Some of the most serious issues that we will face in the coming decades concern the environment, including not only pollution and climate change but also the continuous, unsustainable depletion of both renewable and non-renewable resources. As has been widely noted, China’s rapid economic development has contributed significantly to the problems of pollution and environmental degradation (Economy, 2004). While national governments will play a pivotal role in addressing these issues, the participation of non-governmental groups and environmental worldviews must also be considered. Thus, we are led to examine the relevance of religion to these challenges.

Do religions provide doctrines or perspectives that might improve a society’s successful response to these issues? What (if any) is the impact of religious belief on attitudes concerning the environment and environmental protection? What role might religions play in the organization and promotion of environmental conservation efforts within Chinese culture regions?¹

A number of religious leaders have been particularly vocal and visible in promoting awareness of environmental issues (see, for example, BBC News, 2009) and sponsoring environmental preservation efforts within their local communities. In some cases, secular, environmental organizations, such as the United Nations Environment Program and

¹ For the purpose of this paper, the term “Chinese culture regions” shall be used to refer to mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.
the World Wildlife Fund, have actively sought the support of religious leaders and organizations in promoting their causes, while in other instances, religions leaders have themselves taken the initiative in promoting environmental conservation.

A comprehensive review of these activities over the past twenty years would be extensive (see Tucker and Grim [2001] for a summary), yet the authors believe that a quantitative analysis would reveal the growing involvement of religious leaders in environmental initiatives, particularly in promoting greater conservation of natural resources, reduction of environmentally-damaging practices, and attention to the notion of “environmental justice.” While the pronouncements of some religious leaders have, at times, lacked a firm scientific foundation, their concern for environmental problems is noteworthy.

The growing public support of religious leaders for environmental issues has been a motivating factor in the increased interest of scholars of religion in the ecological relevance of and environmental themes within religions.

The rising perception of imminent environmental crisis as well as the increasing participation of religious figures in the discussion of these problems were among the influential factors prompting the organization of a series of conferences on “Religions and Ecology” in the late 1990’s by the Harvard Divinity School’s Center for the Study of World Religions, which “brought together over seven hundred international scholars of the world’s religions as well as environmental activists and grassroots leaders” to review relevant themes in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and indigenous religions (Tucker and Grim, 2001; see also: http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/).

A prevalent argument for the relevance of religion to environmental preservation efforts points to the insufficiency of scientific and rational analysis in dealing with issues that require the adjustment or revival of values. According to this viewpoint, religions may play a significant role in promoting the collective value shifts and new ethical paradigms necessary to confront these environmental challenges.

This argument has been used, for example, to justify the large-scale, scholarly investigation of the possible ecological implications of the doctrines of the world’s major religions. This view was expressed by Mary Evelyn Tucker in the Harvard University Press series on “Religions of the World and Ecology.” Sponsored by the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions and co-edited by Tucker,