

# ***Interfaith Statement for Chemical Policy Reform***

## **The Problem: Toxic Chemicals Threaten Life on Earth**

**Toxic chemicals enter and harm our bodies, plants and animals, and natural systems** through air and water pollution, and chemicals in household products including cleaners, personal care products, plastic food and drink containers, textiles, and children's toys. Yet these chemicals are poorly understood and inadequately regulated. The U.S. Government Accountability Office found that only 200 of the more than 80,000 registered industrial chemicals have been tested<sup>1</sup>. Existing chemical policies fail to protect the web of Creation, including the human community.

**While all people are at risk, some are more vulnerable.** Communities of color and low-income communities suffer disproportionately from pollution caused by current and past industrial activity, waste disposal<sup>2</sup>, heavily-traveled transportation routes, and consumer products containing toxic chemicals. Researchers also warn that toxic chemicals negatively impact children, expectant mothers, and workers.<sup>3</sup> Chemical workers suffer from chemical exposures because of the lack of public data on chemicals they use, unsafe workplaces, and lax enforcement of regulations.

**As religious leaders and people of faith and conscience from diverse traditions, we affirm that reforming current chemical policies is vital to protecting people and life on God's Earth.**

## **Our Shared Call: Four Religious Values**

The world's faith traditions share values which serve as a foundation for ethical decision-making regarding toxic chemicals. Four core values shared by the world's great traditions are as follows:

- All life is to be respected.
- People of faith must ensure that air, water, and land – which belong to the Divine - sustain life on Earth.
- Society owes justice and care to its most vulnerable people and communities, and to future generations
- Our faith traditions call us to protect and promote the health of the human body.

The conclusion of this statement contains reference to religious teachings that reflect these shared values. Sadly, existing chemical policies fail to respect these values.

## **The Principles: Strong Toxic Policies to Sustain All Life**

Government policy on chemicals can and should protect people and all life on Earth. Chemical legislation should:

### ***Protect People and All Life on Earth***

- Remove the most dangerous chemicals, such as chemicals that persist, bioaccumulate, or are acutely toxic (PBTs), from use except when no safe alternative is available.
- Hold companies accountable for demonstrating that chemicals are safe.

### ***Protect Vulnerable Populations***

- Reduce the disproportionate burden of chemical exposure placed on workers, low-income people, people of color, indigenous communities, pregnant women, and children, and other vulnerable groups.
- Expand government biomonitoring, particularly in at-risk communities, to measure people's toxic exposure.
- Invest in research to understand and protect children's health from chemical harm.
- Provide chemical health and safety information to workers and the public.

### ***Promote a Sustainable, Healthy Economy***

- Fund "green" chemistry and engineering research to create safer chemicals and industrial processes.
- Promote a "green" economy that will allow all life to flourish and bring green jobs to low-income communities and communities of color.

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office. Chemical Regulation: Options Exist to Improve EPA's Ability to Assess Health Risks and Manage Its Chemical Review Program. 2005. 22.

<sup>2</sup> United Church of Christ. *Toxic Waste and Race*. 1987.

<sup>3</sup> For examples see President's Cancer Panel. Reducing Environmental Cancer Risk: What We Know and What We Can Do. Letfall, LD and Kripke, M. May 2010. ;Environmental Working Group. Body Burden: A Benchmark Investigation of Industrial Chemicals, Pollutants, and Pesticides in Human Umbilical Cord Blood., 2004; Christiansen S, M Scholze, M Dalgaard, AM Vinggaard, M. Axelstad, A. Kortenkamp and U. Hass. Synergistic disruption of external male sex organ development by a mixture of four antiandrogens. Environmental Health Perspectives doi:10.1289/ehp.0900689. September 2009; California Environmental Protection Agency Department of Toxic Substances Control. PBDE Levels in Falcon Egg Studies Highest Ever., May 2008.

## Religious teachings affirm strong protections from toxic chemicals.

**These teachings represent humanity's shared moral and spiritual heritage, and affirm the importance of protecting society and all life on Earth from the threats posed by toxic chemicals.**

**Judaism** affirms that human beings are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the divine image (Genesis 1:26), and that God recognized all Creation as "very good" (Genesis 1:31), implying the importance of respect and care for the human body and all Creation. Judaism emphasizes God's command to treat vulnerable communities with compassion and justice, take precautions to prevent possible harm, and forbid people from knowingly harming themselves or others (Leviticus 19:28, Deuteronomy 15:7). Classical Jewish sources mandate proper waste disposal and that potentially dangerous production processes be sited at a safe distance from our homes and communities. (e.g. Deuteronomy 23:13-15, *Mishnah* Baba Batra 2:9). Jewish tradition recognizes the inherent value of children and future generations (Shabbat 119b).

**Christianity** echoes Jewish teachings about Creation's goodness, and the New Testament teaches that Christ's salvation encompasses not only humankind but "all things" or "the entire world" (Colossians 1:15-20; John 3:16) -, demonstrating the importance of the whole of Creation. Jesus teaches that those who receive gifts from the Creator are required to use these responsibly (Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 19:12-28), and that Christians are called to seek justice for society's most vulnerable (Matthew 25:31-40). Paul writes that our bodies are a "temple of the holy spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and Jesus healed numerous people suffering from illnesses, showing God's care for human health and the body.

**Islam** teaches that the natural world is a "sign" ("aya") that points to the existence of Allah and that all of Creation glorifies Allah (Qur'an 27:88, 24:41). Human beings are God's "vicegerents" and stewards (Qur'an 2:30, 6:165, 33:72) and are divinely ordained to maintain Creation's balance and harmony (Qur'an 55:1-13). Allah forbids self-harm – an implicit caution in regards to use of toxic substances (Qur'an 2:195, 4:29). Justice for the vulnerable is central to Islam – whether through care for those who suffer or through the prevention of suffering. For example, Prophet Muhammad declared, "Help your brother whether he is an oppressor or he is an oppressed one." People asked, "O Messenger of God,... how can we help the oppressor?" Prophet Muhammad replied, "By preventing the oppressor from committing acts of injustice" (Sahih Bukhari 45:4).

**Hinduism** affirms veneration of nature in its Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Sutras, and other sacred texts. Millions of Hindus recite Sanskrit mantras which recognize the divine in sacred rivers, mountains, trees, and animals. Hinduism's yogic traditions affirm the importance of human health, while Hindu theologies note that Earth is to be revered as a manifestation of the goddess (Devi). Mahatma Gandhi taught that simple living is the foundation of sustainable economies, and that "dharma" – often translated "duty" - can be interpreted to support respect for Earth. Gandhi emphasized the Hindu teaching of "ahimsa," or nonviolence towards the web of life. The ancient Indic tradition of **Jainism** declares non-violence as its supreme virtue and endorses vegetarianism to benefit human health and prevent animal suffering.

**Buddhist** teachings such as "dependent co-arising" ("paticca samupadda") and the Jewel Net of Indra affirm that all life is interconnected, and by extension recognize that toxic chemicals damage this web of life. Buddhism also affirms "ahimsa," or non-violence, recognizing that we must reduce avoidable suffering, and teaches the importance of restraint and self-mastery as methods to achieve individual and collective harmony, criticizing the self-indulgence and greed that characterizes the reckless use of toxics. Buddhism affirms our duty to show compassion to society's most vulnerable members. For example, Bodhisattvas are great spiritual leaders who draw near to enlightenment and then, instead of entering nirvana, choose to help the less fortunate achieve enlightenment and well-being.

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