



Caring for Our Common Home: Climate Change and Faith

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on May 07, 2018 · Flag (https://www.faithcommongood.org/forms/flags/page.html?page_id=449)



Adopted from a keynote address at the Grand River Interfaith Breakfast held in Kitchener, ON on April 25, 2015

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I had the honour and privilege to stand before 350+ attendees from the Waterloo Region and deliver the keynote on a topic that I'm passionate about at the Grand River Interfaith Breakfast, just three days after the world celebrated Earth Day. I provide below an edited version of my talk.

I started by acknowledging that “we are on the Haldimand Tract, traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples.” The indigenous people of this land have so much to teach us on how to care for it as it was their ancestors who were connected to this land, understood its seasons and rhythms, and welcomed settlers into their ever-expanding circle.

I have structured my brief talk with one goal in mind that I wanted to leave the audience with, which is that humans need to rethink and restore their relationship with and dependency on nature, and that people of all faiths are uniquely qualified to lead in this area.

The history of environmental degradation (<https://www.eh-resources.org/timeline/>) since the industrial revolution that started just two centuries ago clearly shows that human-induced climate change is by far the most serious threat to human civilization as we know it in the 21st century. Nature has a way of restoring balance in its systems after a storm, an earthquake or a volcano eruption. But, when you add to the picture people, homes, factories, farmlands, drinking water sources, basic infrastructure for transportation and sewage, border security, animals and microscopic species we depend on for food, it becomes clear how fragile this human-built civilization is to the impacts of climate change.

These impacts include, but are not limited to: rising sea levels, ocean acidification and its impact on marine life, increased intensity of hurricanes and tornadoes, loss of biological diversity and its impact on soil quality, increased intensities and duration of heat waves, flooding in some areas and drought in others, and mass migration of people fleeing conflict due to lack of water and food.

Because I'm a trained scientist and a practicing Muslim, it is very clear in my mind where science and religion stand on environmental issues:

I see science as a tool that help us make sense of the world around us at molecular, atomic and subatomic levels, and also as a tool to create things we can't find in nature. Through scientific studies, we can quantify and project how human activities influence the chemical and physical balance of natural systems, and how we can fix them when they are out of balance because of our actions. I also can see that scientific findings can enlighten the faithful about benefits and harms of certain religious practices passed on from generation to generation.

As for religion, given what I know about human nature and how it evolves and changes over ones' life time, religion can inform the application of science through instilling ethical principles so that products of scientific innovation are for the benefit and good of society and the rest of creation.

There is a relevant statement in Dr. David Suzuki's book, the Sacred Balance (<https://www.amazon.ca/Sacred-Balance-David-T-Suzuki/dp/1550549634>), that reads as following:

"As scientists, many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred. At the same time, a much wider and deeper understanding of science and technology is needed. If we do not understand the problem, it is unlikely we will be able to fix it. Thus, there is a vital role for both religion and science."

More scientists and politicians are coming out framing environmental problems as moral issues, not only technical scientific issues that can be fixed with machines. See for example statements by Dr. James Hansen (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2012/apr/06/nasa-scientist-climate-change>) and Al Gore (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jun/21/al-gore-battle-against-climate-change-like-fight-against-slavery>).

So, what drove humanity to this degree of environmental degradation that threatens their existence? It boils down to two main factors: (1) unregulated corporate greed for resource development, whether at home or abroad, and (2) overconsumption by individuals eager to achieve and maintain a certain social status based on materialistic acquisitions.

Hence, what do religions in general, including Islam, have to offer humanity at this critical time of societal challenges?

In an excellent book authored by Andrea Cohen-Keiner with the title "Claiming Earth as Common Ground" (<https://www.amazon.ca/Claiming-Earth-Common-Ground-Ecological/dp/1594732612>), I echo what she lists there as the three main tools that people of faith bring to the table of environmental activism: Faith, Spirit and Social Wealth.

- **Faith:** the belief in a mighty God and a benevolent universe. This faith is trust, optimism, and the capacity to work when we know we will not finish the job. With faith, we know the worst and work for the best.
- **Spirit:** is the still small voice we hear that calls for alignment with natural order. It is the joyful wordless satisfaction we feel when are connected to ourselves and feel fully alive.
- **Social Wealth:** is the non-competitive meaningful connection to the community. It is not governed by same physics of "material wealth".

