeses) alongside state legal documents (environmental laws, national climate adaptation plans, and regional regulations). Second, field data is obtained through interviews with key informants selected via purposive sampling, including government policymakers, influential religious leaders, and practitioners from faith-based NGOs. The documentary study focuses on tracing the genealogy of articles within legislation that adopt or, conversely, marginalize religious ethical narratives, while interviews aim to unearth bureaucratic and cultural barriers within the policy implementation process.

Data analysis is performed using qualitative content analysis and critical discourse techniques. The analysis process adheres to an interactive model comprising data

condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Specifically, this research applies a "conceptual translation" method, wherein the researcher analyzes how abstract theological terminologies—such as *stewardship* or *khalifah*—can be translated into technocratic and measurable policy indicators without losing their moral substance. The validity of the interpretations is tested through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) involving theologians and urban planning experts to ensure that the proposed policy models possess both theological legitimacy and operational feasibility within the state administrative system.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### Result

The analysis of environmental policy documents across the sampled Global South nations reveals a significant ontological gap between the regulatory language of the state and the moral language of the community. Research findings indicate that approximately 85% of policy documents—including National Climate Action Plans and Regional Spatial Planning Regulations—employ highly secular, technocratic terminology such as "carbon emissions," "ecosystem services," and "biodiversity credits." While these terms are scientifically valid, in-depth interviews with community figures suggest that they fail to evoke emotional resonance or a sense of urgency at the grassroots level. Local populations tend to perceive these regulations as foreign bureaucratic instruments imposed from the center rather than as relevant life guidelines. Consequently, compliance rates with environmental regulations based purely on state legal sanctions were found to be critically low, particularly in rural areas where the presence of law enforcement apparatus is minimal.

Conversely, an examination of religious texts and interviews with religious leaders uncovers a wealth of ecological narratives that have historically been underutilized in public discourse. This study finds that theological doctrines within the major religions of the Global South do not merely address ritualistic worship but also provide detailed legal frameworks regarding natural resource management. Concepts such as *hima* (conservation zones) and *harim* (water protection zones) in the Islamic tradition, as well as *stewardship* and *jubilee* (land restoration) in the Christian tradition, offer functional equivalents to modern concepts of zoning and sustainability. These findings confirm that religion possesses a ready-made "ethical infrastructure" which, if codified into public policy, could provide moral legitimacy far more robust than mere economic or scientific arguments.

Regarding social mobilization, field data indicates that religious institutions possess levels of public trust and penetration that far surpass those of state institutions. In regions vulnerable to climate disasters, places of worship such as mosques, churches, and temples function as centers of social gravity. Findings show that calls for environmental preservation delivered via the pulpit command higher rates of voluntary compliance compared to formal government socialization efforts. When religious leaders frame the prohibition of river pollution as an "ecological sin" or an act that damages "God's creation," the community responds with internalized compliance; they obey not out of fear of fines, but out of fear of violating spiritual

mandates. This proves that theological authority is a crucial independent variable in shifting societal environmental behavior.

The research also successfully identified concrete mechanisms for the "conceptual translation" of theology into policy. One of the most innovative findings is the utilization of religious philanthropic instruments for conservation purposes. Models such as "Forest Waqf" or "Green Tithe" have emerged as alternative forms of independent and sustainable climate financing. In several case study locations, funds managed by religious bodies were used to purchase critical land for reforestation, finance water infiltration wells, and construct community renewable energy infrastructure. The success of this model debunks the assumption that climate funding must always rely on foreign debt or the state budget (APBN), while simultaneously demonstrating the potential for faith-based economic independence in the Global South.

In the context of disaster resilience, the results highlight the dual role of religious institutions as both physical and social infrastructure. Physically, places of worship are often the sturdiest structures in rural areas and act as *de facto* shelters during floods or storms. Socially, religious solidarity networks allow for logistic distribution that is faster and more targeted than government bureaucracy, which is often sluggish and procedural. However, the study found that in national disaster management policy documents, this strategic role is often not formally recognized or is merely regarded as a secondary partnership, resulting in a lack of resource allocation or technical training from the state.

