Ibn Al-cArabi, Shaykh Muhyiddin (1165–1240)

Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Al-cArabi is called Muhyiddin (rejuvenator of religion) and Al-Shaykh Al-Akbar (the Greatest Master) in recognition of the strong influence of his teachings throughout the Muslim world. Born in Murcia (Al-Andalus), now a part of Spain, he traveled extensively in North Africa and what is now Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Turkey, before settling in Damascus. Ibn Al-cArabi lived an extraordinary spiritual life, studied under numerous scholars and mystics, acted as a spiritual mentor to innumerable disciples, and produced some of the most sophisticated treatises on Islamic mysticism, cosmology, psychology, and metaphysics. Ibn Al-cArabi was essentially a sage, who expressed the contents of his spiritual “unveilings” or “openings” by using all the rhetorical and theoretical tools at his disposal, including poetry, while grounding his insights in the Qur’an and Sunnah. The most famous of his several hundred works include Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyyah (The Meccan Openings), Fasus Al-Hikam (Bezels of Wisdom), and Turjuman Al-Alshwaq (The Interpreter of Ardent Desire).

Ibn Al-cArabi has been a controversial figure in Islam, revered and criticized with almost equal zeal. Much of this controversy can be traced to the inherent complexity of Ibn Al-cArabi’s writings; unable to study him directly, opponents have often formed hasty views based on misleading secondary sources. While this tendency crept into early Orientalist approaches, more recent Western scholarship on Ibn Al-cArabi is yielding increasingly refined understandings of his visions, insights, and intuitions.

One facet of Ibn Al-cArabi’s thought is what came to be known as Wahadat Al-Wujud or Unity of Being. Despite superficial resemblances, Unity of Being is very different from Pantheism, Panentheism, or Monism. It is a highly sophisticated and subtle exposition of the meaning of Tawhid, or divine unity. According to Ibn Al-cArabi, God is sheer Being, Absolute Reality, the only being that truly exists. Everything other than God is in an ambiguous state, halfway between Being and nonexistence. The perceptible universe consists of the manifestations, reflections, or modalities of Being.

According to a divine saying often quoted in the Islamic tradition: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the universe in order that I might be known.” For Ibn Al-cArabi, the universe may be seen as countless mirrors in which the one true Being is reflected, and through which it becomes known. Since all the reflections in the mirrors cannot exist without what they reflect, each reflection can be taken as divine in its essence; at the same time, each reflection is nothing more than a mere image that has no independent reality. The mystery of existence is a paradox between affirmation and negation – everything is God/not God – a paradox that cannot be resolved in either direction without falling into error.

Ibn Al-cArabi’s ontology is rooted in his epistemology. Human beings have been endowed with two “eyes” or ways of knowing. Each provides a valid but limited view; both have to be taken at the same time in order to arrive at truth. Where the eye of intellect and reason (aql) sees multiplicity and difference (takhtir), the eye of imagination and unveiling (khayal and kashf) finds unity and sameness (tawhid). The former can affirm God’s distance and transcendence from creation, but the latter experiences God’s nearness to and immanence in creation. Full realization of truth requires balance and harmony between these two epistemic modes; yet the latter enjoys a degree of precedence.

Ibn Al-cArabi’s ethics revolve around his view of human nature. For him, the foremost ethical imperative is the actualization of the entire range of potentialities inherent in the human being’s primordial nature (fitrah). These human potentialities correspond to divine attributes, and the imperative to actualize them is based on the saying of Prophet Muhammad: “Assume the characteristic-traits of God.” The Islamic tradition provides ninety-nine divine names, each of which describes an attribute or character-trait of God. These names are often divided into “names of majesty” (e.g., Mighty, Inaccessible, King, High, Wrathful, Slayer, Harmer) and “names of beauty” (e.g., Beautiful, Near, Merciful, Compassionate, Forgiving, Life-Giver, Bestower). These two categories of divine names are sometimes seen as “masculine” and “feminine,” terms that should not be understood as having any direct or necessary link with biological gender.

Since human beings have been created in the “form of God,” they must develop their inherent divine character-traits in the most appropriate and harmonious manner, thereby becoming increasingly better “mirrors” in which God may be reflected and thereby known. While every creature or phenomenon of nature reflects a limited configuration of a few attributes of God, the human being has the unique capacity to reflect all of God’s attributes in their fullness – to reflect God as God. This also means that
human beings are not apart from nature; there is a certain kinship between the two, for the same God who is manifested in the created universe is the one who is revealed in the human being, the latter representing the universe in miniature (microcosm). This perspective can have a sobering effect on the human sense of separateness from and superiority over nature.

The writings of Ibn Al-cArabi have hardly lost their value during the last seven centuries. They have probably acquired new and unforeseen relevance in view of the increasingly apparent contradictions of the modern age. In this regard, the environmental crisis can be analyzed in thought-provoking ways when approached from a perspective that is informed and inspired by Ibn Al-cArabi's works. There are many ways to undertake this project; one would be to see the environmental crisis as rooted in modernity's tendency to view reality with only one eye, that of intellect and reason. The environmental predicament can therefore be viewed as coming out of a partially valid but incomplete epistemology that sees multiplicity in nature but is blind to its underlying unity. For Ibn Al-cArabi, the realization that God is not identical with nature and that everything has its own reality is only one side of the truth. The equally important other side is that everything is a mode of God's self-disclosure through which God becomes known, and that the reality of everything is in essence God's Reality. To grasp this side of the truth, human beings must bring about a basic change in their way of knowing – they must open the other eye. Only then will human beings know that they cannot treat nature as their eternal "other" without becoming alienated from God and without betraying the most sublime aspects of their own primordial nature. Only then will they realize that the humanly caused extinction of a single plant or animal species is tantamount to shattering a divine mirror.

Ibn Al-cArabi's ethics provides another possible way of approaching the environmental crisis. The roots of the crisis may be traced to the fact that human beings have become dangerously unbalanced in their self-actualization. Anthropocentric hubris results when human beings give an abnormal amount of emphasis to the traits of majesty, while ignoring the traits of beauty. Modern culture emphasizes the "masculine" side of the human self at the cost of its "feminine" side. Consequently, the human attitudes toward nature have been characterized more by domination and control and less by love and compassion. Ibn Al-cArabi's prescription would be to reverse this trend.

Ibn Al-cArabi believes that God's "feminine" aspects have a greater reality than the "masculine" aspects. In the final analysis, divine names of beauty enjoy precedence over divine names of majesty, in accordance with the divine saying: “My Mercy precedes My Wrath.” In other words, God is more merciful than wrathful. This precedence of beauty over majesty, or "femininity" over "masculinity," in the case of God must also reflect in the character-traits of human beings striving for perfection. In other words, the element of love and compassion in the human attitude toward nature must precede the element of domination and control, as a necessary requirement for self-realization.

In order to actualize Ibn Al-cArabi's relevance to the environmental movement, his extensive writings will have to be approached and appropriated from an ecologically informed perspective; the resulting insights will have to be made the basis of ecological education among those mystical and intellectual traditions in which Ibn Al-cArabi is revered as the greatest master.

Ahmed Afaal

Further Reading
See also: Islam; Islam and Eco-Justice; Islam and Environmental Ethics; Islam on Man and Nature; Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection; Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam; The Qur’an; Tawhid (Oneness of God).

Ifá Divination
Ifá is a sophisticated and complex system of divination developed by the Yoruba people of today's southwest Nigeria, Benin, and Togo. Ifá is based on 16 major odù, or chapters, and 240 minor odù, making a total corpus of 256, which is known as odù Ifá. The odù Ifá is comprised of literally thousands of stories, myths, verses, songs, prayers, proverbs, ritual sacrifices and offerings (ebá), cultural history, social and cultural taboos, medicinal preparations, and dietary recommendations, among other themes. The repository of this literature, which nowadays is frequently in written form but in the past was entirely oral, is in the hands of priests of Ifá called Babalawo. They and other adepts of Ifá believe the entire literary corpus to be the message of the creator God, Olodùmare, as witnessed by the all-wise, all-knowing deity (Orishà) named Òrùnmìlà or Òrùnlà, who presides spiritually over the
Ifá encompasses the entire spectrum of human experience, and as such it exhibits extraordinary diversity and complexity. However, the interconnecting thread that weaves the entire Ifá corpus is nature. Indeed, in virtually every odù Ifá there is at least mention of some bird, mammal, fish, reptile, insect, plant, tree, mineral, or geographic location.

The origins of Ifá in Yorubaland are shrouded in myth and cultural history. However, it is fairly certain how Ifá came to be known in the “New World” or in Diaspora, which nowadays unofficially boasts of having hundreds of thousands of practitioners. Along with millions of other Africans who were brought to the Americas via slave ships, hundreds of thousands of Yoruba were brought to the Caribbean islands of Cuba, Trinidad, and Hispaniola, as well as Brazil. A large contingency of these Yoruba were brought in the late nineteenth century to Cuba and Brazil. A large contingency of these Yoruba were brought in the late nineteenth century to Cuban shores. Undoubtedly among those captured Yoruba were Babalawo versed in the literature and knowledge of Ifá. The names of these Babalawo are maintained orally and recalled frequently in ceremonial settings by many present-day diviners in the diasporic hubs like Cuba, Miami, Puerto Rico, and New York where Ifá and other Òrìṣa traditions and practices are vibrant. Many of the same stories, myths, verses, songs, proverbs, etc. relating to nature that have been recorded in recent studies on Ifá in West Africa have been preserved by present-day Babalawo in the Diaspora. Since there is little difference in the flora of the Caribbean there has been little alteration to core religious practices. However, in several U.S. cities, which do not have a tropical climate, practitioners generally import needed herbs from Miami, Southern California, or other tropical areas.

Ifá priests are not only versed in the literature of Ifá but also in ceremonial procedure and practice. Their training is lifelong but typically most concentrated in the first seven years after initiation into the priesthood. Aside from knowledge of the odù Ifá itself, priests attain a thorough understanding of herbs (including fruits and vegetables), animals (domestic and wild), and geographic locations such as rivers, lagoons, oceans, hills, and forests. From the aforementioned the most attention is usually focused on herbs and animals. Proficient Babalawo are well versed in the medicinal as well as spiritual use of leaves, barks, roots, and fruits. They know their cultivation, locations, indications, and contra-indications. There are Babalawo who specialize in herbal medicine both physical and spiritual. These are often called Olu-Ósayin, after Òsayin, the deity of herbs and healing.

Ifá priests who are herbalists usually also have shrines dedicated to Òsayin. The priesthood of Òsayin is a separate but integral aspect of Ifá. Òsayin is an Òrìṣa who inhabits forests and wooded areas. He is lord over all flora. He is said to kidnap adepts in the woods and return them to society with a vast knowledge of herbs. This deity is also said to have part of one leg, one arm, and one ear missing, as well as a grossly disfigured eye. However, his ability to heal and make spiritual magic is said to be unsurpassed. One of his praises says, “Ósayin, the one who skips along with a single leg but who is more powerful than those with two.” He is a constant ally to Òrúnmílà and in fact taught him the importance and efficacy of herbal medicine.

Most important ceremonies in Ifá in the Diaspora and Yorubaland begin with the collection and ritual preparation of many herbs called “ewe’Fá” or the “herbs of Ifá.” In Yorubaland most coronation and initiation ceremonies employ an array of selected herbs. Prior to annual festivals, shrines and emblems of the different Òrìṣa are often ritually washed with specific herbs. Sometimes shrines are decorated with these herbs and branches from selected trees. Palm fronds woven and dried in the form of a curtain are frequently seen demarcating shrines.

There is also a group of trees that are believed to be the abode of a variety of Òríṣa, spirits known as Ebora, and ancestors, or Ègun. These trees are generally seen in the forests as they are often quite large and usually quite old. Sometimes shrines are established at the base of these trees and designated with a wrapped piece of white cloth, especially when these sprout around populated areas. Some of the trees include Àrùbá (Silk cotton, or Ceiba), Òròkò (African Teak), Akòko (Newboldia Leavis), Òshè (Baobab), and Èpọ’Fá (Oil Palm).

Another common and important feature in the Ifá divination corpus is the role that animals play. Most odù Ifá have some story featuring animal symbolism. Usually these animals include birds such as the hawk, eagle, falcon, woodpecker, toucan, and African Grey parrot; and domestic animals like the rooster, hen, goat, sheep, cow, dog, and cat. Many verses also speak of wild animals like the elephant, lion, leopard, hyena, water buffalo, fox, monkey, turtle, and aquatic species like the Electric mudfish and the Snapper. It is common to see in the divination verses any of these animals anthropomorphized. Oftentimes a specific characteristic of an animal; such as its ferocity, or its cunningness, or its sheer strength, its ability to survive adversity, and even its physical characteristics like fur, teeth, eyes, feathers, or even sound, is fused and paralleled with human characteristics, feelings, habits, and desires. These projections serve as metaphors for ethical and moral lessons, for survival strategies, for acceptable behavior within society, for methods of worship, and/or taboos.

Some animals are considered sacred to certain Òríṣa and are forbidden to be killed or eaten, usually due to a circumstance in which a particular deity was in dire straits and the animal saved its life. The deity, it is said, citing eternal gratefulness, pledges never to eat the animal or its kin. Some animals are emblematic of the worship of particular deities. These animals, usually domestic farm animals, are sacrificed to the deities, then butchered,
cooked, and finally eaten by the worshippers and community at large. In traditional Yoruba society, when a hunter captured and killed a wild animal such as a leopard, bush rat, antelope or deer, the animal was customarily butchered and divided among the hunters’ kin. If the animal was very large (an elephant, for example) the meat was divided among elders and chiefs, as well as the hunters’ family. However, in modern society and in the Diaspora these practices have become less common because of deforestation in Yorubaland and the scarcity of such wild animals in the African Diaspora.

Several Òrìṣà have natural environments and phenomena associated with them. There are deities who inhabit particular rivers for which they are named (e.g., The Òṣun, Òbà, Ògún, and Òṣìwa rivers located in southwestern Nigeria). Although The Ògún river is not inhabited by Ògún, Òmọjá, one of his consorts and the spirit of the seas, there begins her fluvial tour that eventually leads to the ocean – her actual dwelling. There are also important deities who are associated with natural phenomena (e.g., Shangó with fire, thunder, lightning; and Òya with wind and tornadoes). Notably, these two deities are characterized as volatile and hot-tempered. The stories of how these sites and phenomena came to be associated with these deities are also in odù Òfà. There are a host of other less popular deities associated with hills, farms, lagoons, and certain trees, as well as particular spirits who inhabit caves, river banks, desolate beaches, and even ant hills.

Practitioners of Òfà believe everything in nature is a manifestation of Olodumare. And since every creation is imbued with a portion of the Creator, then every creation has a portion of his spirit. Babalawo, and indeed practitioners of the Òrìṣà religion in general, believe that some small portion of Olodumare exists everywhere in nature – in herbs, trees, rivers, oceans, lagoons, hills, birds, mammals, fish, in all their variety and color, and this divine power is accessible through ritual and prayer. Òfà priests believe that through certain words contained within odù Òfà the essence of nature can be summoned. And even though odù Òfà uses words to color its metaphorical landscape, clearly nature provides the canvas to convey sacred messages for the betterment of humanity.

Adrian Castro

Further Reading

Incas
To understand the religious ideas of the Andean peoples under the Inca in the sixteenth century, one must first look beyond the physical manifestations of empire, so dominant and lauded in the literature. To be sure, the elaborate road system that united the area of southern Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, northwestern Argentina, and half of Chile; the hundreds of storage silos that dotted the landscape; the pyramid structures and sacred centers of Tumibamba, Huanuco Pampa, Incawasi, and the like; the terraced Andean slopes; and the extensive irrigation networks that turned dry valleys into fertile oases all deserve mention. But to comprehend why these were built and maintained so assiduously requires delving into Andean notions of origins and life. In short, it requires readers to contemplate the role of the dead in the lives of contemporary Andeans on a continuing and daily basis.

The peoples of the Andes, whether we are dealing with individual lineage, with the ethnic groups that they made up, or with the dozens of ethnicities that fell under Inca rule in the sixteenth century, believed that they owed their existence to an identifiable ancestor, who was, in turn, either synonymous with or the direct offspring of a celestial being, body, or force, like the sun, the moon, the stars, or thunder/lightning. Lineage (ayllu) members, to start with the smallest social, political, and religious unit, told and retold the stories of their creation in songs and verse. Many preserved the mummified body of an apical ancestor to whom their creation was attributed. The mummy was kept in an open tomb or cave. On sacred occasions the mummy was visited, re-dressed in fresh attire, “fed” through sacrifices of animals, corn, coca, and maize beer, and sometimes removed for a period of celebration and worship that involved dancing, singing, and feasting. In the seventeenth century, the Spanish sometimes found such a mummy sitting on a stool or throne in his tomb, surrounded by the preserved bodies of hundreds of his deceased descendants, who could be named and identified by the living. Individual lineage members could and did recite their genealogies back to this founding hero.

This apical ancestor was worshipped as a god, who, often with a sister, begot the lineage and either was the first to cultivate the Earth, was the first to introduce an important subsistence crop, or was the first to dig the irrigation system. Their myths and legends told how the first ancestor had traveled across an untamed landscape. When their ancestor sat down, usually on an elevated place, like a mountaintop, he brought order to chaos and civilized the uncivilized. The living believed that their first ancestor and his deceased descendants could and did continue to influence their lives. The ancestors could affect their health and fertility and that of their animals and

See also: Candomblé of Brazil; Santería; Umbanda; Yoruba Culture (West Africa).
fields. For this reason, they received the peoples’ thanks and acknowledgment through sacrifice and celebration. Living descendants also worshipped the spot where their first ancestor originally appeared and locations where he was known to have stopped or frequented during life. This is the origin of colonial references to the native reverence for a sacred spring, a tree, or a mountaintop. If the living did not adequately remember and propitiate their forebears for their blessings, the ancestors sent signs of their wrath and disfavor. An illness or plague; a frost, drought, or flood; even the infertility of a couple could be attributed to and explained as the result of the ire of one ancestor or another.

Andean peoples saw evidence of divine largess and power throughout nature. At harvest time, peasants separated and saved the highest yielding and fertile corn plants (mates de maíz) to dress as women and revere as the wives of their idols (saramamas). Miners preserved unusually pure pieces of ore to venerate also as gifts of their gods. Peculiarly colored or shaped stones and boulders also served as objects of local devotion.

The same ideas were prevalent among the dominant ethnic group, called the Incas by the Spanish, although the scale and elaborateness of worship were proportionately greater. The Inca or king claimed descent from the sun, his father, and the moon, his mother, the sun’s sister and wife. The Incas who were alive at the time of the Spanish invasion in 1532 preserved the mummies of their forebears and brought them out on ritual occasions as proof of their direct descendence and right to rule. Each mummiified king had a palace and attendants, their own descendants, who clothed and fed them, answered questions for them as if they were still alive, and kept the flies off their preserved remains. The Incas built centers of sun worship throughout their realm, each patterned on the first, complete with hospitality centers and residences for the “chosen” women. Rich ceremonies were celebrated at these centers as the Inca moved from one to another, dispensing favors and justice, celebrating the sun, moon, and stars, and reinforcing the personal relationships that proved the basis of his terrestrial power. On such occasions, Inca feasts and achievements were recalled. Such events marked the calendar and provided occasions for peoples of the various ethnicities to participate in the adorations, learn the traditions, and identify with the greatness of their past.

These ancestor-gods, known as huacas (a generic expression for anything sacred) provided a paradigm for Andean rulership, of a lineage (principal), a larger ethnic group (curaca), and nation (king or emperor). The apical ancestor, either as a mummy or its representation (an idol or a mask), was carried from place to place on ceremonial occasions. An extended family might designate one of its members to carry great (great, great, great . . .) grandfather on his back for the dancing and singing during a celebration. A larger ethnic group might carry their forebear on a more or less elaborate litter. They, as mentioned above, were dressed afresh for such occasions and “fed.”

Andean leaders, from lineage leaders to emperor, were treated in much the same way. Each ruler was carried “on the shoulders of Indians,” seated normally on a low stool, atop a litter. He moved from one ceremonial center to another surrounded by his personal retainers, who served as pages, musicians, entertainers, and guards. Women followed his procession, carrying toasted corn and maize beer to dispense to the onlookers. As he passed, subjects pulled out their eyelashes and eyebrows to blow in his direction and put their hands to their lips, which they smacked as in a kiss, as the palms of the hands were thrust outward and upward, as an outward sign of reverence (known as the act of the mocha). Like the gods who moved from place to place, the leader remained mum and mostly motionless as he was carried about. The Inca’s person was sometimes shielded from view by a curtain or cloth and a spokesman answered direct questions in his stead.

Ancestral gods were believed to take an active role in choosing the successors to rulership. At all levels, candidates for leadership were screened by divination. In a ceremony, called the calpa, the ancestors indicated their choice from among the candidates. Once chosen, the lord-to-be fasted and went through purification rituals. The inauguration ceremony involved investing the lord with the insignia of rule and sitting the incoming authority on a stool. Once thus enthroned, his followers worshipped him. The mocha has been interpreted as symbolizing the investiture of the wisdom and power of the past on the living authority at the moment he took his seat. Once seated above everyone else, he could mandate and control the labor and fate of his followers and bestow justice, including the recognized right to condemn to death for serious infractions of group customs or affronts to the gods or his person.

The authority’s legitimacy was based on his direct descent from a hallowed creator. The balladeers and record-keepers (quipucamayocs) recited the history of the group as a royal genealogy. The Incas recalled the rule of about a dozen previous god-kings, going back to a mythical man named Manco Capac. Lineage leaders in the central Andes in the seventeenth century recited a genealogy of authorities going back up to eleven generations to an apical ancestor. Even the bestowal of a plot of land in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Lamabayeque (Peru) required the recitation of a list of ten previous holders, back to the person who presumably was the first to clear and cultivate the plot.

One task of each ruler was to accomplish, if possible, something extraordinary to be sufficiently noteworthy to be remembered. For some individuals, conquest established his reputation while at the same time gaining the vanquished as persons on whom to impose labor service. Other rulers mobilized their followers to terrace
the hillsides or extend an irrigation system to create additional resources for exploitation. Presumably, production could then increase. More surpluses might be warehoused for distribution at the sacred rituals, where dancing, singing, and feasting were the order of the day. Individuals from other lineages might be recruited to his service because the ancestral god showed favor on his descendants. Prosperity and good government reinforced and were the manifestations of their ancestral belief system. The reputation of the local leader and his cult increased. Marriage alliances extended the cult. In sum, either through successful waging of war or the execution of a major engineering feat, a lord could gain a place in the collective memory stored in songs and verse. This increased the chances that he would be remembered and adored generations after he died, and began the process of turning him into a generous and good folk hero.

It was another of the tasks of such leaders to serve as mediator between the god(s) and his followers. The principal at the lineage level, the curaca at the ethnicity level, and the Inca at the imperial level were responsible for propitiating the spirits of the dead with food and drink. He also directed the cultivation of certain plots of lands that were worked to produce the items used in sacrifice. He assigned people to herd and care for the animals that were raised for ceremonial purposes. He sometimes appointed persons to care for the tombs. Maidens were chosen to make the maize beer and weave the cloth for ritual acts. He also was believed to have the power to communicate directly with the gods. In this way, he served as a mouthpiece for the ancestors, who answered important questions of concern to individuals and the group as a whole. Thus, reciprocity reigned between the gods and authorities, as between the authorities and their peoples.

Should the living lord prove remiss in his duties, as evidenced by difficulties and disaster (including natural ones), his subjects would judge him a failure and flee. It then became incumbent upon the lesser lords to take action. If hardships persisted, lesser lords were responsible to their lord, believing that he had lost the favor of the departed and, therefore, his legitimate right to rule. The power of the gods was not considered to be static. Their power, like that of men, could change over time. In times of war, descendants carried the ancestor’s mummy or its representation into battle to help defeat the enemy. The victor’s god was believed to be more powerful than the vanquished side’s hero. It was accepted custom for the vanquished to accept defeat as proof of relative power and accept service to the victors and their ancestors. One scholar believes that the purported aid of the sun god explained the victory of the Incas against the Chancas under the Inca Pachacuti. This victory moved the sun into the primordial and most powerful position of the pantheon, displacing the thunder god as the most revered.

Because lineage leaders were related to curacas and curacas were related to the Inca through multiple marriages and the practice of polygamy, polytheism was the order of the day. One individual might worship the sun and the moon, the ancestors of the curaca, his own grandfathers’ grandfather, and his father and mother. Likewise, one family, all its relatives, and all the relatives’ relatives might travel in pilgrimage to a regional ceremonial site to participate in a ritual honoring the sun on the occasion of the presence of the living Inca himself.

There was, in short, a hierarchy of gods. The Spanish chroniclers write that the Inca evaluated ethnic and lineage gods, who were required to be presented before him once a year, on the basis of their predictions. Those who foretold correctly were lauded and rewarded; those who failed to predict accurately were demoted to the point of oblivion. In a culture that depended primarily on oral traditions for its historical sense of self, to lose adherents and followers was to be forgotten.

