

# Religion and Environmental Activism

In Hartford and Beyond

**Grace Sullivan**

Environmental Science & Public  
Policy and Law Double-Major,  
Greenberg Center Undergraduate  
Research Fellow, Trinity College

**Surya Rai**

Political Science and Religious  
Studies Double-Major,  
Greenberg Center Undergraduate  
Research Fellow, Trinity College

“I have asthma. My sister has asthma. We all have asthma... you can correlate it to living in congested cities.”

“There was a smell... it triggered me immediately. I had to close all my windows and get my inhaler.”

“My sister particularly, she has it worse than I do... when she gets her asthma attacks... you feel like you can't do anything. It's helpless.”



# Environmental Racism

Coined by civil rights leader Dr. Benjamin Chavis Jr. out of North Carolina's United Church of Christ in 1987 (Chambers, 2007).

Used to describe the Hartford Landfill in early 2000's by Cynthia Jennings, Hartford civil rights and environmental justice activist.

Defined: “the intentional siting of polluting and waste facilities in communities primarily populated by African Americans, Latines, Indigenous People, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, migrant farmworkers, and low-income workers.”

Form of systemic racism that disproportionately impacts communities of color (Hartford Courant, 2018; Ihejirika, 2023).

# National Environmental Racism

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Redlining

Highways

Industries

# Redlining

- A governmental policy in the 1930s that systematically denied mortgages and financial assistance to Black communities and other minorities.
  - Redlining, an 80-year-old racially discriminatory policy, shaped the system of environmental disparities in the United States.
  - Several studies confirm that United States communities of color are systematically exposed to higher levels of pollution (Lane et al, 2022).
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# Highway Placement

- Syracuse, NY
    - I-84 Placement in 1960s
    - Separated public housing from white and affluent neighborhoods, hospitals, and parks (MacFarlane, 2024)
  - North Charleston, SC
    - I-526 runs through Black neighborhoods
    - It is set to expand (MacFarlane, 2024)
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# Pollutive Industry Location

- Groundbreaking “Toxic Waste and Race” 1987 study released by United Church of Christ:
  - race is the most important variable to predict where commercial hazardous waste facilities are located in the United States.
- 79% of all municipal solid waste incinerators in the United States are located in environmental justice communities:
  - Disproportionate burden of environmental harm in low-income and communities of color (New Jersey’s Dirty Secret)

# Environmental Injustice in Hartford, CT

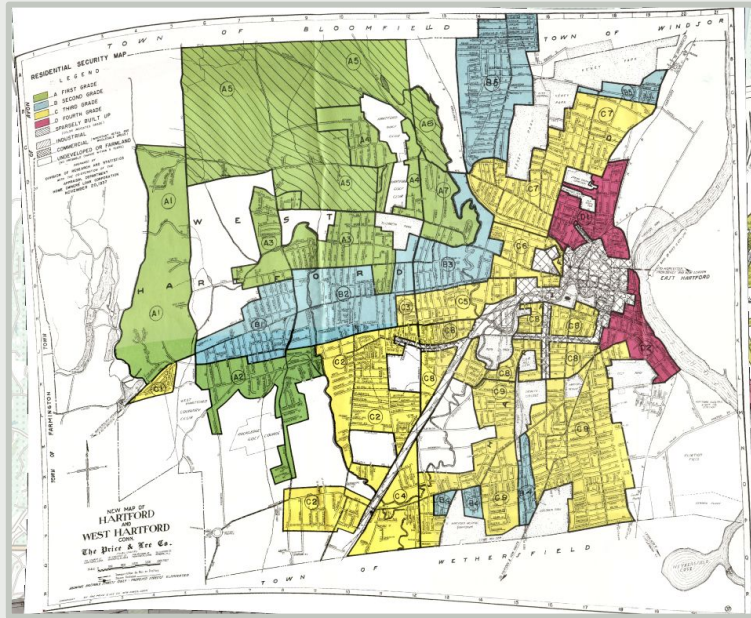
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Redlining

Highway I-84

MIRA Power Plant

# Redlining in Hartford



- Hartford's East End neighborhoods were the lowest rated and redlined due to the population of Black and Italian laborers living in congested single family homes or crowded apartment buildings ([Mapping Inequality](#)).
- Striking city-suburban rating difference: Most of West Hartford was rated A or B while most of Hartford and East Hartford were rated C or D (Nelson and Winling, 2023).
- Created structure for enduring low-income and racially segregated Hartford area.

