



Exploring the Role of Spiritual Beliefs in Shaping Environmental Ethics: A Phenomenological Study of Religious Communities

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ABSTRACT

Environmental ethics within religious contexts have been explored primarily through practical frameworks, but there remains a limited understanding of how individuals from religious communities experience and engage with environmental issues on a personal spiritual level. While religious teachings often emphasize ecological responsibility, little research has focused on the subjective, lived experiences of individuals within these communities. This gap in knowledge raises the question: How do spiritual beliefs shape individuals' perceptions and actions toward environmental ethics, particularly in the context of climate change?

Here we show that a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of religious individuals, can provide a deeper understanding of this relationship by capturing the emotional, spiritual, and moral dimensions of environmental stewardship. Using in-depth interviews with 20 participants from various religious traditions, we identified key themes related to the spiritual connection with nature, climate change as a moral crisis, and the role of religious teachings in shaping environmental actions. The findings reveal that participants view environmental responsibility as both a spiritual and ethical practice, deeply embedded in their religious beliefs.

These results contribute to the broader discussion on sustainability by demonstrating the critical role of spiritual beliefs in shaping individual environmental behaviors. By highlighting the deep connection between faith and ecological responsibility, this study calls for integrating spiritual perspectives into policy-making and environmental strategies. The findings not only underscore the significance of faith-based frameworks in environmental ethics but also suggest new avenues for future research on the impact of religious beliefs on sustainable practices.



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and environmental ethics is a growing area of research, gaining significance as global environmental issues, such as climate change, become increasingly pressing. Religious traditions have long been recognized for their teachings on the sacredness of nature and the ethical responsibility of humans to care for the earth. Across diverse cultures, religious beliefs influence individuals' actions and attitudes toward environmental stewardship. However, despite the clear connection between faith and ecology in religious teachings, the lived experiences of individuals within these communities have not been sufficiently explored, particularly through a phenomenological lens. (Miller, 2020) This gap in research highlights the need to understand how individuals from various religious traditions interpret and experience their environmental responsibilities.

In contemporary society, environmental degradation, fueled by climate change and unsustainable practices, presents not only an ecological challenge but also a moral and spiritual one. Individuals within religious communities often find themselves at the crossroads of spiritual teachings and practical environmental concerns (Olsson, 2024). Their personal experiences of engaging with

these issues are shaped by deeply held beliefs, creating a rich and complex narrative that is essential for understanding how faith influences environmental action. Given the intensity of environmental challenges, it is increasingly important to explore how spiritual beliefs guide personal and collective responses to ecological crises, particularly within religious communities.

The subjective nature of these experiences makes phenomenology an ideal approach for exploring the meaning that individuals assign to their spiritual beliefs and their environmental actions. Phenomenological research allows for an in-depth understanding of how people experience their world, shedding light on the meanings they derive from their engagement with both faith and environmental ethics. By focusing on lived experiences, this study aims to uncover the deeper, often unspoken connections between religion and environmental responsibility, offering insights into the complex interplay between belief systems and ecological practices.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a significant area of interest, particularly within the field of phenomenology. This approach is especially relevant when exploring how individuals make sense of complex and deeply personal experiences, such as their relationship with nature and the environment through the lens of their religious beliefs. The ability to capture and understand the subjective experiences of individuals—how they perceive, interpret, and emotionally engage with environmental issues in the context of their faith—has been increasingly acknowledged as essential to the field of environmental ethics.

However, exploring such deep, personal experiences presents several methodological challenges (Kallinen, 2019). One of the primary obstacles is the inherent difficulty in capturing the richness and complexity of subjective experiences using traditional quantitative methods. While quantitative approaches can offer valuable statistical insights into broad patterns of behavior, they often fall short in addressing the nuances of individual meaning-making and lived experience. Specifically, they lack the depth required to understand how individuals interpret their environmental actions and the spiritual dimensions of these behaviors. As a result, much of the existing research in environmental ethics has overlooked the experiential and emotional aspects of environmental engagement, leading to a gap in understanding the full scope of this phenomenon.

Given these limitations, many previous studies using quantitative or case-study methodologies are not equipped to fully uncover the essence of religiously motivated environmental practices. These approaches fail to engage deeply with the personal, introspective nature of spiritual beliefs and environmental responsibility. In contrast, phenomenological methods—such as in-depth interviews and thematic analysis—allow for a richer, more nuanced exploration of how individuals in religious communities experience their environmental roles. This study aims to address the gap left by traditional research methods, using phenomenology to explore the complex layers of meaning that individuals attach to their spiritual beliefs and their environmental actions.