The multiplicity of gods and the absence of detailed historical texts led to the historization of the landscape as a memory aid. Unique and notable features of the countryside – the highest peak, a lake, a spring, a boulder, or a very old tree – might be rendered sacred by this association with a heroic ancestor. A person would hear in childhood the stories associated with each landmark, thus learning to “read” or “recall” the history of the group. These would be manifestations of the interdependence of the living and the dead; the future depended on the past through the advocacy of the living. Roads were extended to unite a people, made one by marriage and blood with the most powerful of the sacred ancestors, the sun. In times of crisis, one looked to the strongest and most powerful for aid. The hundreds of storehouses of the Inca guaranteed subsistence to people who lived on lands that periodically trembled and shook and who suffered from periodic frost, floods, and drought. The pyramids and other monumental architecture, the ceremonial complexes, the irrigation networks, and the terraced mountainsides were evidence of a powerful past, legacy to the living and the future. In worshipping their ancestors and the places they rested and inhabited, and the origins of their origins, Andeans were worshipping the sun, the moon, the thunder and lightning, the Earth (the pacha-mama), life and themselves, for they were children of the gods.

Vestiges of this native belief system are still seen in the Andes of today. Inhabitants of small towns (e.g., Racchi) still name the surrounding peaks as objects of devotion. There and elsewhere, entire families spend All Saints’ night in the cemeteries, leaving gifts of food and drink at the tombs of their dead. An old aglarrobo tree is still the object of veneration and sacrifice in the Poma forest of inland Lambayeque (Peru), although no one will say why it is considered a holy spot. It is in some ways ironic that all over the Andes, people, like those of Ucupe (north coast of
persecution of many religions and cultures. In India, it is impossible to speak of a single Indian vision of the world as a manifestation of the divine. But especially Hindus of the world live in India. However, because of the immense plurality of cultural and religious traditions of India, it is impossible to speak of a single Indian vision of the world as a manifestation of the divine. But especially Hindus of the world live in India. However, because of the immense plurality of cultural and religious traditions of India, it is impossible to speak of a single Indian vision of

Central in the Vedic religion was the notion of obligation and the duty to give to the gods as a response to what has been received. The sense of obligation linked humans and the divine beings in a circle of ritual giving and receiving. Since many of the gods and goddesses manifested themselves in natural phenomena, humans were linked to nature in a religious sense and in a holistic relationship. This sense of duty was codified in a number of Law-books (Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras) and summarized in the concept of dharma (right, duty, order).

In the centuries after 600 B.C.E., the center of the Vedic culture had moved from the northwest of India to the Gangetic valley. In this region other religions (among them Jainism and Buddhism) arose and the Vedic religious tradition was transformed into Hinduism. Many of the dominating concepts in Indian religious thought, some of which had consequences for the understanding of the human–nature relationship, became popular in this period. The concepts of rebirth (punarbhava), karma, and moksha were central in the new religions of Buddhism and Jainism, and these concepts were also developed in the Vedic tradition.

Hinduism has continued the Vedic tradition of seeing the world as a manifestation of the divine. But especially
in the philosophical and theological texts, the world has often been given a secondary value compared to the divine principle itself. In the Upanishads, and in the philosophical and theological interpretations of them by the Brahmasutra and the Vedanta schools, a principle called brahman was accepted as the ultimate reality and the source of the phenomenal world. Many of the gods inspired by the natural phenomena now received less attention while the gods Shiva and Vishnu were elevated to ultimate principles identified with brahman. Around 500–600, the Goddess was given the same status. The divine power to create was assigned to the Goddess who became the creative power of the male god. The male gods Shiva and Vishnu were identified with the formless, unmanifest and transcendent ultimate source of the world. The Goddess was thought of as the power of manifestation (shakti) and also identified with the manifest world as such. In the theologies of the Goddess, therefore, the material world was not of secondary value. The Goddess was also called prakriti, a word that came to mean both nature and woman, and which later was chosen by the speakers of the languages of North India to translate the English word “nature.”

According to Jainism, all living beings have souls (jivas). Some Hindu traditions believe that all living beings are part of the same divine principle (brahman) and others, that all living beings have separate souls (purushas). In Buddhism it is emphasized that animals and humans are part of the same rebirth realm. Since the cycle of rebirth (samsara) includes not only all human beings, but also all animals (and, in the case of Hinduism and Jainism, also plants), animals (and plants) are included in the moral order. Treating animals well gives religious merit and leads to a good rebirth and treating them badly gives demerit and a bad rebirth. A good rebirth means a rebirth as a human or rebirth in one of the divine worlds; a bad rebirth means rebirth as an animal, ghost or in various hells. Most religions have an ethics of ahimsa (non-injury), but in many religions this is often formulated as a prohibition to kill humans. A consequence of the inclusion of animals and plants in the doctrine of karma, samsara and moksha, or in the divine unity, is that the doctrine of ahimsa in India includes also the non-killing of animals and plants. Ahimsa entered the religious tradition of India as a criticism of the institutional killing of animals in sacrifice. The emperor Ashoka (268–239 B.C.E.), a famous proponent of ahimsa, prohibited animal sacrifice in his capital. Ahimsa, therefore, came to be accepted not as a reaction to war, but as a statement about treatment of animals and of the human–nature relationship. However, slaughter of animals has usually not been prohibited in India and animal sacrifice has been common in some styles of Hindu worship, especially in the worship of the Goddess. Several religious traditions in India such as Jainism, yoga traditions, and traditions of Krishna worship, however, condemn the killing of animals.

Moral behavior is not expected from animals since they usually are not thought to produce merit and demerit, but just to experience the result of past acts. However, the Buddhist Jatakas, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha, tell that the Buddha was building up religious merit through altruistic behavior in rebirths as various animals. The Jatakas use animal stories to teach ethics. The device of using animal stories to convey wisdom is part of Indian culture. Several other such collections are known, the most famous being Hitopadesha and Panchatantra. Animals manifest various human characteristics: the parrot is wise, the deer and the antelope are affectionate and delicate, the monkey is intelligent, the elephant powerful, the jackal is cunning, the tiger fierce but easily tricked by the jackal, and the serpent is secret, vicious and powerful.

The natural parks in India, however, did not grow out of such anthromorphic ideas, but out of the early twentieth-century Western idea of “wilderness” as a protection of hunting reserves. However, an Indian tradition of hunting reserves for the feudal elite had existed already from the time of the Muslim Moghuls.

Animals have also been incorporated into the divine world. Several of the Hindu gods such as Ganesha and Hanuman, have animal forms and most of the major gods and goddesses have animal vehicles (vahanas). These animal vehicles often symbolize attributes of the gods and goddesses. Some gods have particularly friendly relationships to animals. Krishna grew up in a cow-herding community while Rama spent 14 years in the wilderness. Rama’s sense of justice was admired also by the animals in the forest who became his helpers. Krishna is often depicted in contemporary god-posters next to cows, while Rama is depicted hugging animals, either his monkey friend Hanuman or the bird Jatayus, showing the solidarity between the gods and the animal world. Some animals in India such as cows, snakes and elephants have been given an almost divine position. They may be worshipped as divine beings.

Many Indians, especially Hindus and Sikhs, have warm feelings for the cow. The cow is decorated during religious festivals and is celebrated for its ability to give. India is the biggest milk-producer of the world and all the five products of the cow (pancagavya: milk, ghee, yoghurt, urine and cow dung) are considered pure and are used in a variety of rituals. The cow is a symbol of the Mother, both as the Earth and the Goddess. The sacredness of the cow is closely related to the doctrine of ahimsa (non-injury) but the relationship to the cow of many Indians can also be compared to the relationship Europeans or Americans have to the dog. To them the dog is like a member of the family and would of course never be eaten. Even Hindus who eat meat would therefore not eat meat from the cow.
Protection of the cow is an ancient custom in India. Muslims and Christians slaughter and eat the cow but this is sacrilegious to many Hindus and has been a source of conflict. After the Muslim invasion of India in the eleventh century, the sacredness of the cow became a focus for the resistance of the spread of Islam in India. Several of the Muslim rulers such as Akbar’s son Jahangir (d. 1627) had a great love of nature, but they were eaters of beef. Some Muslim rulers such as Babar and Akbar, however, are supposed to have banned cow slaughter, and the Sikh kingdom in Punjab made cow slaughter a capital offense. Slaughtering of cows nevertheless continued to cause tensions between Muslims and Hindus. Slaughtering of cows and eating of beef were used by the Brahmans to generate opposition to Islam. The rulers of the Hindu Maratha kingdom of the seventeenth and eighteenth century who fought the Mughal empire saw themselves as the protectors of the cow. Muslims on the other hand used the propagation of beef eating as a way to spread Islam. With the coming of the Western colonial powers in India, the sacredness of the cow was again used to mobilize people against the British beef eaters.

The Hindu reform movement, Arya Samaj, founded in 1875 by Dayananda Sarasvati, established cow-protection societies in different parts of India. One wing of the movement favored laws for the protection of the cow and prohibition of commercial slaughterhouses dealing in beef. This anti-cow-slaughter agitation led to large-scale rioting between Muslims and Hindus in 1892–1893. Anti-cow-slaughter has been a recurrent phenomenon in India and has often been anti-Muslim, with mostly Muslims as the victims.

One cause of the great Indian Mutiny of 1857 was the accusations that the British were using cow’s fat as grease for the maintenance of military equipment. Accusation about the use of cow’s fat continues to arouse strong feelings. In 2001, when it was revealed that the American fast food chain McDonalds used fat from the cow to add taste to their french fries, it caused an uproar among diaspora Hindus. The hamburger chains in India serve meat only to their french fries, it caused an uproar among diaspora Hindus. The hamburger chains in India serve meat only to their french fries, it caused an uproar among diaspora Hindus. The hamburger chains in India serve meat only to their french fries, it caused an uproar among diaspora Hindus. The hamburger chains in India serve meat only to their french fries, it caused an uproar among diaspora Hindus.

In societies in which humans suffer, animals usually suffer even more, and, like humans, animals in India often have had and continue to have difficult lives. Even if religions encourage treating animals well, animals are no doubt often treated badly. However, the principle of ahimsa has generated a great tolerance of animal life. Animals such as rats and sparrows, who compete with humans for food, are not exterminated but their right to eat and live is generally accepted. Being good to animals gives religious merit, but is not a religious goal in itself, although it might be a sign of deep religiosity. Places to feed animals such as birds and fish are often found in sacred compounds since feeding them gives religious merit. Some Jains run places for discarded animals, called animal hospitals, while some Hindus run goshalas, places to take care of unwanted cows. Animal hospitals and goshalas are important as symbols of the ideal human–animal relationship.

The world is characterized by a fundamental disharmony since species depend on killing each other in order to stay alive. Perfection in the practice of ahimsa is impossible while living; only in the released state (moksha) is absolute non-injury conceivable. This is one motivation for attempting to attain moksha. According to Jainism and Buddhism and some of the Hindu traditions, some practice of ahimsa is a necessity for attaining release from rebirth. Monastic orders have been established for persons interested in performing the religious restraints necessary for attaining release. Since killing or having others kill for you is a necessity, but prohibited for the monks, lay people provide the food and other necessities to the ascetics. The custom of vegetarianism is more widespread in India than in any other country of the world. Vegetarianism is a way to deal with the fundamental disharmony of the world and a consequence of the awareness that humans harm themselves (because of karma) by causing pain to other living beings. It is an adaptation of the principle of ahimsa and the inclusion of animals and plants into the moral order.

Restraint is one of the significant ideals in the religious cultures of India and is often formulated as a relationship to nature. Monks and renunciants are the foremost representatives of this ideal, but most religious persons admire it. Restraint might have been part of the preparation of the priest for the Vedic sacrifice, but it is a primary value in Jainism and Buddhism and is of great significance also in the Hindu tradition, especially in the institution of renunciation. When the Hindu orthodox renunciant took the vow of renunciation, he gave the gift of “safety to all creatures.” He said: “From me no danger (or fear) will come to any creature.” He promised that all living beings may go to sleep and wake up without fear from him and swore never to injure any living being. He abjured even his own self-protection against wild animals.

Ascetics are supposed to be able to almost develop perfection in ahimsa and, interestingly, animals are believed to be able to recognize such ascetics. Animals therefore seek their company and even wild animals become peaceful in their vicinity. In their presence, natural enemies such as cat and mouse give up their animosity. To attract animals is a sign of spiritually advanced persons. Animals recognize their peaceful nature. Ascetics often live or wander in wilderness areas. The Himalayas are known as a place of yogis, but many mountains, hills and forests in India have been and are homes for ascetics. The Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2.10 says that the practice of Yoga should be performed at a charming place and a place the mind does not consider ugly. Since yoga should be performed at a place of natural beauty,
ashramas or meditation centers of ascetics are often places of striking natural beauty with the enchanting sound of water flowing, the melodious song of birds and the pleasant scent of flowers. Many descriptions of their beauty are found in the classical Indian literature.

Jainism and some Hindu traditions believe that plants also have souls (jiva, atman). Some plants are even considered divine. In the Garuda-Purana it is stated that “By growing, nurturing, sprinkling, saluting, and extolling the tulasi plant, the moral impurities of a human being accumulated in various births are wiped off” (2.38.11). In other words, the tulasi plant is a manifestation of God, and by worshipping such a plant salvation is attained. Tulasi is sacred especially to the worshippers of the god Vishnu, but several other plants and trees are sacred to the worshippers of Shiva. Tree worship is common in the whole of India. An ancient institution in India called “sacred groves,” perhaps of pre-Vedic origin, kept patches of original forest uncut. The Buddha was probably born in such a sacred grove. Many villages in India have sacred groves in which plants and animals receive absolute protection. But already in the 1880s, the inspector general of the forests in British India lamented the loss of sacred groves and this destruction has continued unabated since. However, there is also a tradition in India of defending trees and forests from being cut down. In about 1750 the famous Bishnois in Rajasthan protected the tree Prosopis cineraria from being cut down by lifting themselves be killed by soldiers. Even today Bishnoi villages are green islands in a desert-like environment.

In India there is an ancient tradition of wandering in the forest, traveling to rivers or beaches or climbing to the top of hills. The purpose is to visit sacred places. In several of the religious traditions of India, place as such is a source of religious power. Millions of Indians regularly visit sacred places. Traditionally the pilgrims walked alone or in small groups, but these days crowds travel together in buses, trains and cars. The landscape of India is plotted with sacred sites: Hindu temples, Sufi shrines, Sikh gurdwaras, mosques and churches. Many are places of local or regional pilgrimage but quite a few centers attract pilgrims from all over India. At the Kumbha Mela festival 2001 during the most sacred days, between 20 and 30 million people gathered at the confluence of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna to bathe at this sacred place of natural beauty. A unique feature of the Hindu concept of the power of place is the idea that the places as such can be reduplicated. Reduplication means that the power of one sacred place can be represented and thus be made available also at other places. In other words, the power of place can be abstracted and transferred to other places. Sacred places have the power in themselves to give moksha, and dying at a sacred place such as the riverbed in Varanasi brings release.

Many places of pilgrimage are next to rivers and rivers play a significant role in the religion of the Hindus. They are believed to be sacred, are personified as goddesses and have the power to cleanse the individual from moral impurities. The ashes of the dead are usually placed in the river. The idea of the sacredness of places and rivers may be drawn on to generate a respect for the land, but it may also obscure environmental degradation such as pollution. The environmentally polluted state of the rivers Yamuna and Ganges is easily observable, but the rivers are nevertheless still considered pure from the ritual point of view by devotees.

In general, greed for the products of nature is probably a much greater cause of environmental degradation than a lack of appreciation of her. Ascetic values and traditions that consider human restraint as an ultimate virtue in the relationship to nature have had a great impact on contemporary environmentalism in India. This is to a large degree due to the innovative reinterpretation of the ascetic values of Mohandas Karamchand and Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi, although he lived before environmentalism and the environment was not his main concern, is nevertheless recognized as the father of the environmental movement in India. There are several reasons for this. Gandhi’s life had a deeply ecological foundation. He practiced vegetarianism and thought of animals as having the same dignity as humans. His various methods of nonviolent resistance, satyagraha (“holding on to the truth”), have become models for environmental action. Gandhi is also a model for the plain material standard of living celebrated by some environmental movements. Gandhi’s famous statement that “the Earth has enough for everyone’s need, but not for anyone’s greed” is a slogan for contemporary environmentalism. Disciples of Gandhi, such as Mirabehn and Saralabehn and leading Gandhians such as Sundarlal Bahuguna (a disciple of Vinoba Bhave) and Baba Amte, have played central roles in the Indian environmental movements. Gandhi’s thoughts and methods have had a great impact on several international environmental movements such as deep ecology.

Since the 1970s the destruction of the environment has been met by the establishment of a large number of environmental organizations and environmental legislation. Sometimes religion has played a role in this development. The most significant environmental movements in India have been concerned with forests and water. The movements have protested against destruction of forests and the construction of big dams. Their main issue has been environmental injustice. A consequence of providing industry with raw materials and electricity has been the impoverishment and displacement of local people. Several modern environmental movements in India have concentrated on protecting trees. The origin of environmentalism in contemporary India goes back to 1973 when the Chipko movement of the central Himalayas
successfully stopped commercial timber felling. The Chipko managed to prevent loggers for a sports company from the city of Prayag from felling trees by hugging or sticking to the trees. The Indian Forest Act had restricted the access to forests of tribals and peasants who had customary rights, and this created a deep feeling of injustice. Scientific forestry also proved to be ecologically harmful and a cause of erosion and flooding. Increased deforestation, shortages of fuel, fodder and timber for local communities led to conflicts with the interests of industry. Deforestation continues to be a grave problem in India and several other organizations such as the Appiko in Karnataka confront this same problem. Another celebrated environmental movement in India is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (“Save Narmada Movement”). This movement has protested against the building of the dams of the Narmada river that will displace 100,000 persons, mainly tribals. Protests against the Tehri Dam has been led by Virendra Saklani. Chandi Bhatt, a former Chipko leader, fronts the opposition to a smaller dam at the Alakananda River. Chipko, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and several other movements have been catalysts for the opposing interests of, on the one hand, subsistence-oriented peasants and forest dwellers and, on the other, big industry and the better-off urban population.

Religion has played a role in several of the modern environmental movements. Chipko originated in the watershed of the sacred river Ganges, and the river Narmada is as sacred as the Ganges for the people who live in central India. Environmentally concerned individuals have attempted to mobilize against the recent environmental degradation by bringing attention to traditional religious concepts and views, and highlighting texts of the religious traditions of India in which humans are perceived as an integral part of nature, protectors of nature or worshippers of her. As a response to the challenge of environmentalism, Indians have brought attention to the celebration of the sacredness of nature in the Vedic tradition and to responsibility for the welfare of the whole world (lokasamgraha) implied in the concept of dharma. The concept of seva, social service, important to Gandhi and many twentieth-century Hindu religious thinkers and organizations, has put a greater demand on religious organizations to contribute to social welfare. Methods of protest such as nonviolent opposition, a creative reinterpretation of the principle of ahimsa, and fasting, inherited from the religious traditions of India, have found new applications.

Knut A. Jacobsen

Further Reading


See also: Ahimsa; Amte, Baba; Appiko Movement (India); Art of Living Foundation; Athavale, Pandurang Shastri; Aurobindo, Sri; Auroville; Bahuguna, Sunderlal; Bhagavadgita; Bishnoi (Rajasthan, India); Buddhism; Chipko Movement; Dharma – Hindu; Domestication; Gandhi, Mohandas; Goshalas (Home for Aged Cattle); Harris, Marvin; Hinduism and Pollution; Hinduism; India’s Sacred Groves; Jainism; Jataka Tales; Krishnamurti, Jiddu; Prakriti; Ralegan Siddhi; Re-Earthling; Santal Region (India); Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (Sri Lanka); Seeds in South Asia; Shakti; Shiva, Vandana; Sikhism; Swadhyaya; Tantra; Tantrism in the West; Tehri Dam; Theosophy; Yamuna; Yoga and Ecology.
Indian Classical Dance

In any culture, dance both reflects and embodies the central values associated with civilization. In the case of India, a series of “classical” dance styles share a basic worldview that expresses, in symbolic terms, humans’ relationship to nature in the broadest sense of the term “nature.” In Vedic philosophy and practice (the oldest systematized foundational basis of what we now refer to as Hinduism), nature or prakriti encompasses not only the external manifest universe but also the processes of the body, mind, and evolution of all creatures, including humans. Therefore the dominant Hindu worldview is theoretically monistic and denies any ultimate duality, or radical division between humans and nature. Nonetheless, a basic dualism appears (whether such appearance is given the status of reality depends upon the particular school of Hindu philosophy) in all creation as gender differentiation: the world is envisioned as the interplay or “dance” of male and female energies. In this dance, the feminine comes to play the role of “nature” while the masculine is associated with the transcendent function, or “spirit.” It is this interplay that has provided both the structure and content of Indian classical dance in its myriad variations and for this reason, throughout its history, erotic themes and elements have been dominant.

The oldest continuous forms of Indian dance are those practiced in the South where thanks to entire communities and unbroken lineages of artists, the basic language and vocabulary of various classical styles are still governed by Bharata’s Natya Sastra, a dramaturgical text which dates to the first century. Other, more localized texts called agamas fine-tuned the principles and application of the art form to regional specifications, for the temple complexes of South India, both small and large, were, until the early part of the twentieth century, the religious, political, and economic headquarters of regional kingdoms – centers which through ritual of various kinds once defined and upheld both the social and cosmic universe. Today’s Indian classical dance styles are largely the modern-day survivals of the dance forms which played a central role in these temple centers.

Prominent among these were the devadasis or “servants of the God,” young women dedicated to the temple from an early age to fan, sing and dance in front of the deity at midday mealtime, at night before closing the temple, and in procession during festivals. They also served as sexual partners to the priests and elite clientele of the temple who patronized both them and the temple. While debate continues regarding the exact nature and function of such “divine prostitution,” it is clear that the sexuality of the devadasis was a central part of their religious role and sacred status. In their ritual function the devadasis’ dance embodied the erotic element of life associated with fertility – life-giving rains, increase of crops and vegetation as well as its inhabitants – in short, the auspicious properties of nature both invoked and brought under the transcendent order and control of human civilization.

Embodying auspicious nature, devadasis were symbolically regarded as chalanti devi, or “moving goddesses,” manifestations of the Great Goddess married to the God-King or ruler. The importance of this role played by the devadasis cannot be underestimated in a worldview where the divine is gendered and no major male deity stands alone without his shakti – his female consort or “power.” The question which may be raised is whether nature, or the feminine in this equation, is more invoked or more controlled. Does Hinduism display an unambiguously positive attitude toward nature?

To begin to answer it, we must explore goddess myth and symbolism which is rich with elements of tantra – systematized esoteric beliefs and practices which provide a relatively more positive and embracing attitude toward nature and the manifest world than mainstream Vedic Hinduism. A feature of the goddess traditions is that feminine deity (symbolic of nature) is not sentimentalized. She is rather portrayed in both her benign and formidable aspects, in destructive as well as erotic forms. In its embrace of all aspects of nature, the dark as well as the light, the low as well as the high, the Tantric, godess-centered traditions contrast with the more strictly hierarchical and polarized Vedic worldview which, however Earth-centered, holds asceticism (renunciation) as its highest value.

What complicates the picture is that the Tantric and Vedic streams within Hinduism are so highly interwoven and overlapped that it may be misleading to radically distinguish them. Nonetheless, dance, a primarily feminine activity, has traditionally come to embody eroticism and the invocation of nature, while yoga, primarily male, embodies asceticism and control over the same for the ultimate purpose of transcendence. Tantrism embraces both elements and became the means by which the Hindu tradition was able to maintain a creative tension at the center of its ritual, myths, and various philosophies. As the myths, symbols, and sacred techniques of dance and yoga demonstrate, both disciplines contain elements of the other: while dance is performed primarily inside temples, inscribing the heart of culture with the power of nature brought under social control, yogis transcend the social to enter into a mystical union with nature and transcendent cosmos. Ultimately, the goal for both the yogi and the devadasi is to realize both immanence and transcendence, to balance and unite male and female energies within to attain a kind of divine androgyne or mystical state of non-dual unity. Although the dancer projects this state outwardly in her performance, in the Hindu worldview, the key to nature, whether it is being invoked (celebrated and embraced), or controlled, lies “within.”

Today, more than fifty years after the abolitionment of
the devadasi institution under British colonial influence, dance in India is primarily (although not exclusively) performed by and centered on women who continue to inscribe and embody a basically Hindu worldview. Dance scholarship points out that the reformation of Indian classical dance traditions in the post-colonial and post-independence period reinterpreted the meaning and harnessed the energy of the dance within the context of Indian nationalism. “Bharata Natyam,” South Indian temple and court dance reinterpreted by Indian-born Theosophist Rukmini Devi, in particular, became synonymous with Indian culture and, not long after, other regional styles were reformed in similar fashion. Today, Indian dance is in the process of being reshaped again, this time within the context of global internationalism and its associated spiritual multiculturalism. This is happening both in India and within the Indian diaspora, and includes the increase in the number of non-Indian performers of the art both in India and abroad.