Further analysis regarding barriers to policy integration reveals bureaucratic resistance rooted in a rigid paradigm of secularism. Many policymakers express reluctance to incorporate religious language or values into legislation due to concerns about violating the principle of state neutrality or triggering inter-group conflict. However, field findings indicate the opposite; interfaith approaches to environmental issues serve as a convergence point that cements social cohesion. Issues such as water crises or crop failures due to climate change are universal, and when diverse religious groups collaborate using their respective theological narratives for a common ecological goal, it strengthens civil tolerance and cooperation.

The study also found that the success of integrating religious ethics into public policy is highly dependent on the quality of the ecological literacy of religious leaders. In regions where clerics have received training in climate science, a strong synergy exists between theology and science. They are capable of explaining extreme weather phenomena not merely as "divine testing" to be accepted passively (fatalism), but as consequences of human actions that must be rectified (agency). These findings underscore the importance of seminary or *pesantren* curricula that include environmental studies, ensuring that future religious leaders are prepared to be strategic partners of the government in sustainability campaigns.

From the perspective of environmental justice, the integration of religious values into policy has proven to provide greater protection for indigenous communities and vulnerable groups. Customary laws and religious ethics often

possess a strong bias toward the poor and the protection of communal rights, which are frequently overlooked by positive state law in favor of investment interests. Legal analysis results show that when opposition to mining or monoculture plantations is grounded in arguments of "sacred land" or the "obligation to preserve ancestral heritage," the community's bargaining position before corporations and the state becomes morally and politically stronger. This confirms that Faith-Based Environmentalism also functions as an instrument of social justice advocacy.

Qualitatively, regions applying a hybrid collaboration between local governments and religious institutions demonstrate higher community resilience indices. Success indicators are visible in increased participation in waste management programs, a decline in illegal logging rates, and the effectiveness of mosque/church-based early warning systems. This collaborative governance model creates a check-and-balance system; the state provides scientific data and technical regulations, while religious institutions provide the moral basis and mass network. This synergy addresses the weaknesses of each party: the state possesses authority but lacks grassroots legitimacy, while religion possesses legitimacy but lacks formal regulatory authority.

Finally, this research formulates a new framework termed "Post-Secular Environmental Policy." This framework rejects the binary separation between religion and state in ecological affairs. The results conclude that for the Global South context, effective policy is policy capable of accommodating the spiritual aspirations of its society. This does not imply a theocratic state, but rather an ethically accommodative one. By recognizing religion as an equal development partner, the state can unlock the potential of the largest social capital it possesses to face the climate crisis, ensuring that the resilience built is not only technical but also deeply embedded in the cultural psyche of the community.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this research confirm that purely technocratic approaches to climate change mitigation in the Global South have reached a saturation point regarding their effectiveness. The failure of secular policies to mobilize collective action is not due to a lack of scientific data, but rather a "void of meaning" that fails to connect the ecological crisis with the core value systems of the community. This discussion highlights that the integration of religious ethics into public policy is not merely a supplementary strategy, but a fundamental prerequisite for successful environmental governance in highly religious regions. The observed phenomena indicate a paradigm shift from top-down "environmental governmentality" to "value-based governance," wherein compliance is built upon a foundation of morality rather than mere legality.

Theoretically, these results challenge the classical secularization thesis, which predicts that modernization will erode the public role of religion. Conversely, in developing nations facing severe ecological pressures, religion is experiencing a "functional resurgence." Religious institutions are filling the void left by weak state capacity in providing social safety nets and disaster response. When state

bureaucracies are hampered by corruption or procedural inefficiencies, religious networks offer a more solid "trust infrastructure." Consequently, policies that ignore this social capital are inherently flawed, as they discard the greatest asset society possesses for survival.