In addressing environmental ethics within religious contexts, existing research has largely focused on practical, action-oriented approaches, relying heavily on quantitative surveys or case studies to assess the relationship between religious beliefs and environmental practices. While these methods have provided valuable insights into general patterns of behavior and attitudes, they fall short in capturing the subjective and deeply personal experiences that shape individuals' understanding of their environmental responsibilities (Hämäläinen dkk., 2021). By focusing primarily on measurable outcomes, these approaches overlook the emotional and spiritual dimensions that influence how individuals perceive and engage with environmental issues.

The limitation of these practical approaches is their inability to fully explore the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences with nature and environmental stewardship within their religious contexts. Such methods fail to delve into the complex emotional and spiritual responses that underlie environmental actions, leaving a significant gap in understanding the essence of how religious individuals relate to environmental issues. This gap highlights the need for a more in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of individuals, focusing not just on what they do, but on how and why they do it, shaped by their beliefs and spirituality.

A promising alternative is the adoption of a phenomenological approach, which allows for a deeper, more holistic exploration of these experiences. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding human experiences from the perspective of those who live them, is uniquely suited to uncover the layers of meaning that individuals attribute to their environmental behaviors. By focusing on the essence of the experience, phenomenology offers the potential to reveal the underlying spiritual, emotional, and cognitive processes that drive environmental action, thus providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of how religious beliefs influence environmental ethics (Geppert, 2019). This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by using phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of religious individuals in relation to environmental ethics and climate change, allowing for a more profound understanding of the meanings and motivations that shape their actions.

Previous research on the intersection of religion and environmental ethics has largely focused on the practical implications of religious teachings in relation to environmental behaviors. Studies have examined how various religious traditions view ecological responsibility, often through quantitative surveys or theoretical frameworks. However, few studies have delved into the lived experiences of individuals, specifically exploring the subjective meanings they attach to their environmental actions within a religious context. This research builds on existing literature by incorporating a phenomenological perspective, which allows for a deeper exploration of how individuals in religious communities experience and interpret their environmental responsibilities. The study draws on theories of environmental ethics and religious teachings while emphasizing the importance of understanding personal, subjective experiences.

The proposed phenomenological approach is chosen because it enables the exploration of the meanings and essences of individuals' experiences in relation to their spiritual beliefs and environmental actions. Phenomenology is uniquely suited to uncover the nuances of how individuals perceive and react to environmental issues through the lens of their faith, offering insights that are often overlooked in more quantitative or action-oriented studies (Khazaie dkk., 2020). By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, this research will fill the gap identified in the previous section, offering a richer, more holistic understanding of how spirituality influences environmental ethics. The phenomenological method will allow for the identification of key themes that reflect the emotional, spiritual, and moral dimensions of participants' interactions with nature, moving beyond mere behavioral patterns.

The structure of this article is as follows: the introduction provides an overview of the phenomenon and the research gap, while the next section discusses the phenomenological methodology used. The article then outlines the data collection process, focusing on the in-depth interviews conducted with participants from various religious communities. Following this, the data analysis section explains how the thematic analysis was performed to uncover the key themes in the data (Turganbayeva dkk., 2022). The discussion interprets the findings, linking them back to the broader context of environmental ethics and spirituality. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main insights and their implications for both research and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals from religious communities regarding environmental ethics and their perceptions of climate change. The choice of phenomenology is driven by the need to understand the subjective experiences of participants, as it allows for a deeper exploration of the meanings and interpretations they attach to their encounters with environmental issues through the lens of their spiritual beliefs. Phenomenology is particularly relevant to this study because it focuses on capturing the essence of lived experiences, providing rich insights into how individuals perceive and make sense of phenomena that are deeply rooted in their personal, emotional, and spiritual lives (Asbury, 2022). In this study, a descriptive phenomenological approach is applied, which is characterized by its emphasis