# Highway I-84

- During America's Gilded Age, Hartford was the wealthiest city in the country. Now, it is one of the poorest.
  - Obvious divide in Hartford was facilitated by the placement of I-84. The placement amputated a portion of the city and facilitated flight into the suburbs (Kruger, 2024).
  - Now, Hartford is a city where money is made but not locally invested.
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# Hazardous Facilities in Connecticut

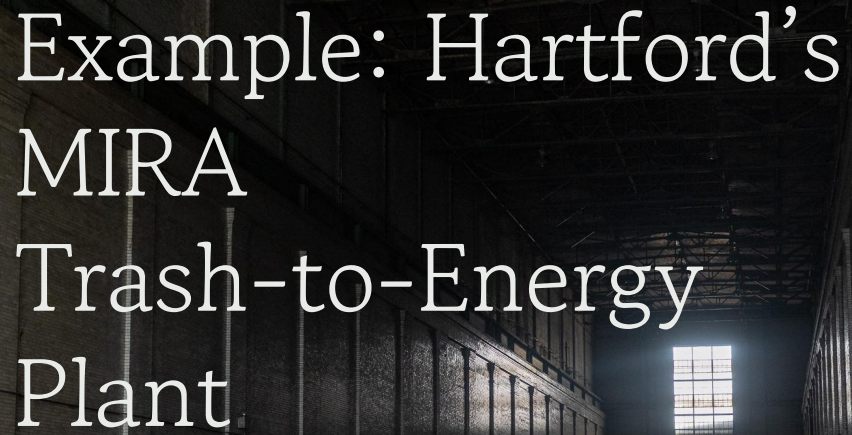
1997 press release from the Connecticut Coalition for Clean Air: “Clean up Connecticut’s Filthy Five”

- Produced more than half of the smog-producing pollutants in CT (THE FILTHY FIVE, 2000).
- All facilities located in environmental justice communities.

Connecticut has 176 potentially hazardous facilities.

- Almost 25% of these are located in the major cities where there are poverty rates are the highest and that have historically vulnerable populations (Underwood, 2025).


While Hartford has 3 polluting facilities, New Haven has 12.



# Example: Hartford's MIRA Trash-to-Energy Plant

## The Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority

- Pollutive industrial trash incineration facility.
- South Meadows neighborhood in East Hartford.
- Historically redlined neighborhood.
- Processed  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the State's trash and served 70 Connecticut towns.



the beginning of the end  
of “a case of  
environmental  
exploitation”

(Polansky, 2024)

## The MIRA Plant

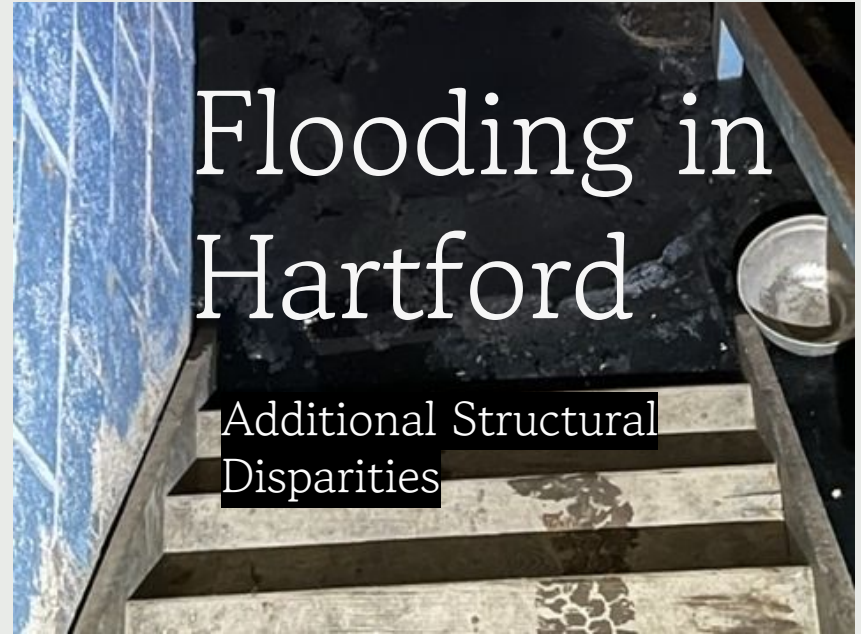
- Shut down in July 2022 thanks to interfaith environmental activism.
- Sent Connecticut into a waste crisis: shipping waste across state borders to be landfilled and perpetuating environmental justice violations in other communities (Almquist, 2024).
- The site still needs to be remediated.

