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How religions shape the environmental movement in Indonesia

by Jonathan D Smith, The Conversation



Religions and religious leaders are actively voicing out impacts of climate change, alongside with scientists and young environmental movement. Credit: Billy Halim/Pixabay

Young environmental activist Greta Thunberg's famous quote "[listen to the scientists](#)", during her meeting with the US Congress is a clarion call for policy-makers to take steps to save the planet.

The scientific consensus on the climate crisis and the need to take immediate action is clear. New reports are being released [regularly](#).

Yet the problems of climate change are not only problems of science and technology. They are moral, ethical and spiritual problems about how we live our lives.

In addition to listening to scientists and young activists like Greta, another influential group that

speaking out more about the environment are religious groups. Though religious groups differ in their beliefs and practices, most agree about the shared need to care for our environment.

In the past 15 years, there has been a rapid rise in environmental activism from religious groups globally.

My [research](#) in Indonesia shows that religious groups have played an important part in responding to climate change by participating in environmental campaigns and by translating scientific and policy language for a religious audience.

Religious environmental campaigns in Indonesia

Indonesia has the [largest Muslim population](#) in the world. Muslims [make up 87.2%](#) of Indonesia more than 240 million people.

Indonesia also recognises Buddhism, Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), Confucianism, Hinduism and Indigenous Religions as official religions.

Indonesia, with its thousands of islands, is also vulnerable to rising sea levels and other extreme weather events caused by human-made [climate change](#). It is feeling the negative impacts of the climate crisis [earlier than many other countries](#) due to its location.

In 2007, when Indonesia hosted the annual UN Climate Summit in Bali, ten Indonesian religious leaders from six religious groups presented an [interfaith statement](#) on the responsibility of religious groups to address climate change.

This interfaith statement expressed the commitment of religious leaders to draw on "religious teachings and local wisdom" to "[inspire and motivate our people at the grassroots level] by [teaching about the environment](#)" and [initiating practical conservation projects](#)".

'Listen to the science' Thunberg tells Congress



As religion has an important social function in Indonesia, religious leaders are expected to contribute to public discussions and work together to solve common problems at the local and national level.

Consequently, religious groups also shape how environmental activism has developed in Indonesia. Religious environmental campaigns aim to change how local people think about the environment and how they live.

Since then there have been some good examples of this action in Indonesia. There is an increase of [eco-friendly](#) "Green Mosques" and "Green Churches". They use renewable energy and encourage conservation. A number of Hindu and Buddhist [initiatives](#) have planted trees and increased local recycling.

Religious groups have also joined with other activists to create strong and diverse coalitions for environmental campaigns. These campaigns are often led by indigenous people who try to protect their lands from being exploited.

For example, the [Save Aru Islands movement](#) kept 5,000 square kilometres of land in Maluku province from being turned into a sugar plantation by a multinational corporation.

The leaders of the movement included Catholic and Protestant leaders working with indigenous groups who would have [lost their land rights](#).

In Central Java, local farmers in [Kendeng](#) who practice Saminism, a Javanese religious tradition which was used as a tool to fight Dutch colonialism in the late 19th and 20th centuries, are [protesting](#) against their sacred lands being given to a Dutch company for cement mining.

In Bali, a [land reclamation project in Benoa Bay](#) prompted strong protests from local Hindus as threatened to [destroy sacred sites](#) on the island.

Global religious groups unite to tackle climate change

[Climate deniers](#) can be found in [religious groups](#) too.

Yet the growing recognition that the environmental crisis calls for solutions beyond the solely scientific or technological has prompted many religious leaders to act.

In 2016, nine years after Indonesia's religious leaders made their interfaith statement on climate change, Catholic, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and other faith leaders urge political world leaders to act on climate change.



Hundreds of religious leaders signed the [Interfaith Climate Change Statement To World Leaders](#) (ICS). In the statement, they urged global leaders to sign and ratify the Paris Agreement, an international pact to limit Earth's temperature rise.

The [statement](#) contains policy recommendations on energy use and religious teachings on the interconnectedness of life and the importance of spiritual reflection.

It combines policy language (calling for states to reduce carbon emissions) and religious language ("Mother Earth", "spiritual dimension of our lives") in crafting a statement of global ethical values. This enables the statement to appeal to policymakers and to people of different religions.

This statement is an example of what the sociologist Peter Beyer calls "[translation](#)". Religious groups are [interpreting scientific environmental concepts](#) into "specifically religious idioms and symbolic clusters".

One example of the religious environmental translation is Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment entitled [Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home](#).

This influential document encourages Christians to protect the environment and calls on governments to take action to reduce [carbon emissions](#).

In Indonesia, the Indonesian Council of Islamic Scholars (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) has developed many fatwas (religious edicts) on environmental conservation. This includes providing [guideline for environmentally friendly mining](#) in 2011, which features rationales using Islamic language and arguments.

Although there's not sufficient [research](#) on the effectiveness of these fatwas in changing logging practices in Indonesia, the religious edicts represent innovative efforts to translate environmental policy into religious languages to preserve forests and reduce global heating.

Working together for climate action

As more people feel the effect of climate change, people around the world are becoming more aware of their natural environment.

Religious environmental activists can play a part in increasing this awareness at the global level and in local communities affected most severely by climate change.

Global reforms to environmental policy and sustainable development will be determined ultimately by the actions of millions of local communities.

Activists, scientists and leaders will need to listen carefully to local communities and work together with them to respond creatively and effectively to global changes at the local level.

Provided by [The Conversation](#)

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