Although they no longer perform in the sanctums of temples, today’s Indian classical dancers continue to embody eroticism – the auspiciousness, fertility, and life-enhancing qualities of nature within a new secular context. Following the dramaturgical rules of the Natya Sastra, all classical dance styles involve a language of the body, facial expressions, and hand gestures called hasta-s or mudra-s. This language reflects both natya dharmi (idealized and abstracted representational form) as well as loka dharmi (a representation of observable life). Loka dharmi reflects the “natural” world that presents itself to the senses; for example, the use of a hand gesture to suggest the shape of a cow or deer, or a young woman walking with a water pot on her head. In contrast, natya dharmi transforms nature into culture – hence the “sacred” geometry (circle and square) of the body in the basic dance stance. In either case, classical dance and drama treats life as food for reflection on the nature of existence – hence the “spiritual” nature of this art.

Both a profound respect for, as well as a desire to control nature for “higher purposes” pervades the art and is reflected straightforwardly in the myths and symbols of the dance. Siva Natraj, the patron deity of the dance is portrayed as a cosmic deity whose five activities govern the origin, preservation and destruction of the created universe and whose dancing feet stamp out cadences which divide eternity into time. His iconographic image incorporates the panchatattvas or four elements – Earth, water, fire, air – and his intoxicated dance represents his complete and blissful control over these processes. Most significant is that under his feet he tramples a dwarf, a representation of our collectively shared notions of “lower” nature.

In contrast, the most popular stories enacted through the dance are much more “down to Earth,” centered on Krishna, the cowherd Lord who playfully romps with the Gopis (cowherdesses) on the idylic banks of the Yamuna in Brindaban. In countless dances and dramas throughout India, the myths and rites of Krishna celebrate the rich eroticism of nature and raise it up as a vision of transcendent beauty. Yet Krishna, as an incarnation of Vishnu the protector who takes birth in various ages to rescue the world from demons, must also subdue the aspects of nature which are anathema to dharma, the socially constructed, transcendent order of civilization. Therefore, as portrayed in various classical styles, Krishna dances on the hood of the snake Kalika who emerges from the primal waters just as Siva dances on the dwarf. In the more commonly portrayed dances, where the focus is on the erotic relationship between Krishna and Radha (or one of his other consorts) the female consort represents the human (nature) while the Lord represents the divine (culture reflecting the transcendent). It is especially noteworthy that classical dance dramas, now as throughout history, center on two archetypal themes – the subduing of demons (the lower forces of nature) and the hieros gamos or sacred marriage representing the union of opposites. Of the two, the latter is by far the most popular, especially today, a trend which may reflect an archetypal nostalgia at the heart of Indian culture – a universal human longing for wholeness reflected in the harmony between nature and spirit.

In India the now “secular” art form of classical dance is still primarily performed at the time of religious festivals, weddings, and the openings of various institutions which are usually calculated astrologically (in tune with nature as defined by Vedic “sciences”). Likewise, it is arguably the “spiritual” aspect of Indian classical dance, the combination of eroticism and transcendence, which speaks most profoundly to contemporary international audiences. While embodying the transcendently erotic aspects of Indian culture, today’s Indian dancers still preface their dance with bhumi namaskar, a simple gesture wherein the dancer bends to prayerfully touch the Earth and to ask the Earth’s forgiveness for stamping on her. Similarly, Puspanjali, the offering of flowers to the stage, the breaking of a coconut and the lighting of the sacred lamp before the start of a program, all continue to be observed, demonstrating what Ananda Coomaraswamy called “the transformation of nature into art,” the sanctification of time and space by offering up the bounty of the Earth to a “higher” spiritual purpose.

Indian classical dance, in an entirely new global context, still speaks to the human desire to contemplate the relationship of spirit and nature, a relationship that continues to be engendered as masculine and feminine. Typical of all art and philosophy in the postmodern period, this changed context calls for a constant reevaluation of the meaning of all terms involved. As Indian classical dance moves further away from its land of origin, it will undoubtedly reflect a transformed understanding of
“nature” in keeping with humanity’s own relationship to inner and outer realities.

Roxanne Kamayani Gupta

Further Reading
See also: Dance; Ghost Dance; Hinduism; India; Lakota Sun Dance; Planetary Dance; Prakriti; Tantra; Tantrism in the West; Yoga and Ecology.

Indian Guides

The Indian Guides is a youth program sponsored by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). Through activities themed around “Indian Lore,” the program aims to use young people’s interest in the “romance,” “beauty,” and “color” of Native American cultures to provide occasions for fathers and sons and fathers and daughters to work together on costumes, rituals, and related projects. The YMCA works from a traditionally non-denominational Protestant religious orientation, and the Indian Guides add to that base a generic nature-based “spirituality” thought to be common in American Indian cultures.

The first “tribe” of Indian Guides was created by Harold S. Keltner, a leader in the YMCA of St. Louis, Missouri. Based on his experiences in Canada, Keltner brought a Canadian “Ojibway,” Joe Friday, to address a father and son banquet in 1925, and Keltner saw immediately that the interest of the boys and men present could be the basis for a movement involving fathers more directly in the social, physical, and moral development of their sons. The movement began as a very loosely organized, decentralized program emphasizing the autonomy of the local “tribe” and, eventually, the groups of tribes called “nations.” By 1925, however, the movement had spread to enough YMCA offices that the National Council became an official sponsor of the program. A few years later, the official name of the program became “The Father and Son Y” Indian Guides. Eventually girls were admitted to the movement (“Indian Princesses”) and, even later, the “Y” created “Indian Braves and Indian Maidens” as programs for mother-and-son and mother-and-daughter-pairs. In 1988 a manual entitled Friends Always (the motto of the program) consolidated the program materials of the four separate programs.

From the outset, the movement acknowledged the important work of Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946), the artist, naturalist, and writer who created his own youth movement based on Indian Lore (the “Woodcraft Indians,” 1903) and who was one of the small group of founders of the Boy Scouts of America in 1910. Seton drew upon the Darwinist ideas of the age and his knowledge of the Native Americans of North America to provide both concrete instruction in “Indian Ways” (e.g., from his 1903 book Two Little Savages to his 1937 The Gospel of the Redman) and a general philosophy of nature-based spirituality.

“Y” leaders have always emphasized to the fathers and mothers that the use of Indian Lore in the program is a means to the end of parents’ greater involvement in their children’s lives. Changing public sensibilities about Native American cultures in the late twentieth century – spurred in no small part by Native American civil rights and political social movement organizations, such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) – brought negative publicity to the uses of “Indian Lore” by mainly white youth organizations and sports teams. By 1990 the National Advisory Committee was attempting to promote more “responsible” use of the “native American theme” in the movement, and a 1991 initiative with the Smithsonian Institution’s planned National Museum of the American Indian signaled a new sensibility about the theme. Responding to public criticism, the national office of the YMCA of the USA decided in late 2001 to revise and rename (as “Friends Forever”) the program, eliminating all references to Indian Lore. The new program material will eliminate references to the “Great Spirit” and substitute the “Creator.” The heavily decentralized nature of the Y-USA, with local YMCAs enjoying considerable autonomy, means that some “tribes” and “nations” might resist this plan.

The religious or spiritual content of the Y-Indian Guides program has always been slight and rather inconsequential. The program, though, brought thousands of children and parents together as part of the larger historical effort by which mainly white, middle-class youth-workers and children attempted to use their own, somewhat limited understanding of Native American nature-based religion to revitalize and energize their own, more conventionally Protestant understanding of how to lead a religious life.

Jay Mechling

Further Reading
See also: Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Scouting.
Indian Shaker Religion

The Indian Shaker religion began around 1882 in Washington Territory, at Mud Bay on Puget Sound, near what is now the state capital, Olympia. Taking its name because of the physical movements of the worshippers (similar in some aspects to the Shaker Religion brought to America by Ann Lee in the late eighteenth century), the faith was inspired by a native who reportedly died, then came back to life, relating apocalyptic visions of the afterlife. John Slocum, a Squaxin tribal member living on Puget Sound, fell sick and apparently passed away. But while the mourners were waiting for his coffin to arrive from Olympia, the “corpse” sat up, astonishing his family and friends.

Unlike traditional native religions, however, Slocum’s new faith considered itself a branch of Christianity reserved for Indians, and it focused on personal renewal and piety, rather than on the rejection of agriculture or other European-American practices. Slocum revealed that he had gone to heaven, been admonished that his sinful ways had made him “unworthy” to enter, and had then been sent back to warn his people to live their lives in accordance with holiness and purity.

The religion quickly spread from southern Puget Sound, gaining converts and influence on reservations such as Neah Bay on the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the Siletz on the Oregon coast, the Klamath in northern California, and the Warm Springs, Umatilla, and Yakama Reservations east of the Cascade Mountains. The Yakamas consistently provided leadership and healthy numbers of believers to other growing native churches, and they maintain an active Shaker presence today.

The faith gives Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest a viable alternative both to traditional native spirituality, and more orthodox expressions of Christianity as brought by missionaries in the nineteenth century. Since its inception, Shakerism has been known for its eclectic nature, borrowing certain rituals from Protestantism, Catholicism, and the Drummer Dreamer faith, but forging its own tradition, based on healing and moral self-examination.

The Shaker faith also allows a more Western idea of virtue and piety to combine with more traditional indigenous attitudes toward the environment. The tradition’s insistence that worshippers practice personal holiness, combined with the expansion of virtue to include environmental respect has resulted in a syncretistic idea of piety that frowns on environmental degradation – not as a personal insult against the order of things, but as a vice to be rejected. Thus, speaking in terms of pragmatic agreement on environmental public policies – especially on local land issues on reservations – Shakers and believers in more traditional native spirituality often present a united front. Given that both traditions do not thrive by adhering to extensive and exclusive doctrines, such agreement is not surprising. However, since natives comprise a minority on many reservations, this unity on environmental issues is an essential component in letting a native voice be heard.

Michael McKenzie

Further Reading


See also: Yakama Nation.

India’s Sacred Groves

Interest in sacred natural elements, such as groves and plants, has grown remarkably in the past decade, particularly in relation to biodiversity conservation (UNESCO 1996). Scholars from numerous fields, including ecology, botany, and anthropology, have attempted to establish the importance of these sacred natural areas, suggesting that sanctifying forests and groves may have been traditional ways to conserve biodiversity. These writings rightly draw attention to sacred areas and traditional systems of conservation; however, village-level studies suggest first that not all sacred groves are biologically diverse, and second, that the biologically rich groves, in many cases, were protected for reasons other than conservation of biodiversity. Sacred groves and other sanctified natural elements may need to be better understood from the local perspectives.

Study in the Kumaun region in the northern state of Uttarakhand (India) illuminates local perspectives on the sacred and sanctity of natural elements, and demonstrates that merely keeping areas sacred is not sufficient for conservation given the nature of change in religious behavior taking place in many rural areas. Instead, it is critical that we understand the beliefs that have led to the sanctification and conservation of these elements in nature.

No single word in the Hindi language captures the various meanings of the word “sacred;” however, the Hindi language has multiple words capturing the different meanings of this English word. The numerous meanings of the word are, in turn, reflected in multiple kinds of local relations with sacred elements in the biophysical world.
For instance, rural Kumaunis refer to the hill regions of Kumaun as *dev bhumi* (god’s land), marked by the presence of the gods. Yet, features of the biophysical world considered more sacred are described by other concepts of the sacred. For instance, mountains and local hilltops are considered especially sacred in Kumaun, for as in many other parts of the world, they are thought to be the abode of the gods and as belonging to the gods. According to local mythology and villagers’ conceptions of these areas, these represent places where the divine showed its presence to the human world. These places are, therefore, dedicated to the divine, and temples are built to honor the deity that showed its divine presence.

Special significance is also accorded to rivers, and confluences of rivers for similar reasons. Likewise, certain species of wild fauna are considered sacred, and are therefore traditionally protected due to the direct association with mythical characters.

When the term sacred is used in relation to particular species of flora, the meaning and conception of the sacred is slightly different from the above. Not all species of flora considered sacred are associated with the divine, neither are they considered sacred *per se*, but these floral species are viewed as auspicious (*shubh*). The conception of sacred in this context, however, is related, as in the case of sacred sites, to a feeling of reverence. Most people, including priests, typically tend to be unaware of the precise reasons for the sanctity of certain flora. It is generally assumed that since these species were referred to in religious texts, and were favored by ascetics and sages of the past, who were especially knowledgeable about flora (especially the medicinal properties), and hence meditated under carefully selected trees, they must have beneficial properties. The numerous sacred and secular reasons for the sanctity of particular flora are provided in the table above.

Also embedded in these notions of the sacred is the concept of relative sanctity, and the recognition that not all sacred places or entities are equally sacred. In such a continuum of relative sanctity, the highly sacred species are believed to be sacred in themselves, and are protected regardless of the sanctity of areas adjacent to them. Species that are relatively less sacred are not necessarily protected unless associated with a sacred area. These lesser sacred plants are, nevertheless, commonly planted in sacred areas such as groves. Through this, these particular plants or trees (and not the species) move up the continuum among the highly sacred floral species, and hence are locally protected.

Sacred groves in the Kumauni context ascribe to yet another conception of the sacred. In Kumaun, these groves are typically associated with a temple, and are generally referred to as *dev van* (god’s forest). These groves are not merely associated with the divine, as in the case of many sacred sites and sacred flora, nor are they always designated or dedicated to the divine; rather, they are often taken simply to belong to the divine.

Although the meanings associated with sacred flora (*shubh* or auspicious) and sacred groves (*dev van*) differ, local reasoning on the existence of sacred groves in Kumaun overlaps with reasons for the sanctity of the specific floral species. The most common explanation of sacred groves, provided by local priests, is simply aesthetics, broadly seen as enhancing the spiritual integrity of these places. Other explanations include shade and shelter for the deities, especially on the hilltops, and ecological benefits such as retention of ground water.

While the biophysical is, and has been, protected due to association with the spiritual world, or at times consciously used as a means of addressing secular concerns of conservation, protection of the biophysical environment may not always follow from such association with the sacred. Numerous examples exist where religious practices...
and beliefs in the sacred have resulted in environmental degradation.

In Kumaun, as in other parts of India, environmental degradation due to association with religion is primarily related to the changing views of contemporary religion itself. There is an increasing emphasis in contemporary religion on the Vedic rather than the animistic traditions. Not only are local deities increasingly being associated with the Vedic deities and recognized as alternate forms of these deities, but natural elements of worship are being replaced by deities of the Vedic tradition. Thus, the traditional use of sacred stones, typically collected from river-beds and placed in temples for worship in the more animistic traditions, are today being replaced by elaborate humanized Vedic idols. There is also increasingly a separation between nature and religion, with greater importance being placed on the material aspects of religious culture in place of the natural and the supernatural. As a result, even the Vedic gods and goddesses that were traditionally associated with certain natural elements, such as rivers, are being dissociated with the natural elements and increasingly being worshipped as idols. Finally, contemporary notions of aesthetics in many of these rural areas are placing greater significance on the material rather than on natural elements. Thus, in rural Kumaun, many sacred groves are being replaced by large temples and temple complexes. Emphasis on the temples and temple structures rather than the groves is leading to intensive grazing pressures on sacred groves. In some instances, the rising popularity of specific temples, religious mass tourism, and resources used in large ritual ceremonies is leading to the depletion of the once-remote sacred groves.

Thus, given the changing conceptions of religion and religious behavior in contemporary times, merely keeping areas sacred is insufficient. By understanding local perspectives on the sacred and the changing local relations with sacred natural elements, we can see that building on local views of the sacred and reestablishing the link between nature and religion may be crucial for the protection of these natural areas.

Safia Aggarwal

Further Reading


See also: Cathedral Forests and the Felling of Sacred Groves; Hinduism; India; Re-Earthling; Sacred Groves of Africa; Sacred Mountains; Wenger, Susan – Yoruba Art, and the Oshogbo Sacred Grove.

Indigenous Activism and Environmentalism in Latin America

Many indigenous spiritual and philosophical traditions express ethics of respect for nonhuman life, for particular places and landscape features, and for the Earth itself. These approaches illuminate the extent to which Western modes of understanding the world authorize or excuse environmentally destructive practices. They provide insight into other ways of representing and interpreting nature and humans’ relation to it and point the way to solutions to human-caused environmental crises.

As the historian Richard White notes, “[p]erhaps the most important decision Europeans made about American nature in the centuries following Columbus was that they were not part of it but Indians were” (White 1999: 132). The Spaniards brought with them a stock of ideas about “wild men” and savages, which were early although not universally applied to the inhabitants of the Americas. Foundational categories of European thinking, expressed in oppositions between savage and civilized, or nature and culture, were central to Spanish thinking, yet images of nature as Eden, the landscape of a prelapsarian state of grace, also shaped their understandings of the land they colonized.

The same categories underwrote different phases of nationalism in Latin America. Early post-Independence nationalisms were characterized by conflict between conservatives and liberals, the latter of whom favored dispossessing the Church and indigenous communities of lands. The liberal view typically saw Indians as obstacles to progress; their disappearance would be an important achievement for the consolidation of the liberal nation. In contrast, some early twentieth-century nationalists lionized their indigenous heritage in their efforts to forge a mestizo nation. The distinctiveness and superiority of Latin American culture was explained as the sum of the best parts of both the Spanish and Indian heritage.
presumed in the ideology of *mestizaje*, or race-mixing. Most famously expressed in the Mexican José Vasconcellos’s ideas about the Latin American “cosmic race,” accounts of *mestizaje* that celebrated its indigenous component looked to a glorious indigenous past rather than contemporary Indians, who were typically poor and marginalized and regarded as hindrances to progress.

Thus, two contradictory but constantly intertwined modes of imagining indigenous peoples recur in the last five hundred years of history in the Americas. One portrays Indians as inferior people and prescribes assimilation; the other celebrates the traditions, knowledge, and history of indigenous peoples. These complex and shifting valences of respect and disregard characterize representations of Indians that convergence in regarding indigenous people as radically and fundamentally different from non-Indians. Such images shape the ways both non-Indians and Indians understand what it means to be indigenous, and influence contemporary issues involving indigenous peoples, including indigenous rights in international law, Indian land claims, and debates over bilingual education. They have also been fundamental in the relationship between indigenous peoples and environmentalists over the last thirty years.

Maya scholar and activist Victor Montejo affirms that indigenous peoples’ worldviews encourage environmentally sustainable practices, pointing out that concern for the natural world, and the mutual respect this relationship implies, is constantly reinforced by traditional Mayan ways of knowing and teaching. [A] holistic perspective of human collective destiny with other living creatures on earth has a religious expression among indigenous people (Montejo 2001: 176).

Montejo draws on the teachings of the pre-Columbian Mayan text *Popol Vuh*, as well as his lessons he learned as a child, to show how Mayan beliefs foster humans’ respect for the rest of creation. An origin myth in which an earlier race of humans were destroyed for the disregard they showed animals and inanimate objects cautions people to respect the natural world, while humans’ relationship of dependence on a Creator who is embodied in the unity of sky and Earth reinforces the sacredness of the world.

Montejo’s work points to one of the central aspects of contemporary indigenous identity: the identification of Indian religions and worldviews as emphasizing respect for nonhuman life and providing a holistic approach to understanding humans and nature. This is often expressed in the figure of Mother Earth. Mother Earth spirituality (whose historical roots among indigenous Americans is disputed) poses environmental protection as an issue of central concern to indigenous peoples for religious reasons. This lends legitimacy to activists’ claims about the ecological superiority of indigenous worldviews; it also provides weight for some territorial claims. But Mother Earth spirituality has also become a central concept for the pan-indigenous identity asserted by political and social activists, expressing a certain sensibility and helping to foster solidarity among diverse indigenous traditions. Prayers to Mother Earth commonly lead off indigenous organization meetings and public events; references to Mother Earth were prominent among indigenous-oriented events at the 1992 Rio Earth Conference.

For the Maya and other Mesoamerican peoples, spiritual links to nature are clearly expressed in beliefs and traditions relating to maize. The first humans were made of corn, according to the *Popol Vuh*, and corn cultivation remains central to the lives of rural people throughout Mexico and Central America. In western El Salvador, peasant farmers choose to sow corn on at least some of their land even when it will be less profitable than other crops and even if they have insufficient land and will have to buy most of the years’ corn in any case. Javier Galicia Silva notes the same preference for corn in Mexico, reporting that for contemporary Nahua small-scale farmers there are still “mythic criteria that motivate agricultural practices” (Galicia Silva 2001: 321).

Culturally specific appraisals of the importance of particular crops and forms of agricultural production clearly inform indigenous peoples’ understandings of and interactions with the natural world. In Mesoamerica, indigenous farmers developed myriad varieties of corn, while Andean farmers have produced an astonishing number of potato varieties. Andean farmers’ preference for a high diversity of crops is expressed in an ethic of cultivation that outlines what constitutes a satisfactory livelihood. This preference for diversity has been particular to peasant or non-elite farmers since before the arrival of the Spaniards: Inca state-run agriculture, like the *hacienda* production of Spanish colonial rule, was dedicated to the cultivation of large quantities of relatively few species and varieties. Commoner or peasant farmers, in contrast, identify a wide diversity of both species and varieties as fundamental to a satisfactory life, and their work has produced and preserved an astonishing array of potato and corn types.

Notable in these examples is the importance of culturally specific, often religious, guidelines that address both connections to “nature” as a general realm of nonhuman being and to agriculture. Although many indigenous traditions distinguish between cultivated spaces and a more distant place of spirits and beasts, both terrains are addressed by belief systems that provide guidelines for human interactions with the nonhuman. While it is by no means uncontested, there is evidence for the claim that many American indigenous traditions do not make the fundamental distinction between “wild” and
“civilized” or “humanized” landscapes that predominate in Western approaches to nature.

Indeed, much of what has been regarded by Westerners as “wild” landscapes in the Americas has indeed been produced by human activity, in some cases over thousands of years. This is true not only for regions like those in the Andes or the Mesoamerican highlands, but also for the lowland forests like the Amazon, many of whose inhabitants – long regarded as “hunters and gatherers” – have long traditions of gardening and cultivating medicinal plants. Selective slash-and-burn (swidden) cultivation in lowland forests appears to have increased biodiversity in many areas; ancient Maya and Aztec societies maintained gardens and protected areas.

In Latin America (as in the U.S.) dominant elites have often labeled land inhabited and tended by indigenous peoples as not only “wild” but also “empty,” particularly in cases of land not occupied by peasant farmers. In many countries (including Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Brazil) governments have encouraged highland Indians to colonize “empty” or “unused” lowland forests to relieve pressures on highland land concentrated in large estates and expand the agricultural frontier, and in some cases to strengthen national claims to disputed border areas. Highland peasants moving into lowland areas can cause tremendous ecological damage, often burning large tracts of land for cultivation and ranching or opening mining claims, and are a major threat to lowland groups in several countries.

There is evidence that anthropogenic environmental change in pre-Columbian Latin America contributed to degradation in some areas, and may have caused significant damage. The most widely cited case is of damage wrought by widespread deforestation and agricultural intensification, which is thought to have contributed significantly to the collapse of Classic Maya civilization.

For the most part, anthropology, ecology, and other disciplines remain ambivalent about the links between spirituality or religion and ecological sustainability in indigenous communities. While many indigenous traditions express respect for nonhuman life or “the environment,” the extent to which these expressions predict ecologically wise and sustainable practices is uncertain. Understanding the natural world as sacred does not necessarily call for an ethic of environmental protection or stewardship. Indeed, a powerfully sacred landscape may well be outside the boundaries of human influence by definition. Specifically religious responses may not address ecological problems in some cases, and the “ecological balance” that many see expressed in indigenous religious traditions may be the result rather than the cause of particular practices that are ecologically sustainable and sensible.

Skeptics assert that the sustainability of many indigenous societies can more plausibly be explained as an outcome of particular technologies, ecological conditions, or levels of population density than as the result of religious attitudes about nature. Some assert that Indians with access to environmentally damaging technologies are no less likely than non-Indians to destroy their environments. In a less extreme but still cautious appraisal of the relations between indigenous religious traditions and ecological sustainability, other observers note that spirituality as well as everyday practices are created in particular historical and ecological conditions. They contend that attributing primary causal weight to religious beliefs oversimplifies complicated historical, cultural, and environmental factors, and that stark contrasts between Indian and Western worldviews neglect the impacts of five hundred years of Western presence in the Americas.

One recent study based on ten years of field research among indigenous and non-indigenous farmers in the lowland Petén forest of Guatemala provides suggestive evidence in favor of cultural explanations of environmental practices while also addressing the contingent quality of culturally specific variables. The Itza’ Maya, who have lived in the Petén for centuries, plant more crops and tree species than do neighboring Q’eqchi’ Maya (who moved to the forest from the highlands) or non-indigenous Ladinos. Itza’ also farm in ways that are less harmful to the soil and more productive, and show a more sophisticated understanding of forest ecology than do the other groups. One factor in Itza’ agricultural and forestry practices is a belief that spirits act as intermediaries for particular forest species, and these must be cared for and respected, while the intimate local knowledge of the Itza’ – inextricably linked to their worldview and spiritual traditions – guides sustainable management and farming practices.

Notably, nearby Ladinos engage in less damaging practices than do immigrant Q’eqchi’ Maya. Ladinos’ social organization favors learning from Itza’ practices, while Q’eqchi’ social organization does not. In addition, cognitive models of ecological relationships brought by Q’eqchi’ Maya from their highland places of origin seem not to favor the environmentally sustainable (or less-damaging) practices engaged in by Ladino and Itza’ farmers.