Severe flooding in the North End from the aging sewage pipes. During storms, homes are flooded with human waste.

Ms. Sharon Lewis', Executive Director of the Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice, home was flooded with sewage and wastewater in December 2022.

- Filed a lawsuit with the Metropolitan District Commission and the city.
- Seeks compensation for damages to her property (Staff Report, 2025).

Hartford advocates and North End residents are fighting for a solution. If these issues were happening in high-income neighborhoods, it would be resolved quickly (Cajahuaringa, 2023).



[Photo Credit](#)

# Example: Bristol's Medical Waste

Company Renworld has applied to place an incineration facility to burn medical and municipal waste.

The community is protesting: 600 letters of opposition and over 1,000 signatures to tell DEEP of their disapproval to allow the permit.

Many residents support Senate Bill 80, which would hold all waste processing plants that burn small volumes of medical supplies to EPA standards of larger facilities.

Mike Ewall, founder and director of the Environmental Justice Network, submitted testimony to demonstrate how Reworld's past emissions did not meet federal standards for medical waste burning (McCard, 2025).

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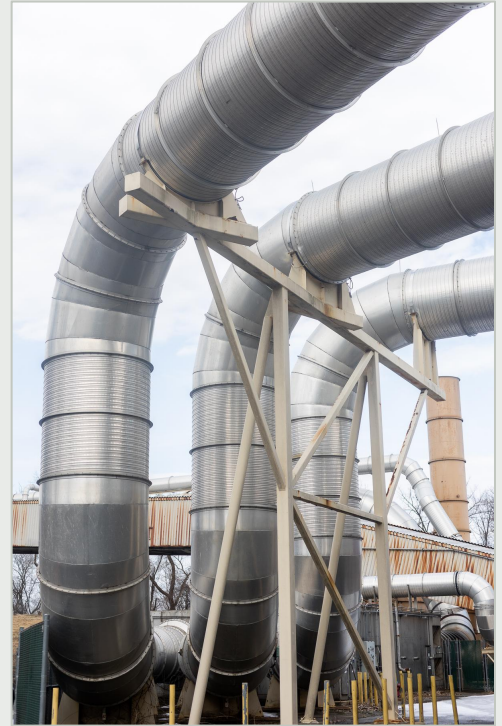
# Disparate Health Effects

Severe impacts to people.

Communities of color are disproportionately exposed to higher rates of pollution, particularly in NO<sub>2</sub> and fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) (Lane et al, 2022).

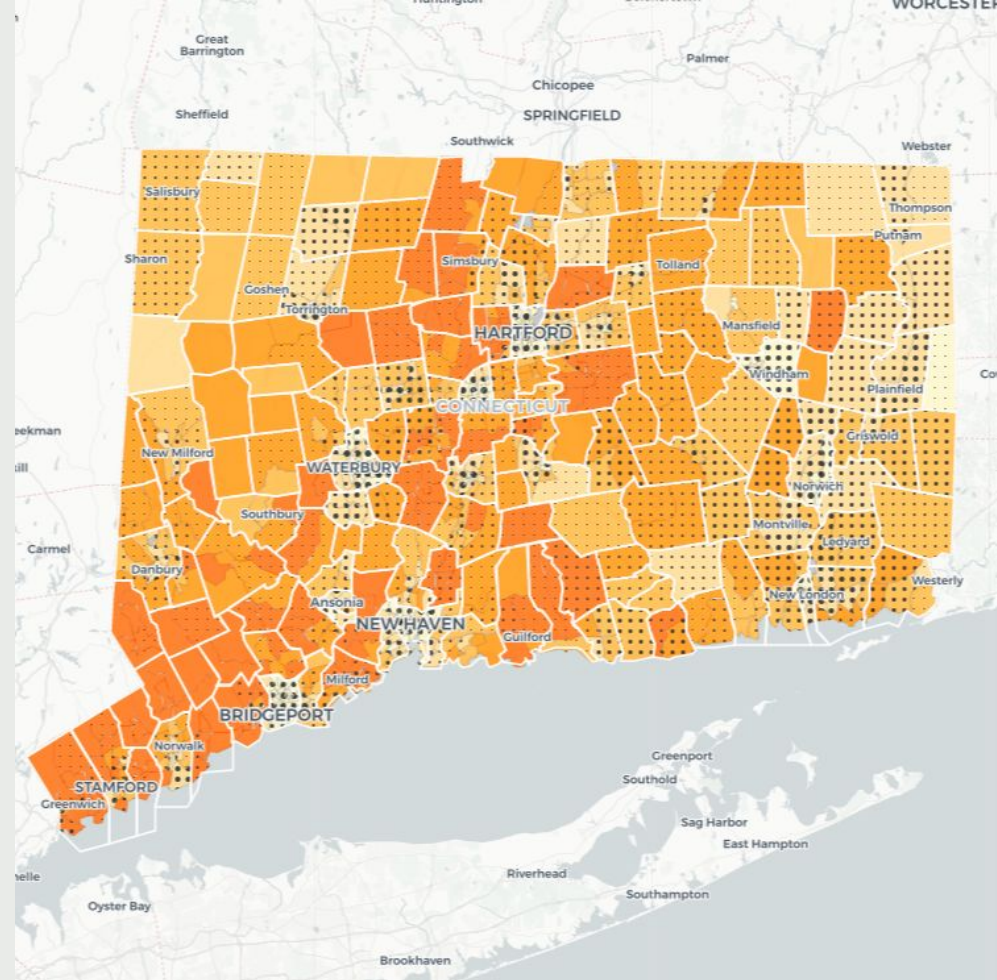
Consequences to chronic, long-term pollution are severe (Bi et al., 2023; Collins et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024).