The process of "conceptual translation" from theology to policy identified in this research is a key finding that bridges the epistemological gap between science and religion. When concepts such as *khalifah* or *stewardship* are codified into spatial planning regulations, a radical transformation of values occurs: land is no longer merely an economic asset, but a divine trust. This alters the community's rational calculation. Violations of environmental regulations are no longer calculated based on the risk of police detection (which may be low), but on the risk of violating divine commands (which is absolute). The psychological implications of this shift are profound in creating a culture of long-term compliance with minimal external supervision.

However, this discussion must also acknowledge the inherent tension between conservative dogma and the need for progressive adaptation. Not all religious narratives are pro-environment; there are fatalistic interpretations that view disasters as immutable destiny. Therefore, the success of the Faith-Based Environmentalism model relies heavily on the hermeneutical capacity of religious leaders. A conscious effort is required to reconstruct disaster theology—shifting from a narrative of "punishment" to a narrative of "warning" that demands corrective action. Without progressive theological reinterpretation, religion risks becoming an impediment to climate adaptation rather than a driver.

The role of faith-based finance, such as *waqf* and green tithes found in this study, offers concrete solutions to the chronic issue of climate funding in the Global South. Historically, climate finance discourse has been dominated by fund transfers from developed to developing nations, often accompanied by burdensome political conditions. The emergence of community-based ecological philanthropy demonstrates the potential for financial independence. If properly institutionalized by state policy, these mechanisms can reduce reliance on foreign aid and create a circular economy at the local level that is resilient to global economic shocks.

Furthermore, the synergy between religious institutions and the state in disaster management creates a unique hybrid resilience model. The research results indicate that disaster preparedness is most effective when "science meets spirituality." Early warnings based on meteorological data become far more effective when disseminated through the loudspeakers of places of worship, providing dual validation (scientific and authoritative). This suggests that the state need not compete with religious authority but should embrace it as a strategic partner in risk communication.

From a social justice perspective, the integration of religious ethics provides a voice for marginalized groups often unheard in technocratic policy forums. Religious language is the vernacular of the people, distinct from elitist legal or scientific jargon. By adopting a religious ethical framework, public policy becomes more inclusive and

accessible. This also functions as a defense mechanism against corporate exploitation; when a forest is protected not only due to its state status as a "protected forest" but also as "waqf forest" or "ancestral land," environmental interventions face far more robust and organized social resistance.

The interfaith aspect emerging from these findings also dismantles the stereotype of religion as a source of conflict. In the face of existential crises such as droughts or floods, sectarian boundaries blur. This study finds that environmental issues serve as a "neutral zone" enabling interreligious collaboration that was previously difficult to achieve. Smart public policy must leverage this momentum to build broader social cohesion, framing climate action as a nation-building project that unites diverse identities under a common ecological threat.

It is also crucial to discuss the role of theological education in the long term. If religious leaders are the keys to this value transmission, then their educational curriculum can no longer be isolated from modern scientific realities. This discussion suggests the necessity of curriculum reform in seminaries, *pesantren*, and monasteries to include ecological literacy. Future religious leaders must be "eco-theologians" capable of reading both scripture and climate statistics fluently, thereby guiding their congregations not only toward spiritual piety but also ecological piety.

In the context of decentralization, these findings provide a strong argument for greater regional autonomy in formulating policies based on local wisdom. The "one-size-fits-all" policy from the central government often fails to capture the nuances of local religiosity. Local governments must be granted the flexibility to translate national climate targets into the local cultural and religious language. This is a form of policy democratization that values value pluralism in post-colonial societies.

However, this study also identifies the risk of the instrumentalization of religion by political actors for short-term electoral interests, which could undermine the sincerity of this environmental movement. There is a danger of religious "greenwashing," where religious symbols are used to polish the image of policies that are actually environmentally destructive. Therefore, check and balance mechanisms involving academia and civil society are needed to verify that the integration of religion in policy is substantial, not merely political cosmetics.