These findings point both to the importance of culturally specific and religious understandings of nature and to the transferability of those understandings. Yet they also show that culturally specific values of an indigenous people may predict environmental degradation and hinder learning ecologically sustainable techniques.

While social scientists may be unable to agree on the relative ecological wisdom of indigenous peoples, many environmentalists and indigenous activists assert with conviction that indigenous peoples are better able to live harmoniously with their environments than non-Indians, a belief that is fundamental both to political platforms and
to social identities. Romantic images of ecologically superior Indians are employed to combat virulent racist representations. Such images are essential to the relatively recent importance of environmental issues to the political platforms of indigenous peoples as well as the alliance between international environmental organizations and indigenous groups. Some observers see the link between indigenous and environmental activists as a decisive shift in the practices of both groups, noting that earlier encounters were marked by tension and competition. Key features of this shift include the increasingly transnational sphere of indigenous activism as well as the new prominence of discourses and symbols associated with Indians' spiritual and traditional ties to nature.

The roots of indigenous rights activism in Latin America go back to debates over the treatment of Indians in the early Colonial period, as well as a long history of Indian revolts. Contemporary indigenous mobilization draws on this heritage, yet is more directly linked to doctrines of universal human rights and national sovereignty developed in the wake of World War II.

Abuses associated with colonization of lowland forests by miners and rubber tappers prompted the creation of some of the first international indigenous rights instruments, including the International Labor Organization Convention on the Protection of Indigenous Populations (ILO no. 107). Issued in 1957, ILO 107 was assimilationist in its basic logic, yet it marked the emergence of indigenous rights in the realm of international law and provided a baseline against which subsequent advances would be defined.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of seminal indigenous rights organizations including the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, Survival International, and Cultural Survival. The 1971 Declaration of Barbados (issued at an international meeting of mostly Latin American anthropologists) called for the recognition that indigenous peoples have rights that precede those of other national groups, including collective and territorial rights, thus articulating the fundamental distinctiveness of indigenous rights in universal human rights doctrine.

Also viewing indigenous rights as properly the domain of international law, the United Nations has been an essential ally in the development of indigenous rights doctrine. The U.N. sponsored NGO conferences in 1977 and 1981, and in 1982 established its Working Group on Indigenous Populations, which issued the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (DDRIP) in 1989. In 1989, the ILO issued Convention 169, an updated version of the earlier 107 that calls for constitutional recognition of cultural difference within nations as well as support for indigenous territorial claims. It has been ratified by ten Latin American nations.

The human rights focus of the movement expanded to include environmental concerns in the 1980s when environmentalists and indigenous rights organizations found common cause in the Amazon. Environmental activism underwent a period of rapid growth and internationalization in roughly the same period as did indigenous movements, and by the 1980s environmentalists were looking beyond national borders and taking an active interest in international issues such as tropical deforestation.

Opposition to World Bank-funded development projects in the Amazon galvanized the alliance. Beginning in 1982, the Brazilian government paved a road through the Amazon, using Bank funds. Millions of colonists followed the road, damaging the forest and threatening indigenous communities. Northern environmental groups pressured U.S. politicians and the Bank, which suspended funding for the project in 1985 and subsequently modified the terms of the loan to include mitigation of environmental damages, protection of indigenous lands, and local participation in decision making. (The World Bank and other international lenders continue to fund road building in the Amazon and other lowland forests, where the presence of a road is the single most significant variable predicting deforestation. The Bank itself is a complex institution, and the impact of reforms like OD 4.20, described below, are uncertain.)

In another campaign, environmentalists joined the Brazilian Kayapó to fight a Bank–supported hydro-electric power project that would flood indigenous territory, including inhabited villages. A meeting convened at one of the proposed dam sites in 1989 included a performance by the rock star Sting. The publicity drew international attention and linked forest conservation with cultural survival. Once again the Bank suspended its loan pending revision of the project.

Responding to the protests, the Bank issued Operational Directive 4.20 (OD 4.20) in 1991. OD 4.20 calls for the mitigation of negative impacts on indigenous peoples caused by Bank projects (although it does not prevent projects anticipated to have such impacts). OD 4.20 formalizes the close association of indigenous rights and environmental concerns. Evaluation of threats to indigenous peoples is subsumed in the environmental impact assessment previously required of Bank projects.

The successful protests against the projects in Brazil helped to consolidate indigenous/environmentalist alliances in the Amazon. They also helped publicize indigenous issues as preparations were underway for two pivotal events of 1992: the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio and the continent-wide protests of the planned celebration of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas five hundred years earlier.

Latin American and Spanish officials planned to celebrate the five-hundred-year anniversary in 1992 of what they called the “encounter of two worlds.” Indigenous activists did not consider the event anything to
celebrate. Under the banner of “500 years of resistance,” indigenous groups throughout the Americas organized protests. In Ecuador, thousands of Indians marched from the Amazon to Quito (with support from NGOs including the Rainforest Action Network) to demand territory and indigenous management of a national park—demands that were soon met. The anti-quinarycentenary campaign galvanized indigenous groups throughout the Americas, and international networks grew substantially. Largely responding to the protests and pressures from indigenous activists, the UN declared 1993 the International Year of Indigenous People and later extended the year to a decade, 1995–2005.

Brazilian indigenous groups, working with environmentalists, had received significant publicity in the five years before the UNCED. Indigenous leaders had toured the U.S. and Europe to mobilize international support and had generated a great deal of media attention. The Kayapó had successfully challenged the World Bank dam project and gained territorial rights, while the Yanomani were fighting for territory in the form of a national park that would protect their traditional lands. Environmentalists, human rights and indigenous rights organizations, and the UN Secretary–General pressured the Brazilian government to grant the Yanomani demands, using the upcoming UNCED as a point of leverage. The Yanomani were granted territory in November of 1992.

These successes, combined with years of diligent organizing, placed indigenous activists in a good position to take advantage of the political space opened by the Rio Conference. They attended a parallel NGO meeting and organized an “Intertribal Village,” a gathering of Indians that generated publicity and helped them achieve a meeting with the head of the UNCED. Their influence, along with the legacy of their alliance with environmentalist groups, is evident in the various provisions addressing indigenous peoples in the policies and recommendations made at the UNCED.

The main UNCED program (Agenda 21), the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) make special note of indigenous peoples’ relations with their environments. These policy statements recognize that many indigenous peoples have sophisticated understandings of local environments and natural resources—commonly called indigenous knowledge (IK)—that contribute to the sustainability of indigenous peoples’ economies, ecologies, and communities.

Indigenous knowledge has contributed to Western scientific knowledge, and many industries see a potential for IK to point to new products and technologies. Industry calls the search for new resources “bioprospecting” while many indigenous activists regard the process as “biopiracy.” They protest the patenting of traditional technologies and resources by Western scientists and firms. They note that patenting rewards Western corporations and scientists for exploiting indigenous knowledge without recognizing the creation of that knowledge by indigenous peoples or the centrality of that knowledge—its production and its use—to indigenous belief systems.

(A related issue of growing concern to indigenous as well as peasant activists is the spread of genetically modified crops and seeds. The use of GMO seeds dramatically increases local farmers’ dependence on agroindustry. Another potential negative impact of GMOs is the reduction of the extraordinary diversity of corn, potato, and other cultigens developed by indigenous Americans. Many indigenous activists argue that GMO and seed patenting threaten their ways of life and their very identities by controlling crops and dramatically impacting agricultural practices central to indigenous spiritual traditions.)

Agenda 21, the CBD, and the CCD all encourage the dissemination of IK. Yet critics argue that indigenous knowledge is meaningful and workable in specific social contexts. The approaches to nature that are understood as IK may, for the people who developed them, be tied to complicated cosmologies and spiritual understandings of the natural world, as in the case of the Itza’ Maya. For indigenous peoples, stripping indigenous knowledge of the worldview and religious traditions within which that knowledge operates is yet another example of outsiders’ failure to respect their beliefs and values. Furthermore, the environmental sustainability of indigenous societies is not reducible to a single factor like IK. Access to Western technologies and market economies, population density, and settlement patterns, all affect sustainability. This complexity suggests that institutionalizing and disseminating IK within a Western development framework may be disappointing.

The interest in IK (and, more generally, the association of indigenous peoples with environmental protection) has contributed to increased support for programs that encourage community management of natural resources. In several cases, notably in the Amazon, Panama, and Costa Rica, participatory management and conservation plans have dovetailed with indigenous peoples’ territorial claims. Agenda 21 includes provisions for territorial rights, as do ILO 169 and the DDRIP. At smaller scales, community forestry and agroecology initiatives that draw on IK have given indigenous peoples greater control over natural resources and local autonomy, including religious freedom. In highland Guatemala for example, including sacred sites identified by local religious leaders in forest management plans, these initiatives have contributed to more successful conservation.

In some cases, indigenous peoples have sought to exploit non-traditional resources within their territories in ways that are unsustainable and environmentally destructive. The Amazonian Kayapó have sold logging rights to tracts of forest under their control, and Amazonian
Guajajara Indians took hostages in 1989 in order to force the government Indian affairs agency to let them sell timber. The image of Indians clear-cutting their forest is jarring for some observers, including some environmentalists and indigenous activists. Yet as indigenous communities seek to achieve higher levels of economic development and social well-being, they may often be faced with the same kinds of decisions regarding environmental quality that non-Indians must confront.

The tremendous diversity of Latin American indigenous peoples is reflected in the heterogeneity of their religious beliefs and relations to nature. Yet Indians throughout the Americas share a basic experience of colonization and social, political, and economic marginalization in which assimilationist efforts to eradicate indigenous belief systems have persisted from missionary colonists through post-Independence education policies, as have the dispossession and destruction of Indian lands by outsiders. For many indigenous peoples religion as an expression of a unique identity and a philosophy of connections to particular territories and places is central to their struggles to secure and protect their rights as distinct peoples.

Brandt Gustav Peterson

Further Reading
See also: Aboriginal Environmental Groups in Canada; American Indians as “First Ecologists”; Indigenous Environmental Network; Maya Religion (Central America); Maya Spirituality (Guatemala Highlands); Mother Earth; Native American Languages; Noble Savage; Religious Environmentalist Paradigm; Traditional Ecological Knowledge; United Nations’ “Earth Summits”; World Conference of Indigenous Peoples (Kari Oca, Brazil).

Indigenous Environmental Network

This relationship to the sacredness of our Mother Earth and all her children, defines our spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and even, political relationship we have with each other and with all life (Tom “Mato Awanyankapi” Goldtooth, Indigenous Environmental Network 2002).

The Indigenous Environmental Network was born in 1990 from a national gathering of tribal grassroots leadership and youth to discuss common experiences regarding environmental assaults on our lands, waters, and communities and villages. At that time, a significant number of our tribal communities were targeted for municipal
and hazardous waste dumps and nuclear-waste storage facilities.

Indigenous activism seeking justice on environmental issues was new to many tribal members and tribal governments in the early 1990s. Such activism was quickly connected with an indigenous treaty rights agenda, namely, a commitment to strengthen the cultural and spiritual traditions that have sustained us since time immemorial. Within the U.S., by the early 1990s, a new “environmental justice movement” recognized that minority and low-income communities in the U.S. bear a disproportionate burden of pollution in our society. This movement was especially relevant to our subsistence-based communities. Many indigenous communities in North America are affected through a traditional cultural and spiritual relationship to the ecosystems in which we live, including subsistence on fish, game, traditional agricultural practices, livestock, and gathering of plants for baskets and medicinal purposes. This relationship is deeply integrated into spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices, the disruption of which constitutes religious intolerance and violates basic principles of human rights.

Following the 1990 gathering, indigenous activists, youth and concerned tribal community members continued regularly in North America to put our minds, heart and spirit together for a common course of action as a means to restore our homelands to environmental health and harmony. From these initial gatherings, the idea of the formation of a network of indigenous peoples, with a commitment to respecting our spiritual traditions, was born – an idea born of hope, courage and common vision. This network was named the Indigenous Environmental Network.

Guiding Principles
We endorse the following principles as a statement of our beliefs and a guide to our actions:

Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all of Creation, from microorganisms to human, plant, trees, fish, bird, and animal relatives are part of the natural order and regulated by natural laws. Each has a unique role and is a critical part of the whole that is creation. Each is sacred, respected, and a unique living being with its own right to survive, and each plays an essential role in the survival and health of the natural world.

As sovereign peoples and nations, we have an inherent right to self-determination, protected through inherent rights and upheld through treaties and other binding agreements. As indigenous peoples, our consent and approval are necessary in all negotiations and activities that have direct and indirect impact on our lands, ecosystems, waters, other natural resources and our human bodies.

Human beings are part of the natural order. Our role and responsibility, as human beings, is to live peacefully and in a harmonious balance with all life. Our cultures are based on this harmony, peace and ecological balance, which ensure long-term sustainability for future generations. This concept of sustainability must be the basis of the decisions and negotiations underway on national and international levels.

The Creator has given us a sacred responsibility to protect and care for the land and all life, as well as to safeguard its well being for future generations to come.

Indigenous peoples have the right and responsibility to control access to our traditional knowledge, innovations and practices, which constitute the basis for the maintenance of our lifestyles and future.

The Need for Indigenous Organizing
The need for IEN arose due to increasing political and social pressures. The U.S. has been increasing efforts through its federal agencies and with energy legislation and through its corporate energy partners to push more mineral and resource-extraction development within tribal lands. Ten percent of U.S. untapped energy-related resources are under Indian lands. The U.S. energy plan calls for more oil and gas development, the construction of more coal-fired power plants, the potential for construction of more nuclear power reactors and the buying of electricity from large hydro-dam projects in Canada. All of these development initiatives are being planned within our tribal reservations and traditional territories, and they threaten tribal sovereignty. Such challenges need to be weighed when addressing environmental injustices related to American Indian and Alaska Natives.

Due to Western forms of development, the world is in a compounding crisis from greenhouse gases of the fossil fuel industry that is causing climatic changes and global warming. Many indigenous peoples with close relationships to the culture, language and environment have the most to lose when the land/water is contaminated, and when severe weather changes occur, which can disrupt their traditional, subsistence food systems and cultural practices.

Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and Canada continue to be confronted by many threats to their environment, whether they live on larger reservations or in smaller isolated communities and villages, or in Indian neighborhoods within urban areas. In addition to minerals, our lands hold natural resources that the industrialized world and corporations want to develop, own, and trade, such as water and timber, and forest products. Environmental problems are compounded by the increasingly toxic nature of industrial, agricultural and extractive industries.
Our tribal lands are viewed as places where municipal, industrial, federal and military toxic and radioactive waste can be dumped, burned, stored or reprocessed. In certain regions, toxic chemicals disproportionately contaminate tribal communities. These chemicals bio-accumulate and bio-magnify in the food chain, affecting both processed and indigenous traditional food systems. Our children are especially vulnerable. In some areas, health problems have resulted from decades of radioactive and toxic exposure. These are some of the reasons underlying the formation of IEN and they have taken environmental justice issues into the global issue-area concerning trade and globalization.

History of U.S. Indigenous Peoples and Colonization

Congress must apprise the Indian that he can no longer stand as a breakwater against the constant tide of civilization.... A....thriftless race of savages cannot be permitted to stand guard at the treasure vaults of the nation which hold out gold and silver.... the prospector and miner may enter and by enriching himself enrich the nation and bless the world by the result of his toil (United States Senate, Congressional Globe, 27th Congress, 1846.)

As many as 15 million indigenous peoples lived in North America when Europeans first arrived in the late fifteenth century. By 1890 there were less than 500,000; the population decimated by European diseases and warfare. By the early twenty-first century, indigenous numbers had grown to over two million. The indigenous peoples of the U.S. are tribally diverse with over 500 different tribes and over 400 federally recognized tribal nations, each with its own tradition and cultural heritage.

In spite of the historical policies of the U.S. government of military campaigns, removal of indigenous peoples from traditional homelands, outlawing traditional indigenous cultural and spiritual/religious practices and forbidding speaking of language at governmental-imposed schools, indigenous peoples of the U.S. have been able to retain a commitment to maintain and restore language and culture, as well as interweaving modern technology into everyday life.

Since the colonization of North America, control of land has always been the central political and economic issue. Those who control the land are those who control the resources. Social control and all the other aggregate components of power are fundamentally interrelated to the control of the land. To gain control the U.S. government signed more than 400 treaties with indigenous tribes. In exchange for land and agreements to cease resistance, tribes were promised protection, material goods, services, and sometimes cash payments. By entering into treaties with the tribal nations, the U.S. government acknowledged their sovereignty, although with restrictions. The colonial leaders recognized that land is essential to the survival of indigenous peoples and that a denial of indigenous peoples’ right to land is racial discrimination. Land is central to the spiritual and physical well-being of indigenous peoples.

Within the U.S., tribal reservations – or “reserves,” as they are called in Canada – constitute a small but crucial “piece of the rock.” Approximately one-third of all western U.S. low-sulfur coal, 20 percent of known U.S. reserves of oil and natural gas, and over one-half of all U.S. uranium deposits lie under the reservations. Energy companies, logging and mining interests, and publicly owned utilities, driven by industrialization and accelerating demands for energy and natural resources and materials are disproportionately affecting indigenous peoples. These developments build dams that flood indigenous lands; for example, like those of the James Bay Cree in Canada and the Standing Rock Lakota (Sioux) in the United States.

Such developments have forced tribal peoples to relinquish their culture and economies and claims to their traditional homelands. These developments have disrupted habitat and have thereby limited the ability of tribal people to carry on traditional subsistence practices such as hunting, gathering and fishing rights. Unsustainable development has made indigenous peoples dependent on government-subsidized housing and “non-traditional” diets.

Biological Diversity and Indigenous Languages

The world’s biological, cultural and linguistic diversity are imperiled. Over 80 percent of the world’s remaining biodiversity is found within indigenous peoples’ lands and territories. Although globally there are an estimated 350 million indigenous individuals, our cultures constitute about 90 percent of the world’s cultural diversity. Our distinct ways of life vary considerably from one location to another. Of the estimated 6000 cultures in the world, between 4000 and 5000 are indigenous. Approximately three-quarters of the world’s 6000 languages are spoken by indigenous peoples. Of the nine countries in which 60 percent of human languages are spoken, six also host exceptional numbers of plant and animal species unique to those locations. When looking at the global distribution of indigenous peoples, there is also a marked correlation between areas of high biological diversity and areas of high cultural diversity. This link is particularly significant in rainforests, such as those found along the Amazon, and in Central America, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Philippines, New Guinea and Indonesia. Wherever we live, we use our highly specialized, traditional knowledge to care for and conserve the interconnected web or Circle of Life known as “biodiversity.”

In November 2000, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF International), in collaboration with the international NGO Terralingua, published a report entitled...

The report reveals that 4635 ethnolinguistic groups, or 67 percent of the total number of such groups, live in 225 regions of the highest biological importance. The study reported that languages spoken by indigenous and traditional peoples are rapidly disappearing. Since the ecological knowledge accumulated by indigenous peoples is contained in languages, and since in most traditional cultures this knowledge is passed on to other groups or new generations orally, language extinction is leading to loss of ecological knowledge, and with that loss cultural and spiritual knowledge also disappears. It is widely accepted that biological diversity cannot be conserved without cultural diversity.

It has been said that languages are the foundation of peoples’ intellectual heritage and the framework for each society’s unique understanding of life. Given the rate of language extinction, cultural diversity is threatened on an unprecedented scale. In the twentieth century the world lost about 600 languages Nearly 2500 languages are in danger of immediate extinction; an even higher number are losing the “ecological contexts” that keep them “living” languages. At current rates, 90 percent of the world’s remaining languages will be lost in the twenty-first century, most of them belonging to indigenous peoples (World Wide Fund for Nature: 2000: Executive Summary). We are concerned that these languages, and our traditional ecological knowledge, are increasingly being lost. The expansion of market-based economic systems, communications, and other aspects of globalization, which promote dominant languages, do so at the expense of our indigenous languages.

The link between culture, spirituality and environment is clear to indigenous peoples. All indigenous peoples share a spiritual, cultural and economic relationship with our traditional lands. Indigenous traditional laws, customs and practices reflect both an attachment to land and a felt responsibility for preserving it for future generations. In Central America, the Amazon Basin, Asia, North America, Australia, Asia, Pacific Islands and South and North Africa, the physical and cultural survival of indigenous peoples is dependent upon the protection of our land and its resources – among a technological society that does not value these links.

Clash in Sustaining Values

The source of this world’s collective social, economic and environmental crisis can be traced to the long historical processes by which people have become increasingly alienated from the Earth. This includes alienation from self, community and nature. This concept of alienation has roots in colonialism. Intellectually it is rooted in Western dualism, which sets humanity apart from nature and legit-
found in the economic need to migrate to urban areas caused by the loss of lands and territories and means of subsistence.

In the U.S., institutional racism prevails throughout federal policies that fail to protect the environment, our natural resources, and the lands we hold sacred. Socially ingrained attitudes of racial superiority and inferiority, which were given birth during historical colonialist attitudes, are now buried into the very fabric of the Americas and the collective unconscious of all Americans. The continuing denigration of our cultures and traditions, sanctioned by the state, damage and destroy our identity, our children, our lands and our future. The persistent refusal of many nation-states to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples as “peoples” underpins and justifies the deplorable state of human rights of indigenous peoples.

Building Sustainable Communities
Youth and tribal leadership are just now beginning to develop dialogue and strategy for resisting these damaging realities, beginning with the effort to rebuild sustainable indigenous communities and villages. With strong, committed and knowledgeable leadership, IEN has come to understand the importance of coming to grips with internalized oppression, the role of the older generation and younger generation in leadership development, and the recognition and application of traditional ecological knowledge, and to provide positive and strong models for community change. The IEN understands our responsibility to provide a voice of reason and wisdom as a means to mend and repair the delicate fabric of life while restoring balance and harmony to our communities and villages.

Reevaluating Our Relationship to Our Sacred Mother Earth
The path of Western development has produced many technological advances, which many indigenous peoples have embraced. But technology has further separated all humans from our sacred relationship to Mother Earth. We have become alienated from the most fundamental basis of our human nature, our spiritual connection to the Earth and the living universe. Within our foundation of utilizing indigenous traditional knowledge in our work, IEN has consistently challenged nation-states, environmental organizations, faith-based groups and other non-governmental organizations that are doing environmental work to examine the spiritual aspects of this work. From the tribal perspective, water, air, ground-soil, and fire are sacred elements deserving of respect and protection.

In 1998, the IEN facilitated the participation of traditional elders and tribal grassroots members in the “Circles of Wisdom” Native Peoples/Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop. It was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in the traditional territory of the Pueblo peoples of southwest United States. IEN brought to this meeting our profound concern for the well-being of our sacred Mother Earth and Father Sky and the potential consequences of climate imbalance for our indigenous peoples, our environment, our economies, and our relationships to the natural order and laws.

At this meeting, there was a strong statement that indigenous prophecy now meets modern scientific prediction. Indigenous peoples have known that the Earth is out of balance, which was a message that Western scientists were beginning to deliver. At this meeting, the collective mind and heart of indigenous participants from many tribal nations developed the following preamble that well reflects the cosmos vision of indigenous peoples of North America:

Preamble
As Indigenous Peoples, we begin each day with a prayer, bringing our minds together in thanks for every part of the natural world. We are grateful that each part of our natural world continues to fulfill the responsibilities that have been set for it by our Creator, in an unbreakable relationship to each other. As the roles and responsibilities are fulfilled, we are allowed to live our lives in peace. We are grateful for the natural order put in place and regulated by natural laws.

Most of our ceremonies are about giving thanks, at the right time and in the right way. They are what were given to us, what makes us who we are. They enable us to speak about life itself. Maintaining our ceremonies is an important part of our life. There is nothing more important than preserving life, celebrating life, and that is what the ceremonies do. Our instruction tells us that we are to maintain our ceremonies, however few of us there are, so that we can fulfill the spiritual responsibilities given to us by the Creator.

The balance of men and women is the leading principle of our wisdom. This balance is the creative principle of Father Sky and Mother Earth that fosters life. In our traditions, it is women who carry the seeds, both of our own future generations and of the plant life. It is women who plant and tend the gardens, and women who bear and raise the children. The women remind us of our connection to the Earth, for it is from the Earth that life comes.

We draw no line between what is political and what is spiritual. Our leaders are also our spiritual leaders. In making any law, our leaders must consider three things: the effect of their decisions on peace, the effect on the natural order and law, and the effect on future generations. The natural order and laws are self-evident and do not need scientific proof. We believe that all lawmakers should be
required to think this way, that all constitutions should contain these principles.

Our prophecies and teachings tell us that life on Earth is in danger of coming to an end. We have accepted the responsibility designated by our prophecies to tell the world that we must live in peace and harmony and ensure balance with the rest of Creation. The destruction of the rest of Creation must not be allowed to continue, for if it does, Mother Earth will react in such a way that almost all people will suffer the end of life as we know it.

A growing body of western scientific evidence now suggests what Indigenous Peoples have expressed for a long time: life as we know it is in danger. We can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of this evidence. We must learn to live with this shadow, and always strive towards the light that will restore the natural order. How western science and technology is being used needs to be examined in order for Mother Earth to sustain life.