- Increased Mortality
- Cardiovascular Disease
- Respiratory disease, especially Asthma
- Strokes
- Emergency Department Visits



# Connecticut Health Disparities

Map



[https://www.ctoca.org/health\\_disparities\\_map](https://www.ctoca.org/health_disparities_map)

# Green Spaces in Hartford

## Hartford's Green Space Allocation:

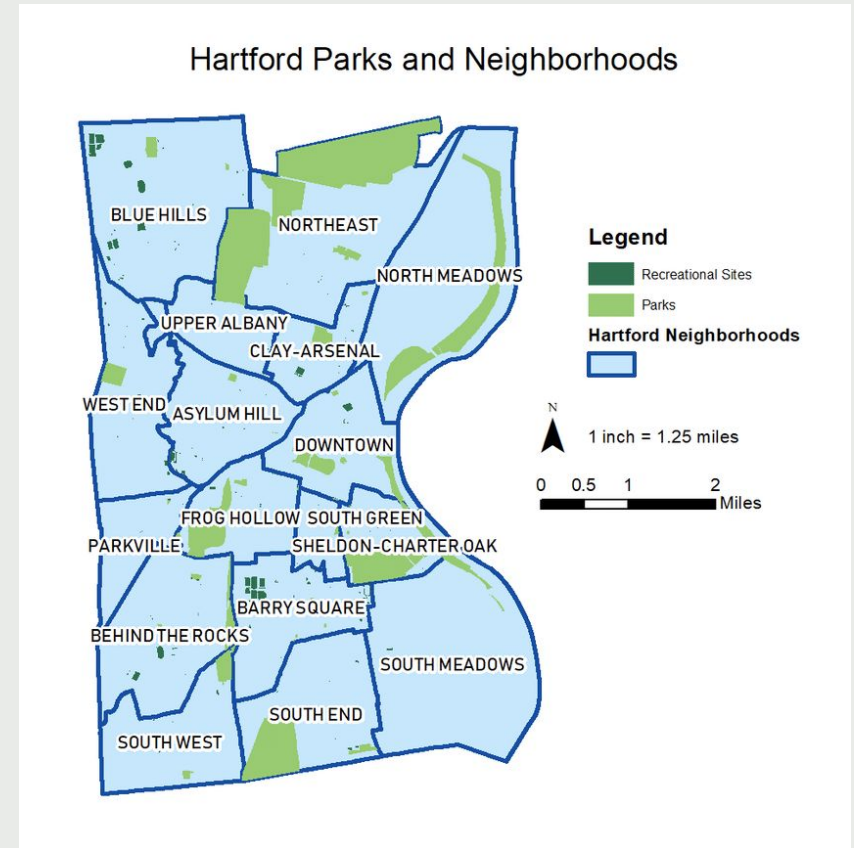
- 37% (Planet Forward) - higher than many prominent U.S. cities (HUGSI).
- “So when I grew up in the North End, there was really no green space. There isn’t any green space where I grew up... Now in the South End, I actually have a pretty big backyard, which is awesome. And I live right next to Goodwin Park which is great.”