For decades, Muslim scholars specializing in religious studies, social and physical sciences have written on the topic of Islam and Ecology. They include Drs. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (<http://cis-ca.org/jol/vol5-no1/environment-fff.pdf>), Fazlun Khalid (<http://www.ifees.org.uk/about/the-founder/>) in the UK, Adi Setia (https://www.abc.se/home/m9783/ir/d/idgg_e.pdf) in Malaysia, and Ibrahim Ozdemir (<http://www.environment-ecology.com/religion-and-ecology/489-an-islamic-approach-to-the-environment.pdf>) in Turkey.

The main questions addressed in their scholarly work were:

1. What do the revelations in the Quran say about the natural world?
2. How do Muslims understand the "stewardship" concept?
3. How do Muslims translate that understanding into practice?

In answering question 1 on what the Quran says about the natural world, we find that verses regarding the natural world are universal and address all humanity, believers and non-believers.

These verses start with “O People..” and “O People of Adam”, or contain pronouns that refer to all humans. The context of these verses revolves around:

- the creation of humans from a single soul and of diverse nature,
- creation of the natural world, the living and the inanimate, and
- how humans should view the natural world.

This verse in particular:

“He has raised the sky. He has set the balance: 8. so that you may not exceed in the balance” (Quran 55-7). The word “balance” in the above verse could be interpreted in light of our scientific understanding of how ecosystems work, where natural elements are interconnected with each other in a delicate cyclical fashion.

In addition, natural elements in the Quran are referred to as “*signs*” of God, a language for us to learn. God invites us to read these signs as a “book of Nature” and tell us that it is as sacred as the written “book of revelation”. It is not a coincidence that the first word that was revealed in the Quran is ‘*Read*’ and the name of the second chapter is the ‘*Pen*’, highlighting the centrality of seeking and recording knowledge to believing in God.

It is also not surprising that the first thing a reader of the Quran will notice is that a good number of the 114 chapters have names of natural elements: the Sun, the Moon, The Star, the Bees, the Ants, The Spider, the Sand Dunes, The Smoke, etc. See more selected verses in this link (<https://www.wlu-science-chem-halabadleh.ca/handout.html>).

In answering the second question on how Muslims understand the “stewardship” concept:

It is mentioned in verse 165 of chapter 6 that, *“It is He (God) who has made you (people of Adam) successors, stewards, vicegerents on Earth.”*

In light of this verse and other related ones, Muslim scholars interpreted the stewardship concept as the following: As God’s vicegerents on Earth, generations of humans are guardians of the natural world and should work hard to keep it in its inherit balanced state.

Early scholars deduced that everything in nature was created for reasons other than only serving or benefiting human kind. Hence, as Al-Burini inferred (https://books.google.ca/books?id=IgvTq3kNCrYC&pg=PA148&lpg=PA148&dq=al-biruni+%22not+have+a+right+to+exploit+the+other+kingdoms+for+his+own+desires%22&source=bl&ots=7633sT8a2z&sig=aGhY81_1jC4w3R_71AKHRTB5wQ6AEIjzAA#v=onepage&q=al-biruni%20%22not%20have%20a%20right%20to%20exploit%20the%20other%20kingdoms%20for%20his%20own%20desires%22&f=false), humans *“[do not] have a right to exploit the other kingdoms for [their] own desires”*.

Should humans ignore their responsibility towards the natural world, we are told in the Quran (Verse 41 of chapter 30) that humans shall taste the consequences of their ignorance in this life: *Corruption has flourished on land and sea as a result of people’s actions and He will make them taste the consequences of some of their own actions so that they may turn back*”. The keyword “*corruption*” is so broad in meaning and has been interpreted by many scholars to encompass environmental degradation as a result of people’s exploitation of the natural world.