Our Peoples and lands are a scattering of islands within a sea of our neighbors, the richest material nations in the world. The world is beginning to recognize that today’s market driven economies are not sustainable and place in jeopardy the existence of future generations. It is upsetting the natural order and laws created for all our benefit. The continued extraction and destruction of natural resources is unsustainable.

There is a direct relationship between the denial of Indigenous Peoples land and water rights, along with the appropriation without consent of Indigenous Peoples’ natural resources, and the causes of global climate change today. Examples include deforestation, contamination of land and water by pesticides and industrial waste, toxic and radioactive poisoning, military and mining impacts.

The four elements of fire, water, Earth and air sustain all life. These elements of life are being destroyed and misused by the modern world. Fire gives life and understanding, but is being disrespected by technology of the industrialized world that allows it to take life such as the fire in the coal-fired powered plants, the toxic waste incinerators, the fossil-fuel combustion engine and other polluting technologies that add to greenhouse gases. Coal extraction from sacred Earth is being used to fuel the greenhouse gases that are causing global climate warming.

Because of our relationship with our lands, waters and natural surroundings, which has sustained us since time immemorial, we carry the knowledge and ideas that the world needs today. We know how to live with this land: we have done so for thousands of years. We are a powerful spiritual people. It is this spiritual connection to Mother Earth, Father Sky, and all Creation that is lacking in the rest of the world.

Our extended family includes our Mother Earth, Father Sky, and our brothers and sisters, the animal and plant life. We must speak for the plants, for the animals, for the rest of Creation. It is our responsibility, given to us by our Creator, to speak on their behalf to the rest of the world.

For the future of all the children, for the future of Mother Earth and Father Sky, we call upon the leaders of the world, at all levels of governments, to accept responsibility for the welfare of future generations. Their decisions must reflect their consciousness of this responsibility and they must act on it. We demand a place at the table in discussions that involve and affect our future and the natural order and natural laws that govern us (The Albuquerque Declaration, “Circles of Wisdom” Native Peoples/Native Homelands Climate Change Workshop/Summit, Albuquerque, New Mexico 1998).

Indigenous Peoples Working Internationally

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992, was an important development for indigenous peoples and our rights related to the environment. The Conference, or Earth Summit as it is called, recognized that indigenous peoples and our communities have a critical role to play in managing and developing the environment. The importance of indigenous peoples’ traditional knowledge and practices was acknowledged, and the international community committed itself to promoting, strengthening and protecting the rights, knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and our communities.

During the Earth Summit, indigenous peoples and non-governmental organizations gathered in Kari Oca, Brazil, to share concerns about the environment. The Kari Oca Declaration and the Indigenous Peoples’ Earth Charter adopted at this meeting expressed the values of the world’s indigenous peoples and recognized our distinct relationship with the Earth. The united voice of indigenous peoples helped influence the outcome of the Earth Summit.

Another important result of the Earth Summit was the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The Convention recognized the close dependence of many indigenous communities on biological resources and the desirability of sharing the benefits that come from using traditional knowledge, innovations and practices to conserve biological diversity, including species diversity.

Interest in the rights of indigenous peoples and the environment grew after the 1992 Earth Summit. Indigenous
and non-indigenous peoples are increasingly aware that traditional lands and natural resources are essential to the economic, cultural and spiritual survival of indigenous peoples. Some countries, such as Canada, Australia, Finland, Brazil and the Philippines, have adopted legal measures that acknowledge indigenous land rights or have established legal procedures for indigenous participation in land-related issues. A growing number of governments have amended their national constitutions to recognize the ancestral rights of indigenous peoples to occupy, own and manage their traditional lands and territories. Although some governments now consult with indigenous peoples on land rights and the environment, however, many nation-states have not introduced laws or policies that provide for indigenous land claims or promote full political participation by indigenous peoples.


At the 2002 United Nation’s “World Summit on Sustainable Development,” held in Johannesburg, South Africa, the IEN coordinated with other indigenous non-governmental organizational representatives in the drafting of our own Indigenous Plan of Implementation for the next decade. This was based on the “Kimberley Declaration,” which had been developed at the International Indigenous Peoples Summit on Sustainable Development that was held in Khoi-San Territory in Kimberley, South Africa, the month before the United Nations conference in Johannesburg. This was our contribution for achieving human and environmental sustainability in the world. One sentence of the Kimberley Declaration that stood out toward confirming our relationship to the Earth was, “Today we reaffirm our relationship to Mother Earth and our responsibility to coming generations to uphold peace, equity and justice.”

Indigenous peoples from every region of the world recognized the Kimberley Declaration and we reaffirmed our spiritual relationship in the text of the Indigenous Plan of Implementation, which reflected the heart and mind of indigenous peoples as traditional caretakers of Mother Earth. This was a message that we reaffirmed to each other as well as a message to the world.

One section of the Indigenous Plan of Implementation well illustrates this message, and is found in the section on Cosmo vision and spirituality. It states:

We will direct our energies and organizational strength to consolidate our collective values and principles, which spring from the interrelation of the different forms of life in Nature. Therein lies our origin, which we reaffirm by practicing our culture and spirituality.

We will strengthen the role of our elders and wise traditional authorities as the keepers of our traditional wisdom, which embodies our spirituality, and Cosmo vision as an alternative to the existing unsustainable cultural models.

Indigenous Peoples Will Continue to Seek Global Transformation

Since the United Nations’ “Earth Summits” at Rio and Johannesburg, the world has heard voices from indigenous peoples and civil society demanding a need for a radical change of humankind’s destructive mentality and actions toward nature in the modern world system. The global sustainability crisis is a direct consequence of how Western forms of development have continued a colonial – conquest of the sacred and have resulted in humans increasing separation from their spiritual connection to nature, Mother Earth, to their human communities, and; most important, to themselves. A global transformation on the dimensions of societal values, lifestyles, worldviews and life-interpretations is a necessary key for the solution of the problems that arise in complex patterns of technical, social and economic development.

Our elders have been telling us that humans have arrived at a moment of critical choice. Repeating previous choices will certainly lead to accelerating social, political and ecological disintegration. The alternative, a choice for spiritual transformational change, represents more than an act of survival.

As indigenous peoples, we will continue to learn to develop and support community-building initiatives and organizations with a focus of maintaining and sharing those principles and spiritual values that have sustained our communities for millennia. Global spiritual transformation of civil society is a necessity. Spirituality and community, not money, must define the threads that bind all people and all life together. The IEN seeks to open a constructive dialogue for mobilizing societal forces, within all cultures, to reevaluate what their relationship is to the sacredness of our Mother Earth.

All My Relations

Tom Goldtooth

Further Reading


Indigenous Religions and Cultural Borrowing

Traditional indigenous religions tend to be intimately involved with the natural environments out of which they emerge. Indigenous peoples around the world have developed shamanic and animist belief systems that reflect their dependence on the environmental conditions directly affecting their communities. As social and economic circumstances have changed for indigenous peoples, religious practices have also been adapted and reshaped to accommodate new influences, desires and pressures. Likewise, traditional indigenous religions have had an influence on the wider world. They are often invoked, for example, as evidence of the connections that indigenous peoples are perceived to have with “Nature.” As a result, elements of these traditions are frequently borrowed or appropriated by non-indigenous groups or individuals who want to strengthen or authenticate their own spiritual feelings toward natural landscapes.

Most cultural researchers acknowledge that the tendency to borrow ideas from others is a universal human practice, an inevitable outcome of interactions between individuals and cultural groups. This diffusion of beliefs and practices is evident in the development of cultural traditions throughout the world. Religious traditions in particular provide some of the most dramatic and widely recognized examples of cultural borrowing. Perhaps it is for this reason that the study of religion has often included discussions about the significance and the implications of blending together elements selected from different cultures. The concept of syncretism, the attempt to reconcile or bring together diverse beliefs, conventions or systems, has frequently been applied in colonial settings to describe the ways in which indigenous peoples combined their traditional religious beliefs with those of the missionaries and colonizers.

“Syncretism” has acquired negative connotations in some places because it has been used to imply that religious traditions are somehow weakened or corrupted when they begin to incorporate practices drawn from other religious systems. This argument depends upon a set of culturally shaped ideas that assume “tradition” to be unchanging by nature and that therefore promote the importance of “purity” and “authenticity” within such traditions. It also reflects an understanding of cultures as essentially fixed and bounded entities, rather than overlapping and interacting systems of social engagement. These approaches fail to acknowledge that cultural traditions, religious and non-religious, indigenous and non-indigenous, are essentially dynamic; like all social practices they are repeatedly amended, altered and readjusted to meet the requirements of changing circumstances – even while they may maintain an appearance of unaltering stability.

Traditional indigenous belief systems tend to be directly and inalienably tied to specific places or sites; when indigenous peoples incorporate elements of other religious systems, both preexisting and incoming beliefs must be adjusted to accommodate new geographical and cultural contexts. Many indigenous groups who have been introduced to Christianity, for example, are faced with the challenge of reconciling their beliefs about the sacredness and centrality of land in their traditional religious practices with the “non-land-based” nature of the new religious system. Often indigenous peoples who take on one of the “world religions,” by choice or by force, will find ways to incorporate their traditional beliefs about land and nature spirits, the spirits of place, into the new set of practices. Alternatively, the two systems of belief might simply coexist side by side.

One indigenous response to the “placelessness” of the Judeo-Christian tradition is evident in anthropologist Eric Wolf’s 1958 account of the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a religious symbol of national significance in Mexico. Guadalupe appeared in a vision, in 1531, to Juan Diego, an ordinary indigenous man who had converted to Christianity. The shrine, built upon the hill where she appeared, became a major site of pilgrimage for indigenous Mexicans, who had, ostensibly, converted to Christianity. That same hill, however, was also an important pilgrimage destination before the Spanish arrived in Mexico, as the site of a temple dedicated to Tonantzin, the
indigenous goddess of Earth and fertility. This former association was maintained amongst indigenous pilgrims. In this case indigenous believers in a religious system that was intimately linked to a particular place managed, very successfully, to appropriate and integrate Christian imagery, with its distant geographic origins, to reflect local needs and purposes.

Likewise, when non-indigenous people adopt indigenous beliefs their meaning may also be changed to reflect the needs and priorities of the appropriating group. In places such as America, Australia and Britain, for example, “New Age” use of imagery drawn from indigenous religious traditions, imagery that originally emerged from and related very closely to particular landscapes, tends to become universalized, its local significance minimized in favor of its perceived wider relevance. In this new context indigenous beliefs and practices are employed to signify a symbolic link to land in general – to the whole of the Earth and to “Nature” in its broadest sense. This approach is clearly reflected in New Age interpretations of shamanism as a universal human tradition that can be employed without reference to specific places or spirits of place. Inversely, members of settler communities also occasionally invoke indigenous religious knowledge in order to assert the strength of their own connections to particular locations and their own feelings of “indigeneity.”

Traditional indigenous religions have also provided inspiration for the international environmental movement. Because indigenous peoples are often perceived to have a strong spiritual connection to the natural environment they tend to be championed as the original ecologists. The famous speech attributed to “Chief Seattle,” for example has become an important rallying cry for environmentalists around the world. In reality, this text was adapted by American professor of film, Ted Perry, in the early 1970s, from earlier texts produced by non-indigenous Americans (but inspired by a speech delivered in the Lushotseed language in 1854 by a Native American leader named Sealth). Elements of Native American and Australian Aboriginal religious traditions have also been incorporated into the ritual practices of the Deep Ecology movement as a means of emphasizing the importance of developing a strong spiritual commitment to the environment as a way of encouraging its protection. Within the context of Western tendencies to align men with “culture” and women with “nature,” indigenous religious traditions are often linked with “feminine wisdom” and embraced by proponents of the ecofeminist movement as alternative of models for “being in nature” (Jacobs 1994).

Many scholars who have worked closely with indigenous cultures, however, debate the perception that indigenous traditions are intrinsically ecologically sound. Evidence, in some places, of overhunting and overuse of fire, for example, supports the argument that indigenous peoples are not necessarily the “paragons of ecological virtue” (Ellen 1986) that they are often thought to be by Westerners keen to present an alternative model to the industrialism and consumerism associated with their own cultural tradition.

While some indigenous individuals encourage and benefit from the kind of interest in spiritual beliefs and practices described above, many now rigorously contest the borrowing or “appropriation” of their religious traditions. Some feel that their religions are trivialized and undermined when particular elements are removed from their original context and freely reinterpreted by others who are not part of their community and who may even seek to profit from the knowledge they have acquired from indigenous people. This situation is often exacerbated by social and economic inequalities that can only be understood by looking at the particular histories of indigenous communities, especially in relation to the long-term impacts of colonialism. Indigenous scholars and others also explain how romantic stereotypes about closeness to nature and heightened spiritual focus can undermine indigenous efforts, as minority groups encapsulated in nation-states, to gain political influence and support for the enforcement of basic human rights and social justice for their communities.

Indigenous peoples in all parts of the world have been persecuted for their religious beliefs, have been dispossessed of their traditional lands, and have had their personal and group identities further challenged and undervalued in numerous ways. As a result, many contemporary indigenous communities are trying to rebuild and revitalize their cultural traditions. Part of this complex process often includes reclaiming the rights to represent and control the use of their unique religious symbols and practices. In this context the large-scale borrowing, re-interpretation, and commodification of religious and cultural imagery by members of more dominant cultural groups may impact negatively on indigenous efforts to assert their own interpretations and uses of those same symbols. Their ability to benefit economically from the production of traditional arts and crafts and other business ventures that depend upon their unique cultural/religious heritage may also be impeded if the power to control commercial use of that heritage is overridden by members of other communities.

Some of the most well-known and extensively researched examples of religious belief systems that overtly combine indigenous traditions and “world” religions are Melanesian cargo cults and the African-derived traditions of Vodou (Africa, Haiti and USA), Candomblé (Brazil) and Santería (Cuba and USA). In each of these cases Christianity has been the major outside influence. The three latter cases are constituted primarily of indigenous African religions combined with elements of Catholicism, initially encountered through contact with
missionaries and colonists. These traditions emerged from the beliefs and practices of African men and women, many of Yoruban heritage, who were forcibly transported to Haiti, Cuba, and the Americas as slaves. Catholic prayers and hymns still have an important place in the contemporary Vodou ceremonies and many Vodou spirits of African origin have counterparts in the form of Catholic saints. Similarly, Catholic saints play significant roles in the Brazilian and Cuban traditions of Candomblé and Santería.

Melanesian cargo cults developed, in part, as a response to the enormous differential in access to material wealth between indigenous people and European colonizers in the Pacific Islands following World War II. In this sense, they are political as well as religious. Although many and varied, these innovative millenarian movements are generally based on beliefs that adherence to newly developed rituals and social practices will result in the ancestors of the indigenous islanders returning with unlimited material goods to distribute amongst the indigenous community (hence the term “cargo”). While some cargo cults are relatively short-lived, others have survived for several decades. Whitehouse explains, in relation to the Papua New Guinean movement that he studied, that its success was closely linked to the fact “... that it was firmly rooted in Indigenous cosmology, [thereby] restoring confidence and pride in local kastom [roughly, “custom”] and exploiting some of the most compelling and plausible assumptions of traditional religion” (1995: 178). While this religious movement also incorporates many Christian terms, concepts and personages, such as “sin,” “absolution,” “Satan,” “Adam and Eve,” “Paradise,” “Jesus,” and “God,” it is essentially an anti-missionary discourse that seeks to even up the imbalance between indigenous peoples and the Europeans, who have greater access to power and wealth.

Each of these forms of cultural borrowing highlight the creative and pragmatic processes involved in the development or invention of religious and other cultural traditions. They provide valuable insights into the dynamism of culture in general and offer interesting pathways to understanding the vibrant and changing nature of religious traditions, indigenous and non-indigenous. At the same time it is also important to understand and respond respectfully to indigenous accusations of religious appropriation, the “theft” of ideas and symbols drawn from indigenous religious traditions by non-indigenous peoples. Acknowledging the potentially destructive outcomes of this form of cultural borrowing is a necessary step toward supporting indigenous efforts to maintain and revive traditional religious beliefs and practices in the face of misrepresentation and other significant social pressures.

Further Reading
See also: Aboriginal Spirituality and the New Age in Australia; Candomblé of Brazil; Disney Worlds at War; Harner, Michael – and the Foundation for Shamanic Studies; Indian Guides; Plastic Medicine Men; Radical Environmentalism; Santería; Scouting; Seattle (Sealth), Chief; Totemism; Umbanda; Uwa Indians (Colombia); Yanomami; Yoruba Culture (West Africa).

Indra’s Net

The motif of Indra’s net is used by the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism as a metaphor for the notion of mutual
interpenetration of all phenomena in the universe. The image of Indra’s net of jewels originally comes from
the Huayan Scripture (also know as the Avatamsaka or the Flower Garland), one of the key canonical texts of
Mahayana Buddhism. According to the scripture, in the
element of existence in terms of dynamic relationships among
interrelated phenomena, which together constitute the
whole cosmos, rather than in terms of distinct and separate
entities. The interdependent web of causal link-
ages, which encompasses the relationship between the
one and the whole as well as the relationship among
individual entities, is predicated on the notions of mutual identity and interdependence. Both of these con-
cepts are peculiar Huayan reinterpretations of the
Mahayana doctrines of emptiness and dependent origina-
tion. According to this point of view, each and every
individual/thing/phenomenon can be seen both as a conditioning cause of the whole and as being caused by the
whole. By extension, every single phenomenon condi-
tions the existence of each other phenomenon and
vice versa. Therefore, nothing exists by itself, but requires
everything else to be what it really is in a given moment. It is
important to note that the Huayan interpretation of causality is not concerned with temporal sequencing and
does not postulate causal processes that involve a progres-
sive unfolding of events. Rather, the theory represents an
attempt to elucidate the causal relationships that obtain
among all phenomena in the universe at any given
moment.

The Huayan doctrine can be interpreted as depicting a
totalistic universe that is a self-generating organic body
constituted by a limitless number of parts that are con-
tantly interacting with each other. Recently there has
been an increased awareness of possible parallels between
the Huayan understanding of reality and an emerging eco-
logical awareness of the interdependence of all living
things, which is imbedded in larger theoretical models that
stress the holistic unity of the world and view nature as an
intricate ecosystem comprised of constantly changing
elements that interact with each other in a web of causal
relationships. The Huayan view of existence as an intricate
web of interdependencies is seen as representing a viable
alternative to predominant notions of an anthropocentric
world, even if the manifold intricacies and nuances of
Huayan’s complex theoretical model are not always fully
taken into account.

Huayan’s religious philosophy can readily be inter-
preted as implying that nature is not a mere background
for the existence of humanity, to be manipulated and
exploited for the satisfaction of human needs and desires.
Rather, humans and all other beings are united together
into an organic whole, with each and every thing and
being related to everything else, each one of them
occupying an important place in the total scheme of
things. An example of contemporary application of
Huayan ideas about Indra’s net in ecological discussions
can be found in Gary Snyder’s conception of nature as
community. By using the Huayan notion of interpret-
atation, Snyder sees the human relationship with nature
as part of an ecological communion of beings that
comprises Indra’s net as a food web, which entails gift
exchanges and can be embodied in a feeling of love that
extends to all.

Mario Poceski

Further Reading
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See also: Buddhism; Buddhism – Engaged; Hinduism;
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ation (and adjacent, Institute of Noetic Sciences).

Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility

The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR),
an independent coalition of religious institutional inves-
tors in the United States, coordinates and facilitates cor-
porate responsibility among its members. In the late 1960s
the Corporate Information Center (CIC), a project of the
National Council of Churches of Christ, produced research
reports on corporate issues. In 1971 six Protestant
churches formed the Interfaith Committee for Social
Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship

Intended as a challenge to the National Religious Partnership for the Environment’s claim to represent Judeo-Christian thought on environmental issues, the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship (ICES) was founded in April 2000 by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant leaders promoting a theologically and politically conservative public religious agenda. These leaders argued that religiously informed moral action, rather than governmental controls, should guide behavior, and that the environment can best be sustained in a context of free market economics, strong property rights, and technological innovation. The ICES was conceived and established by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Economics in 1990 by Fr. Robert A. Sirico “to promote a society that embraces civil liberties and free-market economics.”

The defining document of the ICES is the Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship, created in October 1999 at a conference center in West Cornwall, Connecticut. Largely a distillation of arguments made by E. Calvin Beisner in his 1997 book Where the Garden Meets Wilderness, the Cornwall Declaration minimized the threat of global environmental problems, such as “destructive manmade global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss,” arguing instead that the greatest environmental threats were local in nature and typically confined to the developing world. Rather than depicting humans as “consumers and polluters,” the Cornwall Declaration envisioned them as “producers and stewards” with the ability to “add to the Earth’s abundance” and to “enrich creation” by “developing other resources” and by unlocking “the potential in creation.” Humans were “given a privileged place among creatures” in the divine order and thus “the human person is the most valuable resource on Earth.” Nature is not best when “untouched by human hands” but instead must be developed and brought to fruitfulness by humans. Humans are to exercise wise stewardship, “which must attend both to the demands of human well being and to a...
divine call for human beings to exercise caring dominion over the Earth." A series of aspirations at the end of the Declaration envisioned a world in which "objective moral principles" and "right reason" unite with limited government, a free market economy, assured property rights, and technological advancement to produce a better environment for all creatures.

Though it was at odds with mainstream secular and religious environmental thought (even questioning some of its fundamental assumptions), the Cornwall Declaration represented the first acknowledgment of the need for environmental care by religious leaders combining theological with political conservatism. Among the prominent evangelical conservatives supporting it were Bill Bright (Campus Crusade for Christ), Charles Colson (Prison Fellowship Ministries), James Dobson (Focus on the Family), D. James Kennedy (Coral Ridge Ministries), Beverly LaHaye (Concerned Women for America), and Donald Wildmon (American Family Association). The Catholic and Jewish supporters included Fr. Richard John Neuhaus (editor of First Things) and Rabbi Daniel Lapin (Toward Tradition).

The ICES created a stir among Christian environmentalists in April 2000 when it sent the Cornwall Declaration to 37,000 religious leaders along with an introductory letter accusing the National Religious Partnership for the Environment of seeking to "redefine traditional Judeo-Christian teachings on stewardship" and claiming that "its agenda will have devastating, unintended consequences for humanity and our world." The Evangelical Environmental Network was forced to defend its evangelical credentials and policies in an open letter to its constituents and in a series of semi-public letters with ICES leaders.


David K. Larsen

Further Reading


See also: Au Sable Institute; Cathedral Forests and the Felling of Sacred Groves; Christianity (2) – Jesus (and adjacent, What Would Jesus Drive?); Christianity (7) – An Evangelical Perspective on Faith and Nature; Evangelical Environmental Network; Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation; Stewardship; Wise Use Movement.

Inuit

Scattered around the Arctic regions from Siberia to Greenland, Inuit (including Yup’ik, Inupiat, Inuvialuit and Kalaallit) have often been described as religious people but without a real religion. The variety of the expressions used by Western observers to describe their spirituality or worldview reflects how difficult it is to grasp traditions that have lived for thousands of years in close contact with their environment. Nowadays, if Inuit are still very often considered as "naturalists" (the missionary Hans Egede was already using that notion in Greenland in the eighteenth century), it is again because of this very special relationship they maintain to their environment. However, like many other Western concepts, the notions of religion and nature are very problematic to understand Inuit traditions adequately. We may wonder why, for example, if Inuit are so respectful toward nature, they are often opposed to anti-harvesting campaigns led by Euro-American animal-rights groups and why collaborations with ecologists and environmentalists are not always easy.

According to the Inuit, nature does not exist as such. Human and nonhuman beings including non-living objects belong to one continuum of the same domain. Humans are in dialogue with their environment at all times, and all the entities Western observers call “natural” are often endowed with spiritual agencies, with an inua (an owner), and consciousness. The Inuit discourses about the Earth, their very rich mythology and cosmology, hunting and ritual practices, as well as their spirituality, always strongly emphasize interdependence between human and nonhuman beings.

In the past, when Inuit traditions were developed by small nomadic groups depending on local resources like caribou, fish, plants, etc., the old designation of -miut-like Iglulingmiut ("people from Iglulik") never meant that Inuit owned the land but only indicated the locality the group frequented. As a few anthropologists rightly put it, Inuit had to respect the land as they were in some manner possessed by nuna (the Earth) and sila (the air). Thus, people sharing a piece of the Earth with one another are said to be nunaqqatigiiit and those sharing a piece of the air, silaqqatigiiit. As the Earth itself was conceived as a living entity, camp leaders often warned their people that they should not stay in the same place indefinitely but move to another area to allow the place to cool and hence avoid sickness and starvation. In North Baffin, elders also explained to the youths that they should not pick up the eggs that grow in the Earth. Earth eggs (nunaup...
manningit) are said to become silaat (big polar bears) or pukit (albino caribou) and “They are not allowed to be taken for the Earth will yawn for the lost eggs and cause foul weather.” According to Kappianaq, “hunting silaat can shorten the life expectancy of the human who caught one” (in Oosten and Laugrand 1999: 192–3). Nowadays, a healthy environment (avativut) is depicted as a balanced one, not only regarding the proper numbers and types of living and non-living entities, but also one that has the ability to repair and heal itself.