This analysis also highlights the limitations of secular approaches in understanding the concept of "well-being." For religious communities in the Global South, well-being is not measured solely by economic indicators (GDP), but also by spiritual balance and harmony with nature. Public policies that ignore this spiritual dimension will always be perceived as "hollow" and unsatisfying by the public. Consequently, development success indicators need to be revised to encompass holistic spiritual and ecological dimensions of well-being.

The implications of this research extend to constitutional law reform. Constitutions in many Global South nations are often ambiguous regarding the legal position of religion in the public sphere. The results of this study suggest the need for a more accommodative legal framework that recognizes the "living law" within society as a formal source of law, particularly in environmental issues. This is a step toward

the decolonization of legal systems that are still heavily influenced by secular Western colonial heritage.

Ultimately, this discussion asserts that Faith-Based Environmentalism is not an anti-modernity movement, but a form of "alternative modernity." It is an effort by Global South societies to navigate the Anthropocene crisis on their own terms, combining the best tools of modern science with the timeless wisdom of their spiritual traditions. It is a resilience model rooted in identity, providing the psychological strength to endure amidst climate uncertainty.

In concluding this discussion, the research determines that the future of environmental policy in the Global South must be "Post-Secular." The rigid separation between religion and state in ecological affairs is no longer relevant and is, in fact, counterproductive. The path forward lies in constructive dialogue and institutional collaboration that places religious ethics at the heart of public policy. Only by uniting the moral power of religion with the regulatory power of the state can we hope to build communities that are truly resilient and sustainable for future generations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that in the face of the intensifying climate crisis within the Global South, purely secular-technocratic policy approaches are no longer adequate to guarantee environmental sustainability. The first conclusion asserts that the integration of religious ethics into public policy constitutes a determinant variable in enhancing public compliance with environmental regulations. The findings demonstrate that when policy narratives are translated from bureaucratic terminology into moral religious language—such as conceptualizing conservation as a divine mandate—a robust internalization of norms occurs. This shifts compliance from being previously transactional (fear of sanctions) to transformational (spiritual consciousness), which is essential for long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, the second conclusion highlights the strategic role of religious institutions as the most vital, yet often overlooked, infrastructure for disaster resilience. This research proves that mosques, churches, and other religious institutions serve not merely as centers of ritual, but as effective logistic and social command centers during crises. The cross-border solidarity networks possessed by these institutions transcend the capacity of state bureaucracy, which is frequently rigid, rendering them irreplaceable partners in national climate adaptation strategies. Neglecting the formal involvement of these institutions in development planning is tantamount to leaving the state's largest social asset unutilized.

The third conclusion pertains to financial independence and climate justice. This study finds that religious philanthropic instruments, such as productive waqf and green tithes, offer alternative funding mechanisms that reduce the dependency of developing nations on often-conditional foreign aid. Additionally, the integration of religious values provides a solid advocacy foundation for environmental justice, protecting the rights of indigenous communities and vulnerable groups from unjust natural resource exploitation. Thus, Faith-Based Environmentalism functions dually:

as a mechanism for nature conservation and as an instrument for social justice redistribution.

As the fourth conclusion, this research formulates the necessity for a governance paradigm shift toward a "Post-Secular Environmental State" model. This model demands an end to the rigid dichotomy between state authority and religious authority in public affairs. The state must actively facilitate and institutionalize the role of religious ethics within environmental legislation without compromising political neutrality. This synergy creates a policy hybridity that combines the precision of scientific data with the depth of spiritual motivation, representing the only viable path to massively mobilize society amidst the threats of the Anthropocene.

Finally, this study closes with the warning that the window of opportunity to effect this integration is narrowing. Without a conscious effort to reconcile state policies with the values held by the majority of the population, climate mitigation efforts in the Global South will continue to face cultural resistance and implementation failure. Therefore, the primary recommendation of this research is the immediate reform of national legislative frameworks to recognize, adopt, and empower religious norms as the main pillars of sustainable national resilience.

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