

Religious communities exhibit a variety of attitudes towards climate change and use a range of political and legal mechanisms to advocate for a more sustainable environment. Addressing religious motivations in communities' climate advocacy is essential to better understanding the starting points and frameworks of many climate advocates and victims.

Many religions anchor climate and environmental sustainability discussions in the theological notion of stewardship. From [\*Laudato Si\*](#), the most recent papal encyclical on ecology, to the [\*Islamic Climate Change Declaration\*](#) to the [\*Interfaith Climate Change Statement\*](#), religious declarations reflect creation care as a duty to worship the Creator by respecting and cultivating creation. And indigenous religions in threatened and marginalized communities illustrate religion's unique authority in combating climate change.

In 2016, the [\*Dakota Access Pipeline\*](#) and opposition against it captured headlines and attention across the United States. Grave concerns such as water pollution, endangered animals, and land sustainability caused waves of protests and vocal opposition across the United States. But many of the protests surrounding the Pipeline transporting oil from North Dakota to Illinois also stemmed from the route's proximity to disturbed sacred burial grounds.

The Standing Rock Reservation and Native Americans across the country responded to the threat of losing their religious practices, freedoms, and land, through prayer vigils, ritual chants, and education about indigenous religious and cultural heritage. Some invoked the American Indian [\*Religious Freedom Act \(AIRFA\) of 1978\*](#), which affords federal protection and preservation of American Indians' "inherent right of freedom to believe, express, and exercise traditional religions...including but not limited to access to sites, use and possession of sacred objects, and the freedom to worship through ceremonials and traditional rites." But in practice, the AIRFA primarily functions more as a policy statement and less as a robust protection of fundamental rights.

A statutory protection for Native Americans is the [National Historic Preservation Act \(NHPA\)](#), which strengthens tribal protection from federal government overreach. Tribes were granted greater control over sites and objects related to their religions and cultures and allowed to self-determine cultural values and heritage. The combination of the NHPA and the legislative intent of the AIRFA has been interpreted as extending First Amendment protection to Native Americans, but until American law and culture fully appreciate the history and value of Native American religion, the United States will continue to lack a fully expanded vision of religious liberty to Native Americans in law and jurisprudence. For countries with continuous and often traumatic indigenous presence, the importance of consistently studying indigenous peoples and domestic and international law, particularly as related to religious freedom, cannot be overstated.

The Dakota Access Pipeline illustrates a key theme intersecting climate and indigenous religion: preserving lands. While it is important not to generalize spirituality, many indigenous religions, like the tribal faiths in Standing Rock, teach and honor the concept of their lands as sacredly interwoven with the divine. Thus, much legal and political opposition to land threats stems from deep religious and spiritual conviction. The United States' loosely secular law and culture should not obscure the fundamental tenet underlying much of indigenous religion: land is divinity's abode.

The world is only getting more [religious](#). Standing Rock is an illustrative example highlighting the principle that maximal effectiveness requires the ethical imperatives for climate change action be understood and supported by global and domestic religious leadership.