From the viewpoint of contemporary symbolic anthropology, Inuit traditions fit into the universal – but very diverse – animist model. According to Inuit cosmology, as Fienup-Riordan indicated regarding the Alaskan Yup’ik, human and nonhuman animals possess a mutual awareness of each other’s activities; the latter are considered nonhuman persons and cognizant beings with whom humans can communicate. In some areas human beings are also believed to be able to reincarnate into animals.

To varying degrees, depending on region and generation, Inuit still attribute anthropocentric qualities to many entities that most people in Western cultures regard as “natural.” Though animals differ from humans in that they do not have a name (atig) and that they are used for food, they are nevertheless thought to have a soul (tarniq) just like humans. This soul takes the form of a tiny bubble of air and blood but with the same shape of the outer body, the only difference being that its size is much smaller. According to various sources, it could be located in the gut, in the groin, in the bladder or in the joints. This conception of interdependence between humans and animals is deeply rooted in Inuit traditions from Siberia to Greenland. Quoting Ava and Ivaluajuk, Knud Rasmussen suggested this was one of the major religious problems with which the Inuit had to deal:

The greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All the creatures that we have to kill and eat, all those that we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, like we have, souls that do not perish with the body, and which must therefore be propitiated less they should revenge themselves on us taking away their bodies (in Rasmussen 1929: 56).

Far from being seen as something to be dominated, the Inuit believe animals yield to hunters capable of winning them over. Animals have human feelings, the power of speech and the capacity to think (isama). They have songs and, according to some stories, a spirit (inua) owning them. Animals can also see the conditions in which they will be captured and decide – if the hunter has failed in respecting them by certain ritual practices – not to give in or even to take revenge.

In the Arctic, shamanism thus appears to be a form of religion where shamans act as a mediator between human and nonhuman entities. In Alaska, the Yupiit performed many ritual acts, songs and masked dances to influence animals and affect “nature.” In the Canadian Arctic and in Greenland, shamans (angakkuit) were often sent by their fellows to meet the biggest inuut – and especially the inua of the sea – to negotiate with them and obtain game, healthy conditions or good weather. Also, shamans would use their clairvoyance (qaumaniq) to see the unseen – the spirit world and the faults committed by humans when they break the rules – to restore order by addressing the ancestors and the inuut. Able to speak the language of their helping spirits (tuurngait) and shamanic incantations (irinaliitit), they would sometimes turn themselves into an animal.

With their conversion to Christianity these ideas evolved. Parts have survived while other parts have been reappearing in a new form. Nowadays, Christian Inuit no longer believe that animals are owned by the great spirits of the universe (inua). However, if most of them acknowledge that God created the animals, they still maintain that animals can communicate with humans and need to be hunted and taken and shared as prey to reproduce themselves. Not to hunt an animal is the best way to make it disappear. Inuit also still experience a close connection between diseases or physical problems and spiritual issues.

Transgressing shamanic rules (tirigususiit) or Christian rules (to hunt or get plants on a Sunday for instance) or not respecting animals are very dangerous behaviors for the living community. In that respect, the only solution is often the collective confession (anniariniq). In 1999, Nutaraaluk, an elder from Iqaluit, considered the Quebec ice storm to have happened because God and nature wanted to discipline a society that has been misbehaving for a long time.

Similarly, while the concept of inua seems to be losing its meaning in many areas, it remains consistent to understand modern attitudes. Nowadays, the strong reaction of the Inuit after their dogs were killed by the Canadian Government, for instance (Inuit elders complained that it was a form of genocide), can only be explained in terms of the central position of dogs in Inuit society. Being the only animals to have a name and sharing their master’s inua, dogs are clearly seen as close members of human society. Subject to various rules and prohibitions in the past, they are still considered as human companions, able to decipher the presence of any spirit.

In Inuit cosmology, many myths relate the origins of the great spirits (inuut) of the Inuit universe such as Sila, the spirit of the air and consciousness, or Anningat, the moon spirit who is said to have sexually abused his sister Siqiniq, the inua of the sun. From Siberia to Greenland, other myths relate the story of Sedna also known as Nuliajuk, Nerrivik, Unigumasuituq, depending on the
area. This myth of the *inua* of the sea explains how the entire human race (Inuit but also Whites, Indians and Inuit spirits) was born after she coupled with a dog. Another episode of the myth tells how her finger-joints were transformed into sea mammals (whales, seals and walrus) after being cut off by her father, Anaaultalik. Interestingly, Sedna was considered the mother of the sea mammals and feared as such, being able to punish humans by provoking bad weather, starvation or infertility.

Nowadays, even if Christianity has been deeply incorporated by the Inuit, humans still respect many ritual injunctions and rules to avoid any bad relationship with spirits and animals. Under no circumstances, for instance, should a woman come into contact with game during her menstrual cycle, otherwise, warned an elder from Rankin Inlet, she might anger the spirits. Many people also tell stories about animals retaliating against humans who did not respect them, mistreated them or mocked them. In 1999, for example, Imaruitquit from Igloolik stated:

We were told to treat all wildlife with respect . . . If we did not do this they could take revenge on us . . . If I was toying with or mistreating an animal, the very person I love the most could suffer from what I did (in Oosten, Laugrand and Rasing 1999: 38–9).

The hunt and the relation to game imply discipline and specific procedures to avoid problems. Any mistake can be dangerous for the living person but also for their descendants. Thus hunters must be gracious about wildlife and share their prey. Obviously, the old Durkheimian opposition between the sacred and the profane becomes problematic in such a context, with Inuit connecting everything. Dreams, for instance still provide the best context for nonhuman persons to communicate with human beings.

The arrival of new Christian spirits such as God (Guuti), Satan (Satanasi) or angels (ingilit) has not dispelled most of the spiritual beings of the Inuit territory. Nor has it changed the integration of each person through its name in an extended community, consisting of ancestors, animals and spirits. Myths are full of stories of humans and animals turning into each other. In the Canadian Arctic, many hunters are still telling their experiences of encounters with nonhumans. Some of them talk of marriages between humans and *ijirait*, spirits that can be identified by the set of their eyes. Their whistling can make humans lose their memory. Others talk of bloody battles with *tupilait*, dead roaming spirits who are said to be responsible for spreading sickness among the living people. Others describe *tuurngait*, the helping shamanic spirits, as very dangerous entities. Some younger people have come up against *gallupilait*, these sea spirits that kidnap children and wield a whip of seaweed. Then there are the *inurajait*, who can be recognized by their tiny footprints, the *tarriasuit*, and many other spirits depending on the region. All these meetings are often ambiguous and indicate to living people that the utmost care must be taken to follow social rules and rituals given to them by their ancestors.

As the elders often explain it to the younger generation, when human and nonhumans share so many features and the same universe, bodily distinctions and attitudes become important markers. Thus, humans must be very careful and always share their spiritual experiences with others to avoid the risk of having bad thoughts as this is one of the most dangerous phenomena in such a widely connected universe.

With this background in mind we can now understand why there is no contradiction for the Inuit to respect “nature” and their opposition to ecologists, environmentalists and anti-harvesting campaigns. For Inuit, nature is not a specific and autonomous domain that should be managed. Inuit spirituality is closely related to the hunting life, to providing and sharing food. Each person is inextricably linked to his or her environment and there is no alternative. Inuit cosmology encompasses shamanism and Christianity. Humans are aware that a good life means to maintain good relations with animals, with the weather, the spirits and the ancestors, who can all always retaliate. Thus, humans have to follow specific rules and act accordingly to avoid entropy. Today, over and above the many changes wrought by Christianity and modernity, Inuit spiritual life thus displays considerable continuity by still attaching the greatest importance to harmony and mutual understanding rather than conflict.

**Frédéric Laugrand**

**Further Reading**


Oosten, Jarich and Frédéric Laugrand, eds. *Interviewing Inuit Elders*, vol. 1. Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College/Nortext, 1999.


See also: Animism (various); Traditional Ecological Knowledge among Aboriginal Peoples in Canada; Indigenous Environmental Network; Watson, Paul – and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society; Whales and Whaling.

**Ireland**

Much of what we know of the religion of the first people of Ireland comes to us from myth and legend. There are no original texts and the first printed works – early Christian interpretations – are hotly contested.

It is thought that Megalithic people in Ireland practiced a cult of the sun. They had rites and rituals as evidenced by stone rings, forts and passage tombs with solar alignments and inscriptions dating from this period. For the diverse people we now know as Celts, the sun also embodied a supreme divinity. The estimates for their arrival vary from 1000 B.C.E. to 500 B.C.E. There is little archeological evidence of major conflict in the transition. Indeed, the cross-cultural meeting of Celts and Megalithic people seems to have been a two-way process which allowed a symbiosis of old and new.

For both the Megalithic and later the Celtic people of Ireland, the landscape itself was sacred, often reflecting aspects of divinity in the form of gods and goddess. Certain rivers, wells and hills gained significance because of their capacity to mediate or facilitate the breakthrough of the spiritual world or other world. These places called “Animai Loci” or places of soul are often associated with specific events like sunrise and sunset on significant days of the year, for example, Newgrange in the Boyne valley is associated with the winter solstice, and Lough Crew, Co. Meath, with the spring and autumnal equinox sunrises.

The *Dinsheanachas* (place-name stories) preserve the geomythic tales and express a quality of ensoulment of certain places in the landscape. This information was very important as it detailed the connections that were a source of inspiration and power in the minds of the listeners linking them to other realms. It was, in Jungian terms, the ground of being for the people out of which they constructed their universe.

The idea of the sacred landscape is reflected most potently in the early names for Ireland – Eire, Fodla and Banba. They describe the goddesses of the land as encountered by the Milesians, the mythical ancestors of contemporary Irish people. Eire became the primary name for Ireland and through her the Mother Goddess, connected intimately with the land, lived on in the Irish psyche.

The carriers of the nature religion tradition were the Druids, some of whom were poets – “bards” or “filidh.” They were also judges, political advisors, teachers, musicians and entertainers. It is through their oral tradition that the early Irish nature poetry, perhaps the first of its kind to be written in Europe, has passed into the vernacular today. An example of this is to be found in the *Hymn of Amerigen*. For Amairgen, the primal God he worshipped could be felt within himself and it was embodied in the landscape outside. He could feel the movement of God in the universe and within his own soul:

I am the salmon in the water,
I am a lake in the plain,
I am a world of knowledge,
I am the point of the lance of battle,
I am the God who created the fire in the head

Water in particular was the providence of the goddess for the early Irish. In one early story the warrior hero Fionn Mac Cumhaill is traveling with Saint Patrick. He sees the flowing watercress as a manifestation of the goddess of the well and he intercedes to her on Patrick’s (Christianity’s) behalf.

The belief that the Spirit has been imbued in the water persists and is manifest in the presence of numerous healing wells. The cult of Aine, an aspect of the Goddess Anu, continues even into recent times when people gathered at Knockainey (Aines Hill) in Co. Limerick on Midsummer Eve to invoke the spirit of Aine na gClair (Aine of the Whisps) to guard them against sickness and ensure fertility. Traditions of taking an informal blessing from “holy water” on entry and exit from houses continues, and many Irish people still carry bottles of this water in their luggage and cars for protection.

**Celtic Christianity and Celtic Culture**

Christianity arrived in Ireland, probably in the first or second century. As it settled in Ireland and in the Irish psyche it was immensely influenced by and reflected the pre-Christian relationship to nature. Evidence suggests that there was a belief among these early Christian peoples...
that God was fully present in the created, material world. The elements of the natural world, for example, were seen as a medium through which the glory of God shone. For these Christians as well as their pre-Christian ancestors, for whom the sovereignty myth was the central social tenet, loving God required living in harmony with the natural world.

Several stories from early Christian times tell of the intimate and mutual relationships between saints and animals, such as the one recounting how the sea otters dried St. Cuthbert after he had spent the night praying in the sea, and how his horse found food for him under the thatch of the roof. When St. Columba was dying, it was his horse that first knew about it and began the mourning. Other stories tell of how saints were led to their settlements by animals, Ciaran of Clonmacnoise by his horse and St. Gobnait by nine white deer.

In the early Christian period it is likely that Mass, following the pattern of earlier rituals, was celebrated out in the open and only later was it contained within churches. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, under what is termed “penal law,” Catholicism was effectively prohibited by British efforts to bring the Irish under control. The Mass was then celebrated on a network of secret “Mass Rocks” in the open. Commemorative outdoor Masses occur occasionally today to honor particular saints at their special sites or perhaps to remember the dead during the month of November in local graveyards. It may be argued from this that there is still a belief carried down from ancient times that one can be close to God and other “souls” when praying in the open air at these sites.

For the Celts the world was always latently and actively spiritual. In the Celtic world, and especially in the Celtic world of the senses, there was no barrier between soul and body. Each was natural to the other. The sun was the sister of the body, the body the sister of the soul (O’Donohue 1997: 81).

Religious rituals such as the pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick (the mountain of Saint Patrick) and Lough Derg also seek to narrow the distance between self and God, through exposure to the elements, walking barefoot, fasting and ritual walks with prayers.

This belief in the “sacramentality” of particular places where nature is regarded as a source or vehicle of spiritual power is one of the chief characteristics of primal religions throughout the world. Irish Christianity retained this primal sense of connection between nature and the divine remnants, which survives to the present day. The dates of the pilgrimage on Croagh Patrick coincides with the pre-Christian harvest festival of Lughnasad, and the route, with its large number of megaliths, suggest a pre-Christian origin for the still-famous walk. In addition to the primal and pantheistic origins of the pilgrimage to the mountain, Low also points to the biblical and theological parallels in the incarnational theology of the New Testament and in Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of the Cosmic Christ.

Ireland was the only Celtic country that was not invaded by the Romans. Christianity therefore came in contact with an intact druidic and Irish Celtic culture. In the transition to Christianity, it is clear that scholars and missionaries drew heavily on the earlier goddess and nature religions. As Mary Low, points out,

The old myths enshrined values and world-views which could not simply be discarded without threatening all that held the community together. Instead they were collected, modified and reinvented in an on-going myth making process (Low 1996: 25).

When in 431 the Christian movement, at the Council of Ephesus, made Mary officially the “mother of God,” the Celtic people turned to her enthusiastically as their replacement “Mother Goddess,” seeing in her the goodness of fertility, love and healing. For many scholars, therefore, it is difficult to distinguish between the pre-Christian goddess Bridget, the Christian saint she became, and the mother of God. In early Christian Ireland, Brigit was also known as Mhuire Na Gael (Mary of the Gaels). The historical figure of Brigit (455–525) is thought to have been a female Druid before converting to Christianity and she is intimately linked with the symbolism of the oak, which was sacred to the Druids. This is reflected in the name of her monastery at Kildare (Cill Dara – the Church of the oak).

**Celtic Christianity and Brehon Law**

The early church developed against a social and legal backdrop based on the clan system and codified under what is termed the Brehon Law. The integration of the new religion into this developed legal system set Celtic Christianity on a collision course with its Roman counterpart. Two factors were especially important in this conflict: the position of women and the ownership of land.

Women in the early Celtic Church continued to hold their pre-Christian positions of social and spiritual authority. Large numbers of women were involved in the early movement as missionaries and interpreters of the faith. A seventh-century poem tells of how Ethne, daughter of the Irish High King, questioned St. Patrick at length about the new Christian God asking “Who is God and where is his dwelling?” She was eventually converted and influenced her teachers, the Druids Mael and Caplaith, to follow.

The equality of women in Irish society meant that they continued to develop sexual relations within the context of the new religion. Mixed monastic settlements were common and children were brought up in religious service. This, combined with the communal system of land
ownership by the clan, severely limited the power that could be exacted by the Church and state.

The diocese of a bishop was essentially a clan boundary, with its own priests. The clan allocated land to bishops (some of whom were female) and other members of the Church who were elected from within their own family grouping. These clan families, grouping together, could counter power of both papacy and monarchy. Mael Maedoc (ca. 1094–1148), Archbishop of Armagh, was one of the key reformers in the efforts to enforce clerical celibacy. He was instrumental in getting a papal blessing and permission for Henry II to invade and conquer Ireland. This was given in the bull Laudibiliter, issued in 1155 by Nicholas Breakspear, the only English man to have become pope. At the Synod of Cashel in 1101 the High King, in an attempt to stave off the Anglo-Norman invasion, exceeded his power under law, and agreed to hand over lands to the absolute ownership of the Church. Before then there was no concept of absolute private property. “Thus the first alienation of land from the people took place” (Ellis 1995: 167).

The destruction of the social status and religious standing of women was therefore essential for the enforcement of clerical celibacy and ultimately for the transfer of political power and land from the clans to a clerical hierarchy with an allegiance to the centralizing Roman Church. Women were therefore forbidden to take part in the celebration of the Mass and in the twelfth century had the dignities and honors of bishop removed from their title. Land was no longer held in community ownership but in the private estates of the British Ruling Class and the Church. The religious status of women in Ireland therefore was degraded not for theological reasons but to further the economic and political marriage between the Roman Church and the British state.

The result was an enormous change in the relationship between religion and nature during the tenth to the twelfth centuries. The traditional system of land ownership was overthrown through the mutually reinforcing actions of Church and state. Gender relations were utterly transformed and women began to take increasingly subservient roles. This period marked the beginning of the end for the Celtic Church.

**Protestant Ascendancy and the Land**

As Ireland became a colony of the Protestant British Empire, both colonists and native Irish used religion as a tool of resistance and oppression in the struggle to gain control of the land. An intensely political aspect of the connection of religion with nature in Ireland can be found in the complex history of the North of the country. One aspect of this history, which still carries a high political charge, relates to the movement of the mostly Scottish Protestant people onto the land in the North of Ireland in the sixteenth century. In this effort by Henry VIII to colonize or “plant” Ireland, many indigenous Irish were displaced to marginal lands or overseas by the settlers who are popularly referred to as “The Planters.” Their relationship with the land and nature in their new home was intricately linked with religious and political wrangling.

The conditions upon which they got their land bound them to admit no Irish customs, never to intermarry with the Irish, and not to permit any Irish on their lands. Fintan O’Toole has described the way that the abhorrence of the Planters in the North to the Native Irish was echoed by the colonial project in North America.

The relationship was driven by the distinction between city and forest, on the fear of degeneracy which the intermingling of races would bring, on the contrast between civilisation and barbarism which the divide between town and forest or city and wilderness implies, in which the Irish became associated with the forest savage (O’Toole 1994: 63).

Thus a sense of superiority of the Protestant religion was used as a justification for the bringing “under control” of nature and people.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century a series of “Penal Laws” were enacted by the British. These forbade Catholics to practice their religion, receive an education, and purchase land or own a horse worth more than £5. Ireland was conceived of as an important food source for the newly industrialized urban centers in England. Taxes were placed on arable land so that sheep became more profitable than small farmers tilling the land. Thousands of Catholic farmers were forcibly cleared and either emigrated or died of starvation in the famines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These policies also resulted in a period of immense forest clearance for export to the shipyards of Britain. The last wolf was shot in Clare in 1770. For some writers the demise of the woods and the fall of the Catholic people were linked. “Cad a dhéanfar feasta gan adhmad? Tá deireadh na gcóillte ar lár” (“What will we do in the future without wood? The end of the forests has come”) (O’Corkery 1924: 35).

The potato famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1849 represented an important chapter in the story of religion and nature in Ireland. Before the famine, only 30 percent of the Irish attended Mass. By 1850, after hunger had run its five-year course, attendance had risen to over 90 percent. To the people, it appeared that nature had failed them, and they turned instead to the Church for forgiveness. Thus we can see that nature combined with certain colonial agricultural practices decisively influenced the development of Irish Catholicism after the famine. It gave the Catholic Church increasing political power in the period spanning the famine to the foundation of an independent Irish Republic with a particularly Catholic ethos woven into the Irish constitution of 1937.
Religion, Gender and Nationalism

The connection of female imagery and the land of Ireland had resonance for both nationalists and for the British colonizers. The political rhetoric on both sides used female imagery and religious affiliation to assert rights over land and nature. The oppression of Ireland was often described in the nationalist poetry as the oppression of a woman. The land was given female code names such as Roisin. Numerous laments were written about her plight. In this manner, the political content of a song or piece of prose avoided detection by the British army.

Drawing perhaps on the sovereignty myths of old where the health of the soil depended on the relationship between the king and the Goddess, nationalist writers and activists distinguished between the idea of land and soil, claiming that the connection with the soil could never be appropriated by the British who could only claim ownership of the land. Their campaign (simplifying the reality greatly) pitted the British Protestant elite, largely absent from the estates that they owned, against a Catholic peasantry who depended directly on the soil for their lives.

Although women were largely excluded from the power bases of either the rebel ranks or the Church, both freely used the image of the beleaguered woman as a symbol for the oppression of all Catholic Ireland. The image played an important part in the rallying of several mass movements of people, often with the support of the Catholic Church, to both peaceful boycotts and violent action from the seventeenth century onwards. It can be seen therefore that the Irish masses still had a powerful connection to the archetype of the feminine as a representation of the land and of nature. This connection did not however translate into a sharing of political and religious power, as the writings of the women in movements such as the Land League make quite clear (Ward 1983: 5). Political writings and journalism in nineteenth-century England also used female imagery but conceived of Ireland as “a recalcitrant harlot who needed England’s John Bull to tame and civilize her” (Ellis 1995: 37).

The power and the influence of the post-famine Catholic Church grew among the peasant majority where it was seen as more of a church of the “soil” and of the people than of the landed classes. The growing identification of the Catholic Church with the nationalist cause established the priest as “a curious amalgam of spiritual leader, legal advisor and political organizer” (O’Tuthaigh in Duddy 2002: 251). On independence, the country was partitioned into a 26-county, primarily Catholic republic. The residents of the six, predominantly Protestant, counties which continued as part of the United Kingdom continued to experience political and violent struggle, divided on sectarian lines, over the control of land and nature.

Republic to Present

The government of the new Republic of Ireland initially rejected industrialization and sought instead to maintain a rural nation of small farmers who were in the words of its first president “satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to things of the spirit” (DeValera in Breen et al. 1990: 31). Moral leadership was firmly rooted in the ethics of the Catholic Church and woven into the detail of the constitution.

The political and spiritual influence of the post-famine Catholic Church has been slowly undermined during the last quarter of the twentieth century by a rapid change in the values and lifestyles of Irish people. This was stimulated by the rapid expansion of the “Celtic Tiger” economy and accelerated by the exposure of serious breaches of trust in the senior ranks of the Church.

Alongside this rapid secularization of life in contemporary Ireland there has developed a quest for spiritual experiences outside of the Catholic Church. Some of the new movements link spirituality and nature in explicit terms, others in more implicit terms.

From within the orthodox Christian churches, new movements draw heavily on the Celtic roots outlined earlier. They look to the Iona Community in Scotland to revive interest, prayer and study in the Celtic tradition, and to the creation of a more ecologically informed vision for the Church. There is also a rediscovery and celebration of Celtic festivals, especially the Festival of St. Bridget, which has gained a strong following across Ireland. Symbols such as the rushes and the cow, and other stories that have been carried down from Brigid the Goddess, are freely used in the celebrations. An order of nuns dedicated to St. Bridget has relit her fire in Kildare.

Also from within the Roman Catholic Church, Sean McDonagh, a priest and former missionary, persistently criticized the Catholic Church’s failure to address the ecological crisis. He asserted, for example, that “the Church has not responded in any effective way to environmental destruction” (McDonagh 2001: 40), calling for the development of prophetic witness from the Churches to support scientific information on climate change and other environmental problems. He has argued that “an authentic creation spirituality would help regenerate Irish Christianity” (McDonagh 2001: 50).

Best-selling author and priest John O’Donohue has also called for reclamation of this sensitivity to land and spirit. Significantly, in the 1990s through campaigning activity and direct action, he played a key role in the successful opposition to the development of a visitor center at the heart of the Burren national park.

Outside the mainstream Church, but with a following from within it, Dara Molloy, a “post-Catholic” priest, has been living since 1985 as a Celtic monk on the west coast Isle of Aran. He and his wife, Tess Harper run an important spiritual and ecological community and publish...
an international magazine called The Aisling. The community is dedicated to the recovery of the Celtic Christian Church, and their spiritual vision includes the creation of sustainable communities.

The Creation-Centered Spirituality movement, spearheaded by American theologian Matthew Fox, has excited the spiritual imagination of many people throughout the country. Creation spirituality contains strong references to the story of the creation and evolution of the Earth as a unifying myth for our times and has found special resonance among the female religious.

There is also a strong and growing deep ecology movement in Ireland drawing on the work of Joanna Macy and John Seed. Organizations such as Sustainable Ireland and Feasta are not overtly spiritual but offer a vehicle which critiques the Western economic model as undermining our relationship with nature and with each other.

The long-running protest in the late 1990s against the destruction of a remnant of ancient oak forest in the Glen of the Downs in Co. Wicklow drew on creation spirituality and Celtic Christian philosophy such as that of John Scotus Erigiena (ninth-century philosopher) to develop a moral platform and spiritual reference for their actions.