on describing the experiences of participants without inferring or interpreting underlying structures, thereby preserving the authenticity of their lived experiences.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they possessed relevant experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to be active members of a religious community and to have direct experience or engagement with environmental ethics and climate change in the context of their faith. Participants were aged between 25 and 65 years and represented various religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. A total of 20 participants were involved in the study, with a fairly equal distribution of genders. The participants' experiences ranged from personal environmental practices influenced by their spiritual beliefs to collective religious actions aimed at addressing climate change (Emadi, 2023). The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized as follows: 10 males, 10 females, with an average age of 42 years. These participants were chosen to provide a broad range of perspectives on the intersection of spirituality and environmental ethics.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in person. The interviews allowed for an open-ended exploration of participants' experiences and beliefs regarding the relationship between their religious teachings and environmental actions. A semi-structured interview guide was used, consisting of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting personal narratives related to spirituality, environmental ethics, and climate change. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in a private, comfortable setting to ensure participants felt at ease sharing their thoughts. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. To ensure the validity of the responses, a rapport-building process was employed to create a trusting environment conducive to sharing personal and sensitive experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used technique in phenomenological research that focuses on identifying and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows for an in-depth understanding of how participants conceptualize and experience the phenomenon under investigation. The process of analysis involved several systematic steps: first, the transcriptions were thoroughly read to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data (Simões, 2022). Then, meaning units were identified, representing segments of data that captured the essence of participants' experiences. These meaning units were coded and grouped into initial themes, which were then refined through iterative analysis to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. The final themes were interpreted in the context of the research question, highlighting the connections between spirituality and environmental ethics. NVivo software was used to assist with data organization and theme identification, though the focus remained on the qualitative interpretation of the data.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent before participating in the study. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and all data were kept confidential throughout the research process. The study adhered to international ethical standards, ensuring that participants' rights and privacy were protected (Westerink, 2019). In addition, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The data collected were stored securely and only accessible to the research team for analysis.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from the phenomenological analysis of the experiences of individuals from religious communities regarding environmental ethics and their perceptions of climate change. The data reveal distinct themes that capture the subjective experiences of participants as they navigate their spiritual beliefs and environmental responsibilities. Each theme provides insight into the deep personal connections between spirituality and environmental action.

The Spiritual Connection with Nature

A prominent theme that emerged from the data is the deep spiritual connection that participants feel towards nature. Many of the individuals expressed a profound sense of sacredness in the natural world, viewing it as an extension of divine creation. For instance, one participant, a member of a Protestant community, shared:

"For us, nature is not just a backdrop to life; it is a living testament to God's work. We are called to protect it, not because it's our duty, but because it reflects the Creator."

This sentiment was echoed by other participants, who described their engagement with nature not just as a moral obligation but as a spiritual act that reaffirms their faith. The experiences shared emphasize a theological understanding of nature, where environmental stewardship is seen as a form of worship and reverence for the Creator.



Climate Change as a Moral and Spiritual Crisis

A second theme that surfaced was the perception of climate change as both a moral and spiritual crisis. Participants articulated that the environmental degradation they witness is not only an ecological issue but also a spiritual one. As one Muslim participant expressed:

"Seeing the destruction of the earth makes me feel like we have failed as caretakers. It is a test of our faith, how we treat the earth is a reflection of our belief in God's command."

This view was widespread among participants, suggesting that climate change is framed within a moral and theological context. The spiritual crisis is seen as a test of faith, where the failure to protect the environment reflects a deeper failure to adhere to divine principles of stewardship.

Religious Teachings and Environmental Action

A third key theme highlighted the influence of religious teachings on participants' environmental actions. Many participants cited specific teachings from their faith traditions that encouraged environmental protection. A Hindu participant shared:

"In my tradition, we are taught that the earth is our mother, and that we should honor her. I try to live by this teaching every day by reducing waste and taking care of the plants and animals around me."

This theme suggests that religious principles not only shape the participants' worldview but also influence their practical actions toward the environment. Religious doctrines provide moral guidance that motivates individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles.

The Role of Community in Environmental Ethics

The final theme that emerged concerns the importance of community in shaping environmental ethics. Participants noted that their religious communities provide a framework for collective environmental action, reinforcing the idea that environmental responsibility is a shared task. One participant, a Buddhist, explained:

"Our community regularly holds activities to plant trees and clean up the environment. It's not just individual action; we work together to care for the earth as part of our spiritual practice."

This theme underscores the communal aspect of environmental ethics, where individuals draw strength from their religious communities to engage in collective environmental stewardship. The shared practice within religious groups amplifies the moral weight of environmental action.

The analysis reveals that the participants' experiences are deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs, with nature seen as both a sacred entity and a moral responsibility. The participants' engagement with environmental issues is framed within their religious teachings, which guide their understanding of climate change and encourage them to take action. The themes identified highlight a strong link between religious faith and environmental stewardship, offering a unique perspective on how individuals perceive and respond to the challenges of climate change through the lens of spirituality. These findings provide valuable insights into the intersection of religion and environmental ethics, suggesting that religious communities can play a pivotal role in addressing environmental challenges.

