interpreting not only the origin of the universe, but peoples' place and purpose in it as well. Thus, cosmologies give rise to ethics, because they help people to understand their relationship with each other and, in some traditions, their relationship to the natural world. The capacity to influence cosmology, therefore, translates into influence over ethics, and in turn, influence over behavior.[8]

Religious cosmologies regarding the natural environment are diverse, and the broad range of teachings might suggest that some religions are naturally "greener" than others. But the reality is more complex. Nearly all religions can be commended and criticized for one aspect or another of their posture toward the environment. A religion's environmental credentials may depend on whether its teaching, its practice, or its potential for "greening" itself is being assessed. And scholars see great potential for developing environmental ethics even within traditions that have not emphasized them. (See Box 2.)[9]

Religion's capacity to provide meaning is rooted deep in the human psyche. This capacity is often expressed through symbols, rituals, myths, and other practices that work at the level of affect. These speak to us from a primal place, a place where we "know" in a subconscious way. Ritual, for example—the repeated patterns of activity that carry the often inexpressible meaning of human experience—is a deep form of communication that is tapped by both religious and secular leaders. A president or prime minister singing the national anthem at a sporting event, hand over heart, is engaging in a powerful ritualistic behavior that speaks to compatriots in a profound way. Needing tools to express spiritual concepts that are well beyond the capacity of language to convey, religious and spiritual traditions for millennia have turned to ritual for help.[10]

Ritual communication, it turns out, has also had an important role in environmental protection among traditional societies. Where resources have been managed well, the credit often goes to "religious or ritual representation of resource management," according to cultural ecologist E. N.

BOX 2

Selected Religious Perspectives on Nature

In the three western monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—morality has traditionally been human-focused, with nature being of secondary importance and with God transcending the natural world. Thus, the natural world can be seen as a set of resources for human use, a perspective that some observers blame for the wasteful and destructive development of the past two centuries. Yet scholars in each of these traditions find substantial grounds for building a strong environmental ethics. The Judaic concept of a covenant or legal agreement between God and humanity, for example, can be extended to all of creation. The Christian focus on sacrament and incarnation are seen as lenses through which the entire natural world can be viewed as sacred. And the Islamic concept of vice-regency teaches that the natural world is not owned by humans but is given to them in trust—a trust that implies certain responsibilities to preserve the balance of creation.

Hinduism and Buddhism in South Asia contain teachings concerning the natural world that are arguably in conflict. Some scholars in these traditions emphasize the illusory nature of the material world and the desirability of escaping suffering by turning to a timeless world of spirit, in the case of Hinduism, or by seeking release in nirvana, in the case of some meditative schools of Buddhism. This other-worldly orientation, some scholars argue, minimizes the importance of environmental degradation. On the other hand, both religions place great emphasis on correct conduct and on fulfillment of duty, which often includes obligations to environmental preservation. Thus, Hindus regard rivers as sacred, and in the concept of *lila*, the creative play of the gods, Hindu theology engages the world as a creative manifestation of the divine. Meanwhile, Buddhist environmentalists often stress the importance of trees in the life of the Buddha, and "socially engaged" Buddhism in Asia and the United States is active in environmental protection, especially of forests. Moreover, the Mahayana schools of Buddhism emphasize the interdependent nature of reality in such images as the jeweled net of Indra, in which each jewel reflects all the others in the universe.

The East Asian traditions of Confucianism and Taoism seamlessly link the divine, human, and natural worlds. The divine is not seen as transcendent; instead, the Earth's fecundity is seen as continuously unfolding through nature's movements across the seasons and through human workings in the cycles of agriculture. This organic worldview is centered around the concept of *ch'i*, the dynamic, material force that infuses the natural and human worlds, unifying matter and spirit. Confucianists and Taoists seek to live in harmony with nature and with other human beings, while paying attention to the movements of the Tao, the Way. Despite the affinity of these traditions with an environmental ethic, however, deforestation, pollution, and other forms of environmental degradation have become widespread in contemporary East Asia due to many factors, including rapid industrialization and the decline of traditional

Box 2 (continued)

values in the last 50 years with the spread of Communism.

Finally, indigenous traditions, closely tied to their local bioregion for food and for materials for clothing, shelter, and cultural activities, tend to have their environmental ethics embedded in their worldviews. Gratitude for the fecundity of nature is a common feature of their cultures. Ritual calendars are often derived from the cycles of nature, such as the appearance of the sun or moon, or the seasonal return of certain animals or plants. Indigenous traditions often have a very light environmental footprint compared with industrial societies. Still, many indigenous traditions recall times of environmental degradation in their mythologies. Since the colonial period, the efforts of indigenous people to live sustainably in their homelands have been hurt by the encroachment of settlements and by logging, mining, and other forms of resource exploitation.

Source: See endnote 9.

Anderson. Before stripping bark from cedar trees, for instance, the Tlingit Indians of the Pacific Northwest perform a ritual apology to the spirits they believe live there, promising to take only what they need. Among the Tsembaga people of New Guinea, pig festivals, ritual pig slaughters, and pig-eating rituals play a key role in maintaining ecological balance, redistributing land and pigs among people, and ensuring that the neediest are the first to receive limited supplies of pork. Rituals such as these are often dismissed as superstition by modern peoples, yet anthropologists assert that skilled use of ritual has made many traditional societies far more successful in caring for their environment than industrial societies have been. The key, says Anderson, is traditional societies' understanding that ritual helps people forge emotional connections with the natural world, connections that industrial societies are slow to make.[11]

Growing out of religion's capacity to shape worldviews is a second asset, the capacity to inspire, and the wielding of moral authority. It is a subtle asset, easily overlooked and often underestimated. Asked in 1935 if the Pope might prove to be an ally of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin is said to have replied scornfully, "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?" The dictator's response betrays a dim understanding of the