## Mental Health Benefits:

- Reduced stress, anxiety, and depression (South).

## Social Mobility and Cohesion (Browning, Rigolon).

- “...If you’re low income... odds are you’re not going to have access to any of those green stuff.”



“I have asthma. My sister has asthma. We all have asthma... you can correlate it to living in congested cities.”

“There was a smell... it triggered me immediately. I had to close all my windows and get my inhaler.”

“My sister particularly, she has it worse than I do... when she gets her asthma attacks... you feel like you can't do anything. It's helpless.”



# Environmental Activism + Faith

Religious and faith-based groups organize on environmental issues.

# Bridgeport's Mount Trashmore

3-story high waste dump located in Bridgeport's Black and Latine East End neighborhood where protests in the 1980s and 1990s advocated to shut it down.

East End Baptist Church (Bridgeport Library History Center):

- Proximity affected church attendance.
- Rev. Vernon Thompson and the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance invited civil rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson to Bridgeport to raise awareness.
- Hosted 82 weekly marches from the church to Mount Trashmore.
- Media attention and political support to remove the landfill.

Thanks to long-term community organizing efforts, the land has been remediated. It is being transformed into a wellness and agricultural center: Mount Growmore (Lockhart, 2023).

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# In the Greater Hartford Area

Many Examples of Religious Organization on Environmental Issues

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# Interreligious Eco-Justice Network

IREJN - The Nation's First Interfaith Environmental Group  
Started in Connecticut

## Initiatives (Chambers 2007)

- Houses of Worship/Green Sanctuaries
- Food insecurity
- Energy Efficiency

## Legislative work

- Bill tracking
- Postcard initiative

## Future Goals

- Developing the Network: Outreach to Clergy
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# Congregation Leaders Step Up

## Two Additional Examples

Protests of the Hartford Landfill in the North End were led by pastors of Black churches in the disproportionately affected communities.

Dr. Hamid at the Berlin Mosque: Muslim Association of Greater Hartford advocated for the remediation of a Hartford Black-Muslim community.

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# The Unitarian Universalist Church Overall

**Seventh Principle:** “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” (UUA)

**UU Ministry for Earth** frames climate and environmental activism as a form of spiritual expression, rooted in UU values.

**Environmental Justice as a Moral Imperative** (UUA)



# The Unitarian Universalist Church of West Hartford

## Certified Green Sanctuary

The church is a certified Green Sanctuary Structure, which is a UU program. Meets all qualifications:

- Events
- Lifestyle and Social Awareness
- Environmental Benefits

## Collaboration with IREJN

Developed Guides to get audits for tax credits and rebates.

- Audits are a barrier to installing solar, insulation, energy efficient pumps, and more.
- Energy costs spiked in 2023-2024, and there was increased demand for audits.
- Low-income folks could get free electrical panels, etc.
- Program: \$75 upfront charge to get buy-in and hold an entity to follow-through with the process.

## Community Programs

Worked with the town of West Hartford to get discounted composting containers and held educational Composting 101 events.

Organized congregational postcard writing to support environmental legislation.

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# Christianity & Environmentalism

US Study by Matthew B. Arbuckle, David M. Konisky

- Members of “Judeo-Christian” traditions - less concerned about environmental protection.
- Evangelical Protestants showed especially low environmental concern.
- Considerable Variation.

## Theology & Interpretation

- Depends on the *how*.
- “Religious Determinists” or “Fatalists” – viewed climate change is controlled by God.
- Another group acknowledged human influence on the climate and did not see it purely as God’s will.



# Christianity & Environmentalism

→ Genesis 2:15

"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

→ Psalm 24:1

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

→ Romans 8:19-22

Discusses the damage caused by human sin



# Christianity & Environmentalism

## Christian Environmentalism In Practice

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
“We show our respect for the Creator by our Stewardship of creation.”

## Challenges and Debates

- Some conservative Christians argue that end-times theology (belief in the imminent return of Christ) means environmental protection is unnecessary.  
Others reject climate science, seeing environmentalism as a secular or political agenda (Pew Research).
- Dominion theology: used to justify resource exploitation (Pew Research).