DISCUSSION

This study has explored the lived experiences of individuals from religious communities concerning their environmental ethics, focusing on how their spiritual beliefs shape their perceptions and actions related to environmental stewardship. The findings revealed that participants see nature as a sacred entity and view environmental responsibility not only as an ethical obligation but as a spiritual practice. These insights provide valuable answers to the central research question: how do religious beliefs influence individuals' perceptions and actions concerning environmental issues, particularly in relation to climate change?

The research contributes significantly to understanding the nuanced ways in which spirituality informs environmental ethics. It emphasizes that religious teachings do not simply guide behavior in a general sense but profoundly shape how individuals experience and interpret their environmental roles (Fazliev dkk., 2019). For example, participants described a deep, intrinsic connection to nature, seeing it as a reflection of divine creation, which aligns with their understanding of environmental stewardship. This finding adds to the body of knowledge by demonstrating that individuals' environmental actions are driven not only by ethical imperatives but also by spiritual beliefs that imbue their relationship with nature with profound meaning. The study provides a deeper understanding of how spirituality shapes the subjective experience of environmental issues, revealing an emotional and moral dimension that has not been sufficiently explored in previous research.

When compared to existing literature, these findings both support and expand upon earlier studies in environmental ethics and religious studies. Many studies have established that religious teachings promote ecological responsibility (Bernauer, 2021), yet they often focus on general attitudes or behaviors. This study builds upon these findings by showing how religious beliefs are internalized and translated into meaningful, lived experiences that influence behavior in ways that go beyond prescribed actions. Moreover, while previous research has explored the relationship between religion and environmentalism, few have specifically focused on the phenomenological experience of individuals within religious communities. By using phenomenology, this study complements and extends previous theoretical frameworks by exploring the deeper emotional and spiritual aspects of individuals' interactions with environmental issues, offering a more holistic perspective on how faith intersects with ecological responsibility.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have important implications both in terms of scientific understanding and practical applications. On a theoretical level, they contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the relationship between religion and environmental ethics, emphasizing the deeply personal, spiritual connection individuals have with nature. The research underscores that religious teachings are not merely external rules but are internalized by individuals and shape their worldview, influencing how they perceive and engage with the environment. This has significant social and cultural implications, particularly in how religious communities may be better supported in integrating spiritual beliefs with environmental action (Neumann, 2019). From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that religious leaders and policymakers could play a crucial role in promoting environmental stewardship by framing ecological responsibility within the context of spiritual beliefs, thus enhancing the motivation for environmentally sustainable behaviors.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings offer valuable insights into the role of religion in shaping environmental ethics, there are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. One of the primary limitations is the sample size, which, though sufficient for a phenomenological study, may not fully represent the diversity of religious communities globally. The participants in this study were drawn from specific religious traditions, and their experiences may not capture the full range of perspectives across other faiths or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the use of purposive sampling means the findings may not be generalizable to all individuals within these communities. In addition, the study focused on individual experiences, which may not always align with broader societal or institutional views on environmental issues (Kardgar & Rahimirad, 2022). These limitations highlight the need for further research involving larger, more diverse samples and different methodological approaches to explore the complexities of religious-based environmental ethics.

Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for future research. Given the rich, subjective nature of the experiences described by participants, further research could expand the sample to include a broader range of religious traditions and geographical contexts to explore how different faiths shape environmental behaviors. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of religious institutions in promoting environmental stewardship and how collective religious practices may influence individual behavior. The findings could also be applied to investigate how spiritual beliefs interact with other socio-cultural factors, such as socioeconomic status or education, to influence environmental action (Nikmatullah, 2024). Moreover, longitudinal studies could explore how individuals' environmental ethics evolve over time, particularly as they encounter new spiritual or environmental challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the intersection of religious beliefs and environmental ethics, focusing on how individuals from religious communities perceive and engage with environmental issues, particularly in the context of climate change. The findings revealed that participants view nature as sacred, with environmental stewardship seen not only as an ethical duty but as a spiritual practice. This research fills a gap in existing literature by offering a phenomenological perspective, providing a deeper understanding of how spirituality influences individuals' environmental actions. Unlike previous studies, which often focus on behavioral patterns or attitudes, this study highlights the emotional and spiritual dimensions that shape these actions. The findings suggest that integrating spiritual teachings into environmental policy and practice could enhance individuals' commitment to sustainable behaviors. Future research could expand this study by including diverse religious traditions and exploring how religious institutions promote collective environmental action.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial or personal relationships have influenced the research or its results in any way.

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