Introduction
During the last few decades, ecological crisis has increasingly become an issue of public concern. Many religious organizations are engaged in discussion and action oriented towards environmental protection. Considering the magnitude of the crisis and the pivotal role played by people’s religions in their attitudes towards the environment, inter-religious dialogue and cooperation on this pressing issue is called for. However, given the diversity of religious views on ecology, it is foreseeable that inter-religious dialogue on environment protection could be a challenging task. The crucial problem is thus not whether but how inter-religious dialogue on ecological issues should be conducted.

Through reviewing the philosophical discussion on environmental ethics, the experiences of environmental movements, the diversity of environmental philosophy of various religious traditions, and the actual cases of dialogue, this article attempts to suggest that it is neither necessary nor desirable to establish a universal ethic for the environment as the goal of inter-religious dialogue. Instead, the dialogue among religions on the ecological issues should aim at the betterment of the ecological well-being of the world through the mutual creative transformation of the religious traditions concerned.

Global Ethic and Environmental Ethics
In recent decades, there have been many inter-religious dialogues on a wide range of contemporary issues. One of the most remarkable efforts is the Global Ethic project vigorously promoted by Hans Küng and his supporters. With the support of UNESCO, a draft of Declaration toward a Global Ethic was endorsed by the Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993. The declaration as a whole emphasizes human rights more than ecology. Among the positive responses made by the religious leaders to the Declaration, there were very few references made about ecological issues. In fact, Küng’s own further elaboration on the political and economic aspects of Global Ethic
includes only a small addition on sustainable development.\textsuperscript{5}

In 1992, a total of 1575 world-renowned scientists issued a joint statement called “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity”, which includes an appeal for help from religious leaders for the establishment of “a new ethic” concerning how to fulfill “our responsibility for caring for ourselves and for the earth.”\textsuperscript{6} The Earth Charter, passed by the Earth Charter Commission of UNESCO in Paris in March 2002, appears to be a formulation of this “new ethic.”\textsuperscript{7} However, without denying the efforts and achievements made, the failure to reach an agreed formula at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen requires us to consider how economic, cultural, environmental, social and religious diversity has led to this impasse. Furthermore, one may have to reconsider not only the viability, fruitfulness and adequacy of the consensus seeking approach to environmentalism, but also the future direction for inter-religious dialogue on ecological issues.

A rather crucial issue is whether the prevalent approach, which aims to achieve a unitary “Ethic” accepted by all the world religions, should be adopted in the dialogue on environmental protection, or whether a diversity of “ethics” is more suitable. This approach seems to be quite viable in the area of human rights, but the problem is whether this approach, which aims at the highest common denominating factor among the world religions, is adequate in environmental ethics? Since a global ethic agreeable to all is unlikely, it is also doubtful as to whether it would be comprehensive and thorough enough to make effective impact on religious people’s attitudes or behaviors towards the environment.

**Environmental Ethics and Moral Pluralism**

In the contemporary philosophical discussion on environmental ethics, one of the most controversial topics is moral pluralism. Some scholars argue that one has to adopt different ethics in different domains of life because no single ethical theory can cover all of our major ethical concerns for other human beings, other animals and the environment.\textsuperscript{8} Other scholars reject this position of intra-personal moral pluralism and prefer the position of inter-personal pluralism, which affirms the existence as well as the value of diverse worldviews towards environmental protection.\textsuperscript{9} The advocates of inter-personal moral pluralism, e.g. Don E. Marietta, Jr., argue that environmental ethics should be contextual and pluralistic, rather than rationalistic and universal. Unlike the universal, rationalistic and abstract approach to ethical principles-based on simplistic deductive arguments, that tend to overlook the concrete parts in specific situations and the complex ethical decisions we face as humans- a contextual approach takes into consideration the fittingness of the moral behavior to the natural environment within the context of specific situations; including the individual’s worldview.\textsuperscript{10} Instead of separating the agent from the concrete situation of making moral choices the
contextual approach to environmental ethics will stress the ecological obligations in the concrete context of a lived situation.\textsuperscript{11}