A motorway that had in principle the full support of local people was diverted in 2001 to avoid the destruction of a fairy tree known as the “sceach” near Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare. It was claimed that the sceach was a marker in a fairy path and the stopping place for fairies to bury their dead on their way from the great battles between the Munster and Connacht fairies. Local folklorist Eddie Lenihan warned that its destruction could bring misfortune to those using the new road. The power of the myth with which the hawthorn tree was associated was still sufficiently strong to ignite a furious national debate that resulted in its protection.

Only a few miles from the “sceach” is the Cefin Institute for Values-Led Change, founded in 2001 and named after the Celtic Goddess of Inspiration. The institute was founded by Catholic priest Fr. Harry Bohan and seeks to “revitalize Irish society, give us a renewed sense of identity, sense of purpose and a shared vision that people can take forward” (from the Founding Statement 2001). Although it is not overtly Catholic in its mission, it draws on the long tradition of integrating spiritual and religious concerns into the social and political debates. Its conferences represent a uniquely Irish contribution to the sustainability debate. Inclusion of the key figures in Gaelic sport (with its traditionally strong links to church and spiritual matters) has garnered wide support in a country with very shallow roots in the secular and a long memory for the formative influence that religious and spiritual concerns have played in changes in the land.

Tara O’Leary
Dolores Whelan

Further Reading
See also: Brigit; Celtic Christianity; Celtic Spirituality; Christianity (7e) – Creation Spirituality; Council of All Beings; Deep Ecology; Druids and Druidry; Faerie Faith in Scotland; Fox, Matthew; Macy, Joanna; Roman Britain; Scotland; Seed, John.

Ishimure, Michiko (1927–)

Michiko Ishimure became famous in Japan for exposing through various literary works the horrors of methyl mercury poisoning resulting from human ingestion of fish polluted by industrial discharges into the sea. Minimata disease, the neurological disease caused by such poisoning, became infamous the world over in part as a result of Ishimure’s heart-wrenching portrayal of the 1956 epidemic that devastated the men and women of the coastal town of Minimata in Kyushu. Kugai Jo¯do, published in 1969, was translated into English as Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow: Our Minimata Disease (1990) by Livia Monnet. As Monnet notes in her introduction, Kugai Jo¯do became a bestseller not only for its achievement as a poignant exposé but also because of its innovative style. Ishimure creates a "new
From the title itself through the depictions of the spiritual lives of those afflicted, Ishimure emphasizes the moral and ethical dimensions of the religious beliefs and practices of traditional village people in opposition to the ruthlessness of corporate capitalism. In particular, she gives extensive attention to the Pure Land and True Pure Land sects of Buddhism, popular in that part of Japan. As Monnet explains, one popular interpretation holds that “the Minimata disease patients, purified by their suffering, attain enlightenment.” Throughout Paradise, Ishimure interweaves a cry for environmental justice, a statement of belief in Buddhism and local Shinto practices, and feminist praise for the women victims and activists in the struggle to expose the cause of the disease and seek an end to the pollution.

While Ishimure has devoted many years of her life to assisting the Minimata victims and making their plight and the price of pollution known to the world, she has also written numerous other works. Of these, only one other has so far been translated. Tusbaki no Umi no Ki was originally published in serial form from 1973 to 1976, then in book form in 1976, and translated as Story of the Sea of Camellias (1983) by Livia Monnet. While also addressing the disruption of traditional village life by capitalist development in the twenties and thirties, Ishimure focuses on the inner life of a young girl named Michiko growing up in the Minimata area. Only partly idyllic, this apparently autobiographical novel portrays the world as filled with suffering in the Buddhist sense of desire and illusion and the need for reincarnation. In deep empathy for the people around her who suffer and for the natural world she frequents, Michiko displays not a passive acceptance of this suffering but a profoundly active animistic spirituality in her own dealings with social reality and a supernatural world. At the book’s end Michiko takes her long-suffering, insane grandmother to see the opening of the lotus buds and announces that in that instance, “something akin to enlightenment took place within me.” Out of this moment of both physical and metaphysical union of nature and spirit, a poem wells up inside of her. In Story, as in Paradise, the reader finds a unique vision of the interrelationship of the physical and the metaphysical, the immanent and transcendent, nature and culture, hope and sorrow.

Patrick D. Murphy

Further Reading


See also: Autobiography; Buddhism (various); Japanese Love of Nature; Japanese Religions; Matsumo Basho; Memoir and Nature Writing; Zen Buddhism.

Islam

Islam is a universal religious tradition claimed by over 1.3 billion people throughout the world at the end of the twentieth century. Muslim communities exist in virtually every country. The largest concentration of Muslims is in the region of South Asia, where they are fairly evenly distributed between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (with about 150 million Muslims in each), along with minority communities in Nepal and Sri Lanka. The nation with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia, with over 200 million inhabitants who adhere to Islam to at least some degree.

Islam originated in western Arabia in the early seventh century. Its founder, Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Hashimi of Mecca (ca. 570–632) is believed to have begun receiving divine revelations in 610 at the age of forty. These revelations, which are collectively known as the Qur’an, continued up to the time of the prophet’s death. Sometime during the following decade they were collected from various companions of the prophet who had memorized them, and written down. The Qur’an, which Muslims believe to be the word of God (Allah), is the basis of Islam and the foundation of all Islamic knowledge.

A supplementary source of guidance for Muslims exists in the form of reports about the words and deeds of the prophet Muhammad. Codified during the eighth century, these reports are known as hadiths. The Qur’an and the hadiths, together with the analogous reasoning (qiyas) of the classical jurists and the consensus (ijma) of the scholarly community, constitute the four sources of Islamic law (shari’a), which were codified by the recognized schools of law by the tenth century.

The question of what constitutes the basis for religious authority in Islam has been a contested issue since the death of Muhammad. At that time the majority of his followers considered that the Qur’an represented the sole and adequate source of religious guidance for Muslims, while a significant minority felt that Muhammad had designated a successor in his nephew and son-in-law, Ali. Eventually the former group came to be known as “Sunnis” (“traditionalists”), while the latter were referred to as “Shi’ites,” or “partisans” (i.e., of Ali [shi’at ‘Ali]). Shi’ites differ from Sunnis mainly in that they accept a different set of hadiths, and consider the teachings of Ali and certain of his descendents, known as imams, to be authoritative.
From the eighth century a third type of authority emerged in the form of charismatic leadership by Muslim mystics, called Sufis (probably because some of them wore garments made of wool, Arabic suf). Since in the Sunni world religious authority resided with the legal scholars who studied the Qur'an and the hadiths, the charismatic authority of Sufi teachers was often a source of contention. Many Sufi teachers, however, were also recognized legal scholars.

The intellectual tradition of Classical Islam (eighth to tenth centuries) was heavily influenced by that of pagan Hellenism. The Arabic term tabi’a, typically rendered in English as “nature,” was used by medieval Muslim philosophers in the sense of the Greek physis. Following Aristotle, the Iranian polymath Abu Ali Ibn Sina, known to the West as Avicenna (d. 1037) identified tabi’a as “an essential first principle.” The definition given in the tenth-century Treatise of the Pure Brethren of Basra, on the other hand, reflects Neoplatonic notions of emanation, referring to tabi’a as only one of the potentialities of the Universal Soul. Within the Neoplatonic hierarchy of creation as appropriated by many Muslim philosophers, only humans possessed all three attributes of tabi’a, intellect, and desire.

Yet for Muslims an important qualification is found in the Qur’an, where one reads, “In whose hand is the dominion of all things” (Qur’an 23:88). Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) found support for his concept of wahdat al-wujud, or “unity of being,” in the Qur’anic verse (Qur’an 2:115) which states that “Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God.” Although Ibn ‘Arabi’s monist metaphysics have been enormously influential on the thought of Sufi mystics in particular, especially in South Asia even to the present day, orthodox Islam has tended to reject the doctrine of wahdat al-wujud as verging dangerously close to pantheism. In the seventeenth century Ibn ‘Arabi’s popularity in India gave rise to a response by the conservative Sufi teacher Shah Waliullah (d. 1763) in which the latter attempted to substitute a concept he called wahdat al-shukud, or “unity of witness,” through which the boundary lines between the Creator and creation could be firmly maintained.

In recent years a number of Muslim writers, mainly living in the West, have published essays to the effect that based on the scriptural sources of the tradition, Islam is an ecologically oriented religion. Whereas the medieval philosophers, when they addressed issues of the natural world, were concerned primarily with constructing theoretical arguments about justice, Islamic environmental ethics as articulated by contemporary writers tend to be rooted in more practical terms, often by way of response to Lynn White’s 1967 critique of Western Christianity. Iqtidar Zaidi, for example, is clearly paraphrasing White when he states that the ecological crisis is “a crisis rooted in moral deprivation” (Zaidi 1981: 35). Seyyed Hossein Nasr actually anticipated White’s critique in his own lectures given at the University of Chicago earlier in the same year as White’s address.

It may be useful to restrict the term “Islamic” to that which can be derived from the canonical sources of Islam, as opposed to the activities or attitudes of Muslims, which may or may not be directly motivated by those sources. In other words, one may distinguish between Islamic environmentalism – that is, an environmentalism that can be demonstrably enjoined by the textual sources of Islam – and Muslim environmentalism, which may draw its inspiration from a variety of sources, possibly including but not limited to religion. Around the world today one can find increasing examples of both. For example, such organizations as the UK-based Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences conduct environmental education programs around the world which are based on Islamic principles. On the other hand, the activities of international environmental organizations such as the IUCN and WWF in Muslim countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia, while carried out by Muslim staff members, tend to reflect Western notions of what constitutes environmental education and protection.

Muslims have always been culturally diverse, and never more so than today when they number a billion or more and inhabit every corner of the globe. Historically the one indisputable source of authority which all Muslims have agreed upon is the will of Allah as expressed in the revealed scripture of the Qur’an. Within the Sunni majority (perhaps 80 percent of all Muslims) there exist four accepted schools of law, which differ from each other in approach and in some details of their legal rulings. Shi’ites follow their own school of law. Though the classical legal traditions contain material dealing with the environment, such as forbidding cruelty to animals, regulating water distribution and establishing undeveloped zones (himan) for the protection of watersheds, to attribute to them an environmental ethic in the contemporary sense would be anachronistic.

Islamic environmentalists today have attempted to derive an environmental ethic based on the Qur’an and hadith, generally giving little attention to possible cultural contributions from the various societies in which Muslims live. This is because local or regional attitudes cannot form a basis for any kind of universal Islamic ethic, since they are almost invariably perceived by Islamists as “accretions,” (bida’ – literally, “innovation”) and therefore un-Islamic.

The politics of environmental activism among Muslims, where present, have tended to be region-specific. For example, when Palestinians seek to assert territorial claims by planting olive groves, one cannot say that this is an “Islamic” issue, since many Palestinians are not Muslim. From an Islamist perspective, the mere involvement of Muslims does not make an activity or ideology “Islamic”;
oneness of God (in contradistinction to polytheism), but the concept of stewardship, expressed by the Arabic term *khalīfa*. The following verses are cited: “I am setting on the Earth a viceregent (*khalīfa*)” (Qur'an 2:30), and “It is He who has made you his viceregent on Earth” (Qur'an 6:165). Also, a *hadith* is cited which states that “Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as viceregents therein; He will see what you do.”

The Qur'anic concept of *tawhid* (unity) has historically been interpreted by Muslim writers mainly in terms of the oneness of God (in contradistinction to polytheism), but some contemporary Islamic environmentalists have preferred to see *tawhid* as meaning “all-inclusive.” It has been suggested that Ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of *waḥdat al-ʿuṣūd*, or “unity of being” can be understood in environmentalist terms. Ibn ‘Arabi, however, has always been a highly controversial figure for Muslims, since many have accused him of holding pantheist or monist views incompatible with Islam’s radical monotheism.

In support of the more inclusive interpretation of *tawhid*, a verse (Qur’an 17:44) is often cited which states that all creation praises God, even if this praise is not expressed in human language. Another verse (Qur’an 6:38) states that “There is not an animal in the Earth, nor a flying creature on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you.” There would seem to be here a basis for tempering the hierarchical notion of stewardship implied in the concept of *khalīfa*. The Qur’an also describes Islam as the religion of *fitra*, “the very nature of things.” By extension, some contemporary thinkers have reasoned that a genuinely Islamic lifestyle will “naturally” be environmentally sensitive.

Traditional accounts of the deeds and sayings of Muhammad, which together with the Qur’an have formed the basis for Islamic law, emphasize compassion toward animals. Muhammad is believed to have said, “If you kill, kill well, and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters;” also, “For [charity shown to] each creature which has a wet heart (i.e., is alive), there is a reward.” Muslims are urged to respect plant life as well, as in the prophetic saying, “Some trees are as blessed as the Muslim himself, especially the palm.”

The Qur’an contains judgment against those who despoil the Earth (Qur’an 2:205): “And when he turns away [from thee] his effort in the land is to make mischief therein and to destroy the crops and the cattle; and Allah loveth not mischief”; and (Qur’an 7:85) “Do no mischief on the Earth after it has been set in order.” Wastefulness and excess consumption are likewise condemned (Qur’an 7:31): “O Children of Adam! Look to your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not wasteful. Lo! He [Allah] loveth not the wasteful.” The Qur’an repeatedly calls for maintaining balance in all things (Qur’an 13:8, 15:21, 25:2, and elsewhere). Certain *hadiths* seem particularly relevant to contemporary issues of sustainability, such as, “Live in this world as if you will live in it forever, and live for the next world as if you will die tomorrow,” and, “When doomsday comes if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, then he should plant it.”

Direct application of these injunctions to contemporary environmental problems is a matter for interpretation by analogy (*qiyas*). Contemporary Muslim jurist Mustafa Abu-Sway has argued that *hadith* reports which enjoin Muslims from relieving themselves on public pathways or into water sources can be understood “to prevent pollution in the language of today.” Since we now know that discharging toxic chemicals and waste into the water supply is harmful to human health, Abu-Sway reasons that, “by analogy, from the perspective of the *shari’a*, this is prohibited” (lecture at Belfast mosque, February 1998, published online at <http://homepages.iol.ie/~afifi/Articles/environment.htm>).

To date, Islam has not figured prominently in contemporary discussions on religion and the environment. For the most part contemporary Muslim writers on the environment have characterized environmental degradation as merely a symptom of social injustice. The problem is not, it is argued, that humans as a species are destroying the balance of nature, but rather that *some* humans are taking more than their share. If, in accordance with the Qur’anic prohibition of interest-taking (*riba*), the interest-based global banking system is eliminated, then there will be no more environmentally destructive development projects, and there will be plenty of resources for all. Overpopulation is usually dismissed as a non-issue. The problem is stated to be the restriction of movement; if visa restrictions are eliminated, then people will simply migrate from overpopulated areas to “underpopulated” ones.

In recent times global initiatives on birth control and women’s reproductive rights have been most strongly opposed in Muslim countries. Such efforts are frequently met with accusations that “the West is trying to limit the number of Muslims.” Warnings of starvation and deprivation from overpopulation generally elicit the response that “God will provide,” which draws its support from the Qur’anic verse (Qur’an 11:6) which reads, “There is no beast upon the Earth for which Allah does not provide.”

Yet unlike Roman Catholicism, in Islam there are no inherent barriers to practicing contraception. The
medieval theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali (1058–1111), who has been called “the second greatest Muslim after Muhammad” and whose writings remain highly influential throughout the Muslim world today, argues in his book The Proper Conduct of Marriage (Kitab adab al-nikah) that birth control in the form of coitus interruptus (‘azl) is permitted in Islam. He suggests, furthermore, that “The fear of great hardship as a result of having too many children ... is also not forbidden, since freedom from hardship is an aid to religious devotion.” In response to the “God will provide” argument, Ghazali comments that “to examine consequences ... while perhaps at odds with the attitude of trust in Providence, cannot be called forbidden” (Ghazali 1998: 79).

Despite these arguments, many Muslims still see arguments against having more children than one can afford as being symptomatic of unbelief (kufr), which to Muslims is quite a serious charge. Today, Iran appears to be the only Muslim country where an official policy of birth control is currently being realized. The government of Northwest Frontier Province began to adopt an environmental policy toward the environment, including the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and a national branch of the IUCN, which together formulated the Sarhad Provincial Conservation Strategy (SPCS). This was prepared and published in English, French and Urdu, and published in English, French and Urdu, and published in English, French and Urdu.

Given the importance of the petroleum industry and the widespread pursuit of materialistic, consumption-oriented lifestyles in numerous Muslim-majority countries, would appear that Muslims must now share with Christians and others some of the blame for the present and rapidly deteriorating state of environmental crisis. Some of the most severe environmental problems in the world today are found in countries where the majority of inhabitants are Muslim. Even accepting a degree of outside responsibility, these problems would clearly be less pronounced if large numbers of Muslims were shaping their lifestyles according to an interpretation of Islam which strongly emphasized khilafa as applied to the natural environment. The reality is that most are not, and this includes governments for whom development and economic growth are the top priority.

If Islamic sources do offer models for increased environmental responsibility among Muslims, the urgency of the environmental crisis implies a need to assess whether and to what degree the latent potential for Islamic models of stewardship (khilafa) is currently being realized anywhere in the Muslim world today. A possible starting point for this inquiry would be to analyze current environmental policy in countries where Islam is claimed as a basis for legislation by the government in power. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, The Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Islamic Republic of Iran are three countries that currently make this claim.

In 1983 the government of Saudi Arabia commissioned a group of Islamic scholars at the University of Jeddah to formulate an Islamic policy on the environment. A short paper was prepared and published in English, French and Arabic by the IUCN in Switzerland, but this paper has not been widely circulated or served as a basis for any government policy. Muslim environmentalists who have worked for Saudi government agencies have complained that environmental initiatives are not being adequately implemented due to lack of official interest.

The government of Pakistan, which began to adopt an Islamist platform in 1978, created a National Conservation Strategy Unit (NCS) in 1992 within the Ministry of Environment, Local Government and Rural Development. There are also several environmentalist NGOs active in Pakistan which have been striving to influence government policy toward the environment, including the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and a national branch of the IUCN, which together formulated the Pakistan Environment Programme (PEP) in 1994. These organizations have achieved some successes in bringing about environmental legislation in Pakistan, such as the Environmental Protection Act of 1997. However, specifically Islamic rhetoric has not thus far been part of their approach. Only as recently as 1998 did the government of Northwest Frontier Province begin to envision an “ulema [religious scholars] project” as part of the Sarhad Provincial Conservation Strategy (SPCS). This
initiative, in which religious scholars were urged to seek out and implement environmental teaching in Islamic sources, did not meet with success, as most of the scholars involved did not see the environment as a primary concern. In Pakistan, as indeed in many other Muslim countries, environmentalism is often seen as a “Western” ideology and thus dismissed if not actively opposed.

Developments in the Islamic Republic of Iran may offer the strongest evidence of an applied Islamic environmental ethic in the world today. Since the country’s revolution of 1978–1979 which ousted the repressive, U.S.-backed Pahlavi monarchy, Iran has been led by an avowedly Islamist government whose legitimacy depends on its claims to be working toward an Islamic state. As such, Iran’s government has had to face the hard realities of reconciling Islamic principles with the exigencies of contemporary statecraft. Among the most pressing problems that have vexed Iran’s revolutionary government – subsequent to its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s – are pollution, environmental degradation, and overpopulation. In attempting to address these issues through Islamic discourse, Iranian Islamists have perhaps gone further than any of the world’s Muslims today in deriving and articulating an Islamic environmental ethic that does not merely revert to pre-modern models, but rather expresses itself in terms of modern realities. Nevertheless, in Iran as elsewhere in the developing world environmental protection has taken a back seat to the exigencies of rapid industrialization and development, and environmental degradation there remains severe.

For many Muslims – as indeed for members of most religious traditions – the practical and active relationship between religion and the environmental crisis is not immediately obvious. Even so, some Muslims, recognizing that the environmental crisis is in some sense a spiritual issue, have begun to illuminate that connection through writing, activism, and policy making.

Richard C. Foltz

Further Reading

See also: Gardens in Islam; Ibn Al-cArabi, Shaykh Muhyyiddin; Islam, Animals, and Vegetarianism; Islam and Eco-Justice; Islam and Environmental Ethics; Islam and Environmentalism in Iran; Islam and Post-Anthropocentrism; Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection; Islamic Law; Islam on Man and Nature (and adjacent, Hadith and Shari’ah on Man and Nature); Izzi Dien, Mawil Y.; Muhammad, The Prophet of Islam; Nasr, Seyyed Hossein; Nursi, Said; Pure Brethren; The Qur’an; Rumi, Jalaluddin; Sufism; Tawhid (Oneness of God).

Islam and Eco-Justice

Protecting the environment and all God’s creation for Muslims is a duty and not a choice. This duty comes from its Tawhid (Unity) paradigm. Before addressing Islam’s view of the environment, it is useful to clarify the sources of the Islamic tradition. Most Muslims would agree that the sources of Islam are the following: the Qur’an or the Holy Book which Muslims believe to be God’s Word transmitted through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad; Sunnah or the Prophet’s traditions; hadith or the oral sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; Fiqh (Jurisprudence) or Madahib (Schools of Law); and the Shari’ah (paths of law). These sources are not considered to be of equal weight. Most Muslims regard the Qur’an as the actual speech of God revealed through the angel Gabriel and it is the most authoritative source of normative Islam.

Tawhid Principle and the Environment

To understand the place of protecting nature one has to understand the various levels of the Tawhid principle in Islam. The first level of Tawhid is one that focuses on the oneness of the divine, Allah. The Qur’an says: Say: “He is Allah, the One and Only. Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; and there is none unto Him” (112:1–4). The Qur’an clearly states: “There is no God but He, the Creator of all things” (6:102). This Oneness of Allah frames the understanding of nature. Tawhid links nature to the divine, but does not make it divine. Nature stands as a sign of God Almighty’s creation and must be protected for that reason. Many verses in the Qur’an speak of respecting and reflecting on God’s glory in His creations.
One verse clearly states this relationship between God the Creator and the creation: “The seven heavens and the Earth, and all beings therein, Declare His glory: There is not a thing but celebrates His praise” (33: 72). To attribute sacredness to nature is to associate other beings with God and that is against Tawhid and the Oneness of God (shirk).

The dualism of the Creator and created renders the latter in Islam (e.g., nature, animals, humans and other creatures) a unified class of God’s creation. This is the second level of Tawhid/Unity. The Prophet in regard to God’s creation said, “all creatures are God’s dependents and the most beloved to God among them is the one that does good to God’s dependents.” These dependents, though diverse, have five characteristics in common. First, all creation is a reflection of God’s sacredness, glory and power. The Qur’anic verse notes about such creation, “Whithersoever you turn there is the Face of God” (11: 115). Second, God’s creation is orderly, has purpose and function. The Qur’anic verses say, “And the Earth we have spread out; set therein mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance” (15: 19); “And look for his Creation for any discrepancy! And look again! Do you find any gap in its system? Look again! Your sight, having found none, will return to you humbled” (67: 3–4).

Third, the created world is actualized to worship and obey God. Hence, the Qur’anic verse states, “See thou not that to Allah bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and Earth, the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among humankind” (22: 18).

Fourth, the created have all been created from the same element: water. The Qur’anic verse states, “We made from water every living thing” (12: 30) and continues in another verse by stating: “And God has created every animal from water; of them there are some that creep on their bellies; some that walk on two legs; and some that walk on four... It is he who has created humans from water” (24: 45).

Fifth, the unity of God’s creation as a category is also exemplified in Islam in terms of the social structure. The Qur’anic states that all God created he created in communities by stating, “There is not an animal (that lives) on the Earth. Nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms a part) of a community like you” (6: 38).

Tawhid views only God, the Creator, as having the special quality of independence, while the created are interdependent on each other and dependent on God. In this relationship of interdependence among the created, Islam places the keeping of the Earth and heavens under the hands of humans, as the Khalifah (viceregents) on Earth. The Qur’anic verse states, “I am setting on the Earth a viceregent” (2: 30). The Khalifah is a manager not a proprietor, a keeper for all generations. The Qur’anic verse (2: 22) states, “Who has made the Earth your couch and the heavens your canopy and sent rains from the heavens, and brought forthwith fruits for your sustenance, then set not up rivals unto Allah when you know,” clearly ends with a plural “you”, carrying the message that the universe is not for one generation but for every generation past, present and future.

Humans were given the responsibility for managing the Earth according to the Qur’an (33: 72) because the Heavens, the Earth and the Hills refused to shoulder the responsibility out of fear, but humans “assumed it, Lo they are tyrants and fools. For these reasons the universe is given to humans as a ‘trust’, [ammanah] which they accepted when they bore witness to God in their covenant of Tawhid, there is no God but Allah.” According to the Qur’an this covenant was renewed throughout the years (7: 65, 69, 87, 10: 73, 11: 56, 61) until it reached Muslims in verses such as “Generations before you we destroyed when they did wrong” (10: 13); “Then we made you heirs in the land after them to see how ye would behave” (10: 14).

The Moral Burdens/Dilemma of Human Viceregency

The role of humans as Khalifah, viceregent, on Earth is to better it and improve it and not to spread evil and destruction. The Qur’an is full of injunctions concerning such behaviors and states clearly that this responsibility of improving the Earth will be checked by God to see how it has been accomplished, “And follow not the bidding of those who are extravagant” (26: 152); “O my people! Serve Allah, and fear the Last Day; nor commit evil on the Earth, with intent to do mischief” (29: 36); “But they strive to make mischief on Earth and Allah loveth not those who do mischief” (5: 64).