To continue on to the answer of the third question of how Muslims translate their understanding of religious texts into environmentally-friendly practices, we have to start by saying that what drives Muslims to couple faith with action stems from their desire to live a good life now and in the hereafter, where they will meet their Lord. Acts of righteousness — as Muslims understand them — encompass those to one self, other fellow humans, and the rest of creation.

In addition, traditions of Prophet Muhammad inspire Muslims to cultivate land, treat animals humanely, reduce water usage, and tread gently on the earth. See specific examples in this link (<https://www.wlu-science-chem-halabadleh.ca/handout.html>).

What I’ve mentioned so far does not only provide an alternative ethical worldview of the natural world, but also builds a sense of internal accountability to the Creator to whom we will return. This internal sense of accountability was the driving force for early generations of Muslims to (1) set up a range of conservation zones for protecting land and species in their habitat, (2) designate zones where human development was not allowed, usually for the protection of water sources, and (3) establish agencies known as hisba to whom members of the community were held accountable.

In more recent history, a number of initiatives by Muslim academics, activists and concerned citizens in Canada and around the world galvanized action towards raising awareness of environmental problems and solutions, and also produce scholarly work in this area. This modern Islamic environmental movement culminated in the publication of the “Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change” (<http://www.ifees.org.uk/declaration/>) in 2015 in Istanbul by a team of Muslim professionals recruited by the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences based in the UK.

2015 was also the same year when Pope Francis published his 192-page encyclical letter on climate and the environment (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). The letter was welcomed in the scientific community with dedicated editorial pieces written on its content in the top two scientific journals, Science (<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/345/6203/1429>) and Nature (<https://www.nature.com/news/hope-from-the-pope-1.17824>). This is in addition to reports published regularly by a number of interfaith grassroots organizations and initiatives focusing on ecology: the Greening Sacred Spaces (https://www.faithcommongood.org/greening_sacred_spaces) of Faith & the Common Good here in Canada, the US Sierra Club report entitled ‘Faith in Action: Communities of Faith bring Hope for the Planet’ (<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/6558830/faith-in-action-sierra-club>), and the UK-based Alliance of Religions and Conservation (<http://www.arcworld.org/>).

So, the climate change issue presents opportunities to think globally and to act and collaborate locally towards a common goal. Instead of feeling paralyzed when thinking about the impacts of climate change, we need to shift our focus and energy and think of the massive opportunities that await us in creating a new future that is more sustainable, socially just, and in harmony with nature for us and future generations.

Scientists and thought leaders in politics and the energy sector tell us that the path to meeting Paris emission reduction goals (<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/12/it-might-seem-like-an-impossible-task-sometimes-but-this-is-how-we-can-limit-global-warming-to-1-5-c>) center around the following three major points:

- Stopping all subsidies to the fossil fuel industry,
- Pricing carbon to account for the true cost of pollution,
- Divesting investments from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

Religious leaders in all faith communities also have a role to play to:

- Remind the faithful that their value as human beings in the eyes of God does not equal the material wealth they accumulate at whatever expense,
- Remind the faithful that their faith in the heart has to be coupled with actions that benefit the planet, the people, and all creation for generations to come, and that God is watching their intentions and actions,
- Encourage the faithful to renovate or build homes and places of worship that consume less energy and water,
- Encourage the faithful to cultivate the land in their homes and places of worship in form of community gardens,
- Encourage the faithful to contemplate their diet and ways of transportation to reduce their environmental footprints,
- Reach out to members of the indigenous communities to listen to their stories on how they cared for this land,
- Reach out to neighbouring faith communities and other non-faith based community organizations to learn about best practices and how to support each others efforts.

I hardly can think of other ways to engage the faithful — and youth in particular — for the long term, except through working on solutions to climate change. In this way, we are sure to build a future and a community that we will be proud of for years to come.

To conclude, while science provides the understanding and technical fix to climate change, religions provide the moral and ethical framework that influences the individual's behavior towards the creation in general.

Acknowledgments:

I want to thank my dear colleague Dr. Meena Sharifi-Funk for the introduction at the event and encouragement to participate in this year's interfaith breakfast.

Also, thanks to Sandy Milne and John Maine for their kind invitation, Mirko from the Laurier Seminary for the media coverage, and the hardworking volunteers who made that event possible.