This contextual approach can be a viable alternative to the traditional ethical universalism because it can make ethics more concrete and more appropriate to the specific circumstance.\textsuperscript{12} Since there are people living in different contexts with different worldviews, a corollary of this contextual approach to environmental ethics is the pluralistic approach to environmental ethics and the rejection of the position of monistic ethics or meta-ethics based on ethical rationalism or universalism. While the contextual character of environmental ethics forces one to deal with real situations and the various factors relevant to decision making, the pluralistic character makes one aware of all the possible moral values involved in the making of a moral judgment.\textsuperscript{13}

One of the strengths of this contextual pluralistic approach to environmental ethics lies precisely in its allowing flexibility, uncertainty, fallibility and creativity; all necessary conditions that help us respond to complex or novel situations with appropriate moral behaviors.\textsuperscript{14}

This discussion about environmental ethics, especially the contextual and pluralistic approach, may constitute a theoretical challenge to the necessity and desirability of establishing a global ethic for the environment that is endorsed by all religions via inter-religious dialogue.

**Plurality of Environmental Movements**

Apart from the theoretical consideration of environmental ethics, one has to consider also the issue from the perspective of environmental movements. It is rather obvious that
though environmental problems are to a certain extent global, environmental movements are usually local. Since environmental problems in various regions could have different foci and diversified resolutions, participants of environmental movements from different social, political, and cultural contexts will have different motivations, strategies and directions.

It has been noted that due to the poor-rich disparities of different countries, the environmentalism of ‘affluence’ and the environmentalism of ‘survival’ could greatly differ and may even conflict with one another. For example, when the debate on nature and landscape values are dominated by the ecologists and biologists, the resultant policies will be less open to ethical-normative and aesthetic-expressive points of view. Furthermore, the environmental holism advocated by radical ecology may have leanings towards totalitarianism, ignoring the views of certain parties and their rights to be heard. The case of environmental movements in Asia is even more complicated. Since Asia is not only religiously pluralistic, the environmental problems also vary rather dramatically from one country to another. It is thus very natural that the environmental movements in Asia employ various actions and strategies and thus carry a strong character of localism, which even calls into question the possibility of a so-called unified Asian perception of nature.

In fact, the lack of diversity in the environmental movement is criticized by many scholars and activists. Many mainstream environmental organizations are criticized from time to time by grassroots activists as being too centralized and hierarchical, for they focus their attention on the
issues that concern the white upper-middle class.18 For the critics, there is a general tendency in contemporary environmental movements to simplify their intellectual themes, theory, actions, and motivations, which could have the effect of excluding and marginalizing many other valid approaches to environmental problems. In order to rectify this tendency, environmentalism needs to be combined with political pluralism.19 In other words, plurality of environmentalism is vital for environmental justice, which is defined not only in terms of environmental equality but also in terms of the recognition of affected individuals and communities.20 The legitimate and fruitful plurality of environmental movements challenges the practical necessity and desirability of a global ethic for the environment, which calls for a pluralistic and contextual approach to environmental ethics.

Divergence of Religious Views of Ecology

China is known to be a country of religious plurality. The “three teachings,” namely Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism (Taoism), have co-existed largely, though not entirely, in peace with each other for centuries. Their views on the environment or ecology, which seem to emphasize the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, are regarded as important cultural resources for the construction of an environmental philosophy for the contemporary world. Though this “harmonious” picture might have been idealized somewhat, the ecological potentials and the relationship among the three religions - assuming that Confucianism is a religion in a broad sense - underlines the significance of the Chinese case for the prospect of inter-religious dialogue on the environment.

Considering their emphasis on the interconnectedness and equality among all sentient beings or even existences, Buddhism and Daoism are very often associated with the position known as Deep Ecology.21 Though it is understood that Buddhism and Daoism are also different from Deep Ecology22, they are recognized as examples or cultural resources of environmental holism or eco-centrism, which is in square opposition to the position of anthropocentrism in environmental philosophy.23

In contrast to Buddhism and Daoism, Confucianism, with its anthropo-cosmic vision of the dynamic interaction between heaven, earth, and human, affirms the idea of forming one body with all things.24 This affirmation of having benevolence (ren) towards non-human beings- including even inorganic matters- is universal in scope but differentiated and hierarchical, rather than indiscriminate in its application. For example, Wang Yang-Ming (1472-1529) suggests that it is natural for human beings to love both animals and plants, but one may also tolerate feeding animals with plants; one loves both animals and human beings, but one will tolerate butchering animals for feeding parents, having banquets or religious sacrifice; one loves both parents and strangers,
but if one has a very small amount of food sufficient for only one person’s survival, one will give it to one’s parent rather than to a stranger. According to this ethic of “one principle with many manifestations” (li yi fen shu), the virtue of benevolence is the same but its application should vary according to the particular relationships involved. Based on this “hierarchical” or “gradational” understanding of benevolence, Confucianism will not wholeheartedly support the idea of deep ecology, which tends to affirm the equality between human and non-human beings.