# Islam & Environmental Attitudes

## Increased Concern

- Islamic leaders and organizations are increasingly vocal about sustainability.
  - ◆ Often invoking principles like *khalifah* (stewardship) and *amana* (sacred trust) to encourage care for nature.
- Practical impact varies
  - ◆ In some cases, strong faith in divine lead to apathy toward worldly environmental issues.
  - ◆ In other cases faith motivates action (UNEP).



Climate Change Concern in Muslim-Majority Countries

- Internal “culture war.”
- Political-religious ideology influences whether people view climate change as a serious problem (Yale Climate).

# Islam & Environmental Attitudes

## Scriptural Justifications for Environmentalism

### → Khalifah (Stewardship)

- ◆ Qur'an 6:165 – *“It is He who has made you vicegerents (khalifah) on the earth.”*
- ◆ Qur'an 2:205 – Condemns those who cause corruption (fasad) on Earth, including environmental harm.

### → Tawhid (Oneness of God)

- ◆ Qur'an 55:10-12 – *“And He set the earth for the creatures... then which of the favors of your Lord will you deny?”*

### → Mizan (Balance) – Maintaining ecological balance:

- ◆ Qur'an 55:7-9 – *“And He has set up the balance, so that you may not transgress in the balance.”*

### → Hadith on Water Conservation:

- ◆ Prophet Muhammad discouraged wastefulness, saying: *“Do not waste water, even if performing ablution on the banks of a flowing river.”* (Ibn Majah)
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# Islam & Environmental Attitudes

## Islamic Environmental Movements

- **Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015)**
  - ◆ Calls for Muslim-majority countries to take leadership in addressing climate change.
- **Eco-Islam Movements**
  - ◆ Initiatives like **Green Mosques** promote sustainable practices, solar energy, and tree planting (Ummah for Earth).
- **Zakat for Environmental Causes**
  - ◆ Some Islamic charities now direct zakat (charity) toward conservation (Ummah for Earth).



# Islam & Environmental Attitudes

## Challenges and Debates (Brookings)

- Some **Muslim-majority nations** prioritize economic development over environmental policies.
  - Islamic teachings support conservation, but **political and economic interests** sometimes lead to resource exploitation.
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# Dark Green Religion & Environmentalism (Bron Taylor)

## What is Dark Green Religion?

- Nature is sacred
- Deeply **influential in environmental activism**.
- Found in grassroots movements, arts, science, and even **global governance (e.g., UN environmental policies)**.

## Core Beliefs

- **Animism**: Nature is alive and has spiritual essence.
- **Gaian Spirituality**: Earth is a self-regulating, sacred system.
- **Pantheism/Panentheism**: Nature and the divine are interconnected.
- **Ecocentric Ethics**: Humans are not superior but part of nature's web.

## Impact on Environmentalism

- Shapes **radical environmental movements** (e.g., Earth First!, Deep Ecology).
  - Inspires **scientists, activists, and artists** to integrate spirituality with ecological awareness.
  - Seen in pop culture (films, books, documentaries) reinforcing **eco-spirituality**.
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# The Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance

## GHIAA

Est. 2019 when Hartford's Center for Leadership and Justice (CLJ) opened to interfaith work to build a diverse leadership base and address social issues.

- Variety member organizations: Christian denominations, Jewish and Muslim organizations.

## Action Campaigns

- E.x. One current (2024) campaign is to combat racial and religious hate.

Organization at the neighborhood level and hosting house meetings.



# GHIAA and the MIRA Waste to Energy Plant

## The Environmental Justice Campaign

- Worked to shut the plant down, culminated in 2022 shut down.
- There is much debate over the remediation of the site, and the South Meadows Redevelopment Survey describes remediation options.
- Example of interfaith community organizing around an environmental justice concern.

Inspiration for this project.



“We won. This was a fight and a win over how we use our resources to care for our communities, and how and who controls the land.”

GHIAA member Dwayne David Paul quoted in CT Public Radio

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# Acknowledgements

- ◆ Sarah McCoy, GHIAA
  - ◆ Prof. Leslie Ribovich, Trinity/Greenberg
  - ◆ Reanna Kuzdzal, Greenberg
  - ◆ Edith Pestana, CTDEEP
  - ◆ Sabina Shelby, UU
  - ◆ Terri Eickel, IREJN
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