This Confucian approach to environmental ethics is significantly different from the positions of Buddhism and Daoism, even though it is considered merely a mixture between the two extreme positions of anthropocentrism and eco-centrism, or a third new approach to ecological ethics. It is interesting to note that though both Confucianism and Daoism are indigenous to China, and emphasize the unity between humanity and nature, their approaches to environmental ethics are quite different. While Confucianism takes the human self as the starting point of ethical reasoning, Daoism takes the cosmic Dao. While Confucianism tends to participate actively in social and political institutions, Daoism prefers to avoid them. While the Confucian attitude towards nature is characterized by the concept of benevolence and tends to stress taking positive action in accordance with the principle of benevolence manifested in nature, the Daoist attitude is characterized by “non-intervention” (wu wei) and tends to emphasize not violating the natural way of Nature.

Given the undeniable divergence among the environmental philosophy of these religions, one has to reconsider whether seeking a common ground among them is a viable approach to the dialogue between them, especially if the monotheistic religions are to be included as well.

**Actual Cases of Dialogue**

Though the religious views of ecology are dramatically divergent, it does not mean that inter-religious dialogue on ecology is impossible. In fact, many attempts have been made in the inter-religious dialogue on ecological ethics. For example, there are attempts to engage Christianity and Confucianism to dialogue on ecological ethics. There are also Christian theologians attempting to articulate Christian ecological theology through dialogue with Buddhism.

This kind of dialogue can take place between different religions because each of these religions may have developed various approaches to environmentalism. For example, Buddhism has developed a good variety of approaches to environmentalism. These approaches facilitate the dialogue with Christianity on ecological issues. Similarly, due to the complexity or plurality of Christian churches from various regions and contexts, Christianity has developed a very rich diversity of positions on eco-theology and on environmental ethics, which...
include not only the anthropocentric and ecocentric, but also the theocentric approaches. These divergent approaches provide various contact points for dialogues with different religions.

Based on these examples, even though a universal environmental ethic is not achievable, it does not negate the possibility of inter-religious dialogue on environmental issues. Dialogue between two or more religious groups on ecological issues remains a possibility. The remaining question is that given the divergence among religious views of ecology, why and how would a religious person or group engage in dialogue with another religion on environmental protection? In line with the contextual and pluralistic approach to environmental ethics, this question should not be answered in an abstract and universalistic way. Instead, one has to study the actual cases of the participants in inter-religious dialogue on ecology.

Dialogue: Why and How?
Among contemporary religious thinkers Paul Knitter and John B. Cobb, Jr. are probably among the best known Christian theologians attempting to combine inter-religious dialogue with ecological concern.

Knitter was first interested in the problem of religious pluralism as well as political liberation, and later expanded his concern to ecological
issues. The theological foundation underlying his understanding of inter-religious dialogue - which aims to enhance the cooperation among religions for the promotion of what he terms ‘Eco-human Well-being’ - is his understanding of the Kingdom of God.

According to Knitter’s understanding, Jesus’ ministry, including his proclamation, was focused on the Kingdom of God, which was not the realm the dead entered after life, but a reality on earth. The message of the Kingdom of God is not merely social justice, which includes the preferential option for the poor, but also eco-justice. Knitter affirms that the establishment of the Kingdom of God is primarily the work of God, accomplished by the divine Word, and the Holy Spirit who works universally and beyond the boundary of the Church. The mission of the Christian church is the establishment of the Kingdom of God, rather than the growth of the church. However, as no single religion alone can establish the Kingdom of God, the Holy Spirit uses the other religions as the agents to facilitate the coming of the Kingdom of God. In other words, Christianity is merely one of the means of grace employed by God, who can use other people and things, including other religions, to establish His merciful and righteous Kingdom. In order to fulfill its mission, Christianity has to dialogue and co-operate with other religions. Since other religions have different points of view on world matters and their resolutions, the differences among religions are not only undeniable but also fruitful for inter-religious dialogue and co-operation. For example, Knitter himself admits that in his “activism for the Kingdom of God” he has learnt a lot from Buddhism, such as “being peaceful” is necessary for and has certain priority over “making peace”; without compassion there will be no justice and that “just social structures require reconciled human hearts”; contemplation is necessary for and has certain priority over action; and the non-duality of the “already” and “not-yet” aspects of the Kingdom of God.

Unlike Knitter’s largely Catholic theological background, Cobb’s theological approach to inter-religious dialogue and ecological concern is shaped by process theology and the Wesleyan tradition. Similar to Knitter, Cobb also suggests that what the ecological crisis calls for is not an ecological ethic universally endorsed by people from different cultures, but the creative transformation of various religions and cultural traditions and the resultant transformation of the world. Cobb agrees with Knitter that it is an urgent and important task to have inter-religious dialogue on global ecological issues. However, Cobb refuses to take this as the only acceptable form of meaningful dialogue. Cobb argues that dialogue among religions should be open and without any pre-determined common ground or context as the prerequisite conditions for dialogue. In other words, it is legitimate to have inter-religious dialogue concerning ethical and/or ecological issues, but it
is illegitimate to take the commitment to these issues as the pre-requisite condition to which all participants must adhere before the commencement of the dialogue. In other words, different religions could engage in dialogue on other issues first. Thus environmental concern would be a focus of inter-religious dialogue but not a pre-condition for inter-religious dialogue. This could be an even more open form of dialogue that allows religions committed to ecological concern to take part. It is hoped that through engaging in actual dialogue these religions will become more aware of the ecological issues.

The examples of Knitter and Cobb clearly illustrate that there are theological grounds for Christians to engage in this kind of inter-religious dialogue on ecological issues. In this kind of dialogue, people of different religions could dialogue with each other on the concrete issues of modern life, particularly on the ecological issues of their shared concern, without denying their differences on ecology or other issues. Through dialogue with each other, they can learn from each other, transform themselves, and co-operate with each other for the well-being of humanity and the earth. In this model of inter-religious dialogue, the emphasis is more on how the divergence among religions can facilitate, through dialogue and co-operation, the actualization of the ideal kingdom (Kingdom of God) or the most relevant values, i.e. justice. These Christian discourses on the theological foundation for inter-religious dialogue are based on the Christian tradition itself; they affirm the Christian commitment and openness towards other religions and the religious, as well as social praxis that could be generated from such discourses. However, these are not religiously neutral theories which can be accepted universally by all other religions. The doctrinal basis for involvement in inter-religious dialogue on ecology may be different for people of other religions and are best resolved by their own religious leaders.

Concluding Remarks
Inter-religious dialogue on environmental issues does not have to aim at seeking a universal ethic accepted by all religions. Given the diversity of the religious views on environmental issues, this is a rather unrealistic and
unreacheable objective. Even if such a consensus could be reached, it would be too simplistic and too impotent to provide moral guidance and inspiration to believers of different religious traditions, who come from different cultural, political and social milieus. An alternative model of dialogue is to allow different cultures and religions to follow their own ways of developing their own environmental ethics - based on their own traditions, contexts and encounters with other religions and cultures. By so doing, they can creatively transform their own ethical traditions and further develop their environmental ethics, which should be logically coherent, scientifically credible and capable of providing moral guidance on environmental issues. For this reason it would be better if the inter-religious dialogue on environmental ethics opted for the latter model, which aims to enhance the well-being of all lives in this world through the mutual creative transformation of religious traditions, inspired by their open and yet committed dialogue among each other.45

Notes

1 The author argues for similar position in: Lai Pan-chiu, “Inter-religious dialogue on Environmental Ethics,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21.1 (2011), pp. 5-19. Some parts of the present article are extracted from this more elaborate article.


7 Ibid., pp. 131-142.


11 Ibid., p. 206.

12 Ibid., p. 144.

13 Ibid., p. 209.
14 Ibid., p. 10.


19 Ibid., pp. 4 & 20.

20 Ibid., pp. 11 & 179.


36 Ibid., pp. 97.

37 Ibid., pp. 111-114.

38 Ibid., pp. 108-111.

39 Ibid., pp. 118-121.

40 Ibid., pp. 98-99.


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