The creation of humans on Earth in Islam is neither a “greater creation” (40: 57), nor is it a punitive fall from the Heavens (2: 35). The creation of humans was a fulfillment of the covenant to be custodians of nature. Faruqi emphasizes this protection of Earth as human destiny (purpose) to show their moral devotional abilities. Haq notes, there is a due measure (qadr) to things, and a balance (mizan) in the cosmos, and humanity is transcendentally committed not to disturb or violate this qadr and mizan; indeed, the fulfillment of this commitment is the fundamental moral imperative of humanity. (2001: 3)

It is this role of Khalifah that produces several moral dilemmas for humans. The first dilemma lies in the dread of “corrupting the Earth.” The Qur’anic verse says: “Behold God said to the angels I will create a viceregent on Earth. They said will You place one who will make mischief and shed blood? While we celebrate your praises and glorify your holiness, He said, I know what you know not” (2: 30).
Numerous Qur'anic verses repeat this question about whether humans are capable of protecting this Earth from corruption. Hence we read: “If any do good, good will accrue to them therefrom; and they will be secure from the terror of the Doom. And if they do evil, their faces will be thrown headlong into the Fire” (27:88–89).

This dilemma of not corrupting the Earth is harder to resolve because Islam is not an ecstatic religion commanding detachment from worldly goods. Muslims are left with the duty to enjoy and use the bounties of the Earth. Humans in Islam have a dual relationship with nature/Earth/universe. On the one hand they are nature’s manager, but they are also its user. The Qur’anic verse notes, “Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your (use) all things on the heavens and on Earth, and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen” (31:20); “It is He who made the Earth manageable for you, so traverse ye through its tracts and enjoy of the sustenance which he furnishes” (67:15).

Islam has a clear view that encourages the use of the bounties of Earth, and the engagement in other human pleasures. Islam does not tolerate abstination, hence the absence of priests and nuns in the mainstream religious hierarchy.

There lies the dilemma. The subjugation of Earth to humans is always attached to a moral dimension of obedience and the fulfillment of the covenant to God. The Qur’an states: “He has made subject to you the night and the day, the sun and the moon and the stars – They are in subjection by His command: Surely, in this are signs for those who reflect” (16:12–13). This dual role of the Khalifah, viceregent, creature of God and user of Earth creates the moral burden/the test for Muslims. For Muslims the issue of maintaining the equilibrium between having been charged with managing the Earth and bettering it, and at the same time using its bounties for their fulfillment, is one of the important tests in reaching the Gardens of Heaven.

Paths to Resolving the Moral Dilemma
Islam did not leave its human adherents, the Khalifas, with an impossible task to perform as custodians of the Earth. At least three clear paths are recommended to fulfill the role well and eventually go to Heaven. These include justice, action and balanced use. Haq (2001:9) argues that Islam “promulgates what one can call a cosmology of justice” to deal with the dilemma of protecting and using the Earth. The Qur’an clearly addresses issues relating to the dignity of the disabled (80:1–9); the rights of the orphans (93 entire; 89:17–18); honesty in exchange and barter (83:1–13); condemnation of greed and hoarding of wealth (100:6–11); feeding the poor (89:17–23); just interaction (11:85); abstention from usury (2:161); distributive justice through taxation, zakat, (2:267); just leadership (88:22–21, 18:29, 4:58, 5:8, 16:90, 42:15, 38, 49:9, 13); and respecting differences as God’s will (10:99, 99:18). The necessity for justice, of justice that attends to the vulnerable and that speaks to the powerful, is central in the Islamic vision. This message is clear in the Qur’anic injunction: “God intends no injustice to any of His creatures” (3:108–109). It is through this cosmology of justice that humans can fulfill their destiny as custodians of the Earth.

The second path for humans to follow in their journey as Khalifas of God on Earth is that of action. Some Muslims argue that the failure of humans to fulfill their eternal destiny is the will of God, it is predestined, and human action is of no consequence. Other believers disagree with this view of predestination in Islam and there has been a long historic debate within Islamic thought on human will and action. It is clear, however, from many Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions that action has a role in human destiny. Hence, in a hadith we hear the Prophet saying “Any one who witnesses evil should remonstrate upon it by his hand, his mouth or his heart; the last is the weakest of faith” (Sahih Al-Bukahri 1966: 1998). This action that humans are enjoined to take is not only one that negates evil, but is also one that involves good deeds. As such the Qur’an states, “let there be among you a group of people who order good, al-maruf, and prohibit evil, al-munkar” (3:104). To many readers the usage of this verse in relation to the environment is strange. However, in the golden ages of Islam the term al-maruf applied to all God’s creation. Interpretations of the meaning of Qur’anic suras, and especially the application of God’s word to contemporary conditions (tafsir), have varied considerably in the Islamic world. These good deeds are not differentiated between actions toward humans or other creatures of God. Within the perspective of Tawhid it is the good deeds of people that please the creator. As such a saying of the Prophet notes, “A good deed done to a beast is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being” (Sahih Al-Bukahri 1966: 1027).

A third path that humans can follow in their role as viceregents on Earth is that of balance in behavior and use. The concept of balanced use is based on three principles. The middle path or balance is clearly stated in the Qur’an, “We have made you a community justly balanced” (2:143). The following story about the Prophet also indicates the importance of balance. Three believers came to the home of the Prophet to declare their piety and belief in and love of God. One of the believers said, “I want to show the extent of my belief in God by abstaining from food.” The second one said, “I will show my belief in God by not sleeping nights.” The third one said, “I will show my belief in God by not being intimate with my wife.” The Prophet stopped them and recommended, “God does not tolerate the extremes of abstention and says that moderation is the best path to piety” (Sahih Al-Bukahri 1966: 484).
Population in Islamic Ecological Thought

Scientists have argued that overpopulation is a major contributing factor to environmental depletion. In the case of Islam the argument remains anchored in simplistic debates about population and reproduction (i.e., of family planning and abortion) as though these are matters connected only to teaching women about ways to avoid pregnancy. Although Islam is a pronatal religion, various Qur’anic verses favoring family planning outcomes were stressed in many Muslim countries in the 1960s. For example:

4:9 – Let those [disposing of an estate] have the same fear in their minds as they would have for their own if they had left a helpless family behind: Let them fear Allah, and speak words of appropriate [comfort].

8:28 – And know ye that your possessions and your progeny are but a trial; and that it is Allah with Whom lies your highest reward.

24:21 – O ye who believe! Follow not Satan’s footsteps; if any will follow the footsteps of Satan, he will [but] command what is shameful and wrong; and were it not for the grace and mercy of Allah on you, not one of you would ever have been pure; but Allah doth purify whom He pleases; and Allah is One Who hears and knows [all things].

Still population growth rates in Muslim countries remain among the highest in the world. The root of the problem of population growth for many Muslim countries lies in the marginalized conditions of women. In most Muslim countries the patriarchal and misogynist conditions of local cultures prevail and debase women. Post-colonial policies, introduction of non-productive technologies (e.g., cellular telephones), focus on credentialing rather than education, and unequivocal focus on consumption rather than production are all cultural factors that have contributed to the taking on of various forms of debasing women that in many ways are in direct opposition to early Islamic history and the holy texts. It is important to remember that Islam, at its core path, offers women equity with men by stating,

Oh humankind! We created you from a single soul, male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Truly, the most honored of you in God’s sight is the greatest of you in piety (49:13). [my emphasis]

Islam sees Muslim women as part and parcel of the religious message. They are included in the revelations. They have privileges and responsibilities. The Qur’an dictates that the penalties imposed on women are no less than those imposed on men (5:41, 24:2):

5:41 – O Messenger! let not those grieve thee, who race each other into unbelief: [whether it be] among those who say “We believe” with their lips but whose hearts have no faith; or it be among the Jews,—men who will listen to any lie—will listen even to others who have never so much as come to thee. They change the words from their (right) times and places: they say, “If ye are given this, take it, but if not, beware!” If any one’s trial is intended by Allah, thou hast no authority in the least for him against Allah. For such – It is not Allah’s will to purify their hearts. For them there is disgrace in this world, and in the Hereafter a heavy punishment.

24:2 – The woman and the man guilty of adultery or fornication – flog each of them with a hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment.

Islam does not prescribe the oppression of women as some interpretations suggest. Actually an accurate look at the Qur’anic directives and legal rights shows that polygamy is regulated in such a way that it could be very difficult to justify marrying more than one woman most of the time. Moreover, the veiling of Muslim women is not so clearly enforced as one is commonly led to believe from the images in Iran, Afghanistan and other Muslim countries.

The slowing of the population growth rates in Muslim countries and communities, and hence in the attendant ecological crisis, lies in the issues of social justice for women. Such forms of social justice as discussed above are very much at the core of the Qur’anic message and only require retrieval by those Muslims who want to do good deeds and avert corruption on Earth.

Summary and Conclusion

The Qur’an offers a blueprint for saving the environment, Muslims being called upon to strive to protect the latter as part of their devotional duties. With more than thirty wars devastating the Muslim world, the inexcusably violent responses of suicide bombing and terrorist attacks on non-combatants, the glaring difference between the rich and the poor in Islamic communities, and the extraction of oil with minimum controls on toxic emissions and hazards make the prevailing conditions today far from desirable.

Islam, however, is very clear and has an unequivocal response to the depletion (corruption) of the environment. God created nature in an orderly manner. This nature is given to humans as a trust (ammanah). Humans are the
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Khalifas, managers of this ammanah and not its owners. To manage this trust, humans need to follow the social justice ethic of the Qur’an, actively negate evil and do good deeds; and utilize the resources of Earth in a balanced manner. The protection of the Earth is the responsibility of all Muslims, and on account of this responsibility every Muslim and every community claiming the faith ought to be more engaged in protecting nature and the environment.

Nawal Ammar

Further Reading
See also: Abortion; Breeding and Contraception; Environmental Ethics; Islam and Environmental Ethics; Islam and Post-Anthropocentrism; Islam on Man and Nature; Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection; Islamic Law; Population and Consumption – Contemporary Religious Responses; Tawhid (Oneness of God).

Islam and Environmental Ethics

The growing literature on Islam and nature, ecology, and the environment includes many writings that deal with ethics. Some work discusses how Islamic ethics bear upon environmental issues. Other studies proceed in the opposite direction, asking how modern environmental ethics intersect with Muslim faith and practice. Still other works strive for a dialogue among different religious and philosophical perspectives on environmental ethics. Although the late twentieth century witnessed a welcome increase in crosscultural communication on religion and environmental ethics, it was still the case that few works on environmental ethics gave close attention to Muslim contributions.

As Islam provides a comprehensive guide for human conduct, it might be thought that all writing about Islam and nature is, in some way, about environmental ethics. Although correct in a broad sense, that view does not shed light on specific environmental norms or on different ways of thinking about ethical obligations within the natural environments of different Muslim societies and traditions. Works on Islamic environmental ethics range widely across fields of human–environment relations from philosophy to ecology, landscape architecture, and geography. They link and sometimes conflate the closely related fields of ethics (akhlaq), law (fiqh), and justice (’adl) – a tendency that seems increasingly challenging as each of these fields develops its own specialized body of work on environmental problems.

One useful approach begins with the common doctrinal foundations for Muslim discourse on environmental ethics, which shed light on environmental norms in the Qur’an, sunnah, and fiqh, after which the historical contributions of groups like the Ikhwan al-Safa (Sincere Brethren of Purity; tenth–eleventh centuries), Sufi mystics such as Farid ud-Din Attar (d. 1220), and theologians from al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) to the present may be considered.

The term “environmental ethics” does not appear in revealed or prophetic sources of the Abrahamic religions. Scores of words and phrases in the Qur’an and traditions (i.e., the hadiths, which are authenticated sayings of the Prophet Muhammad or about him by his companions), denote aspects of the natural world and connote ethical obligations to them. The primary ethical relationship, however, is between the believer and Allah. The duties toward this world (dunya) – its airs, waters, creatures, and places – are part and parcel of fulfilling one’s primary obligations to Allah, as are social ethics. Thus, much depends upon how one understands the relation between Allah and his creation, as a unified whole and in all of its myriad parts. To put it in overly simplified terms, an understanding of Allah as immanent in the creation can lead toward the mystical environmental ethics of Sufi theologians and orders from ninth-century Arabia to the modern U.S., which are ethics of love (Ernst 1997). An understanding of Allah’s transcendent relationship with the creation can lead either toward a view of environmental ethics as one of several branches of applied moral
philosophy or toward ascetic philosophies that do little harm to but have little intrinsic interest in the natural environment, which are ethics of care (Izzi Deen 2000). But no simple dualism of this sort can sustain itself in the unifying context of Islam, as evidenced, for example, by the passionate asceticism of Majnun in the desert (as compiled by the poet Nizami in the twelfth century):

Two gazelles had been caught in snares, and a hunter was just about to kill the poor creatures with his dagger. “Let these animals go free!” shouted Majnun, “I am your guest and you can’t refuse my request. Remove the nooses from their feet! Is there not room enough in this world for all creatures? What have these two done that you are bent on killing them? Or are you a wolf, not a human being, that you want to take the burden of such a sin upon yourself? Look how beautiful they are! Are their eyes not like those of the beloved? Does their sight not remind you of spring?” Never before had the hunter heard anything like this . . . he replied, “I have heard what you said. But look, I am poor, otherwise I would gladly obey you . . .” Without a word Majnum jumped out of his saddle, and handed the reins of his horse to the hunter who, well content otherwise I would gladly obey you . . .” Without a word Majnum jumped out of his saddle, and handed the reins of his horse to the hunter who, well content.

Thus, rather than begin with a partial perspective on the creation or the manifold relations that ensue from it (e.g., the sense in which human beings are viceregent [khilâfah] in the creation, have responsibility for other creatures, or have the free will to obey or not), it is useful to survey a range of ethical perspectives, following the broad categories of Islamic ethics delineated by Majid Fakhry (1991).

Scriptural Morality – ethics revealed in the Qur’an and traditions (hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad; and as discerned in the fields of Qur’an interpretation and exegesis (tafseer), and in the science of the transmission of the hadith (mustalah al-Hadith and rijal al-Hadith).

Theological Ethics – ranging from rationalist theories of moral duties, including duties to fellow creatures, to voluntarist theories of human will in, and on, the world.

Philosophical Ethics – built upon antecedent Greek ethics, ranging from Socratic to Aristotelian, neo-Platonic, and neo-Pythagorean arguments.

Religious Ethics – situate ethics within the psychological and social contexts of religious life. Fakhry (1991) discusses ethical traditions, rules of conduct (adab), and religious traits.

Rather than recapitulate Fakhry’s analysis, which offers a well-organized account of early and medieval Islamic ethics in categories meaningful to philosophers, but lacks close parallels with contemporary writing on Islamic environmental ethics, it is useful to survey how major bodies of contemporary environmental writing draw upon, extend, or depart from these four categories of Islamic ethics. We begin with a combination of scriptural and religious approaches, which illuminates the major structures of Islamic moral philosophy, proceed to thematic investigations that invite more theological and philosophical approaches, and conclude with the challenges of synthesis and an overarching view of the field as explored by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

The source of all ethical approaches to environmental issues – from conservation to treatment of animals, reclamation [ihya], purification, protected areas, and pious endowments – combines scriptural and religious approaches in a well-structured way that parallels Islamic law (e.g., Hamed 1993):

1. The Qur’an – is the first and most authoritative source on any ethical question. Whatever the Qur’an does not directly or fully address may be illuminated by the:

2. Sunnah – which is the example of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, including the hadith. Whatever is not fully addressed by the Sunnah may be illuminated by:

3. Ijma’ – the consensus of the community of believers (ummah). The authority of ijma’ rests upon the Prophet’s saying that, “My community will not agree on an error.” Some Muslim environmental laws (fiqh) are the product of ijma’, as are some aspects of major schools of law (e.g., Hanbalite, Maliki, Asharite, and Safi’ite schools of Sunni law; and Isma’iite, Shafi’iite, Zaidite schools of Shi’a law). Thus, we would expect some strands of environmental ethics to vary across geographic, socio-economic, and cultural communities. In a related vein, some Muslim environmentalists have emphasized the role of institutions (hisbah) in formulating and advancing environmental policy. If ijma’ is inconclusive one looks to:

4. Qiyas – the logic of analogy with comparable ethical cases and situations. The rules and limits of analogy have been rigorously developed, for example, to address the rights of humans and animals to water (Wescoat 1995).

For some groups, the scriptural-religious approach stops with qiyas, while for others it continues on to less codified sources of custom (urf), conduct (adab), and individual discernment (ijtihad).

The scriptural-religious approach lends itself to analysis of specific environmental ethics issues because it follows a clear logical progression, and has long-established albeit contested principles and tools of inquiry (e.g., concordances and compilations for Qur’an interpretation, hadith science, fiqh, and local social knowledge of environmental norms and practices).
While many topics in environmental ethics are addressed with a scriptural-religious approach, some, if not most, topics require additional theological and philosophical inquiry when pursued in depth. These include the ethics of environmental topics such as the creation, signs in nature, and paradise eschatology. They also encompass human topics that have environmental dimensions such as viceregency on Earth, free will to conserve or consume, and obligations to mend damage (islah), avoid waste (israf), and prefer what is better (istishan) – to name just a few. To date, few detailed theological or philosophical treatises on these topics have drawn implications for, or made connections with, environmental ethics.

Instead, much Muslim environmental writing of the late twentieth century focuses on local substantive problems or international and crosscultural dialogues. A good example is the *Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment*, co-published by the Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration (MEPA) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Ba-Kader, et al., rev. edn, 1994; first published, 1983). After an introduction on “Islam’s Attitude toward the Universe, Natural Resources, and the Relation between Man and Nature,” the authors survey principles for protection of basic natural resources (air, water, land); protection of humans and the environment from toxics, polluting substances, noise, intoxicants, and natural hazards; and individual mandates, legislation, and institutions that support and enforce ethical teachings. Its ethical teachings are drawn almost exclusively from the Qur’an and hadith, and not from theological or philosophical studies or from commentaries on sacred texts.

Sponsorship of the *Islamic Principles* by the IUCN, and the document’s reference to World Health Organization publications, indicates an active engagement with international environmental discourse – as do the increasing number of chapters on Islam in edited books on environmental issues. An extended case of engagement is Izzi Deen’s (2000: 149–66) review of the United Nations World Charter for the Protection of Nature. Deen compares it with the *Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment*, which provides a Muslim perspective on each passage. Several recent doctoral dissertations explore ethical issues in urban design and landscape architecture in Muslim societies, pointing the way toward further development of the pragmatic thread in Islamic environmental ethics (e.g., Ba-Ubaid 1999).

In the field of Islamic ethics, Fakhry (1991) regards al-Ghazzali as providing a synthesis across scriptural, theological, and religious ethics (though his *Tahufat al-Falasifa*, “Incoherence of Philosophy,” indicates the extent of his synthesis). In environmental ethics three further lines of synthesis seem promising. First, extended studies are needed of the sort pioneered in Seyyad Hossein Nasr’s *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, which undertook a close philosophical and theological comparison of ideas about nature by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina. A second line of synthesis should focus on linkages between historic philosophical contributions and the modern pragmatic work by environmental agencies and organizations (e.g., Izzi Deen 2000). Finally, to cite Nasr (1996) again, advancing beyond simple oppositions between Islamic principles and the consequences of Western humanism, and toward a theory and practice of sacred science, East and West may chart a path beyond the current situation.

*Further Reading*


Islam and Environmentalism in Iran

Iran possesses more biodiversity than any other country in Southwestern Asia. The country contains many of the world’s major ecosystem types, from high mountains and deserts to semi-tropical forests and marine environments. Yet with rapid overpopulation, desertification, and the endangerment of many species, Iran’s environmental crisis is as dramatic as anywhere in the world. Whether despite or because of the severity of Iran’s environmental crisis, official statements on a range of issues connected with the environment sound strikingly progressive, especially when compared with other parts of the Muslim world.

Iran is probably the only country at present where Islam is claimed as a basis for environmental ethics at the official level. In 1996 the DOE (Department of the Environment) stated in a published paper,

the religious leaders in Iran have found the principles of environmental conservation compatible with the general guidelines of the holy religion of Islam. It is now the duty of environmentalists to encourage the Friday Prayer speakers to convey environmental messages to the public (Islamic Republic of Iran Country Paper 1996: 27).

The revolutionary government went so far as to assert its ideological commitment to environmental protection by including it in the 1979 constitution. Article 50 reads:

In the Islamic Republic protection of the natural environment, in which the present and future generations must lead an ever-improving community life, is a public obligation. Therefore all activities, economic or otherwise, which may cause irreversible damage to the environment, are forbidden.

Iran’s Department of the Environment, originally established in 1972, was reorganized under the new Islamic government, in 1986. The DOE has a Provincial Directorate for each of Iran’s 28 provinces. Its mission includes research on appropriate technology, a national biological survey, public education, and national regulation of air, water, urban development, biodiversity, waste disposal, noise pollution, and agricultural toxics. The principle of sustainable development as outlined at the Rio Earth Summit (Agenda 21) is stated to be the framework for Iranian legislation, and environmental impact statements are supposed to be a major consideration in all projects. Recently increased priority has been given to family planning, bringing women into conservation, and encouraging grassroots movements. The DOE is also responsible for administering Iran’s seven national parks, four national nature monuments, twenty-four wildlife refuges, and forty-two protected areas. In a national strategy paper published in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank in 1994, the DOE called for 1) a land-use planning strategy based on integrated ecological and socio-economic issues rather than solely socio-economic ones, 2) promotion of NGOs and community participation, 3) provisions for the preparation of management plans for protected areas, 4) provisions for the formation of a “Green Corps” to reinforce the manpower needed for fulfillment of national strategies, and 5) a nine-point plan of action, incorporating details about the degree of sensitivity, sizes and relative cover of the country’s protected areas as well as the types of destructive activities threatening those areas, and including a program to finance the proposed strategies. The Department has produced educational programs on the environment for television and radio, and publishes a scholarly journal, called Mohit-e Zist (The Environment) four times a year. In 1996 plans were announced for an Environmental University, at which “all aspects of the environmental sciences” will be taught and “the expertise needed in the field of the environment will be trained according to the needs of the country” (Iran Country Paper 1996: 27).

The Iranian delegation to the Kyoto conference on Climate Change in December 1997 was led by Vice President and Director of the DOE and the Environmental Protection Organization (EPO), former revolutionary spokeswoman Massumeh Ebtekar. Though the Vice President cited in her address Iran’s successes in reforestation, control of desertification, and emissions regulations, she sided with other developing countries in arguing that

Before the actual materialization of promises made by industrialized countries, including technology

See also: Islam, Animals, and Vegetarianism; Islam and Eco-Justice; Islam and Environmental Ethics; Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection; Islamic Law; Nasr, Seyyed Hossein; Sufism.
transfer and financial assistance, it seems unfair that developing countries should undertake considerations that could seriously hinder their pace of development and damage their fragile economies (Ebtetkar, address to Kyoto International Conference on Climate Change, 1–10 December 1997).

Nevertheless, following the Montreal Protocol of 1987 Iran currently has the world’s second-largest program (after China) for the phasing out of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). Though Iran does not produce CFCs, it imports them, and the figure of five and a quarter billion tons imported in 1993 is to be reduced to zero by 2005.

Also in 1997, the DOE introduced a National Environment Plan of Action (NEPA), which was submitted to the Cabinet. A workshop at Tehran University in May 1999 brought members of the DOE together with academics and representatives from environmental NGOs, for the purpose of incorporating environmental policies into Iran’s Third Development Plan.

Non-Government Organizations
Public awareness of Iran’s environmental crisis seems to be on the rise, due in part no doubt to the increasing visibility of new environmental non-government organizations (ENGOs). As of late 2000 there were 149 registered and unregistered ENGOs in Iran.

For the most part NGOs are a recent phenomenon in Iran, and are desperately attempting to establish contacts with similar organizations worldwide. Like many such organizations, they are underfunded. While some have received contributions from foreign donors, most of their funding comes from private donations within Iran. Since they are dependent upon ongoing government authorization to function as independent entities, they tend to abstain from direct political involvement such as lobbying for environmental legislation. There are no Sierra Clubs or Natural Resource Defense Councils. Instead, most of Iran’s environmentalist NGOs concentrate on raising public awareness of environmental issues, often through direct contact such as volunteering door-to-door or taking inner-city children on field trips to the countryside.

The first registered environmental NGO in Iran was BoomIran, founded in 1980. In 1983 BoomIran’s director, Farrokh Mostafi, traveled to Switzerland to muster support for opposition to drain the Anzali lagoon near Rasht on the Caspian coast. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) pressured the Iranian government, and the project was abandoned. Mostafi himself was featured in a recent issue of National Geographic.

BoomIran, which currently counts some 250 members, publishes a monthly magazine, Shekar o Tabiat (Wildlife and Nature), as well as a children’s magazine and an encyclopedia of Iran’s fauna. The organization maintains a library, provides lecturers, and produces an educational television program. It has initiated a Pathfinders Program, which seeks to identify road and trail networks for use by hikers and travelers with regard to preserving the environment, and a program called Save Our Rivers, which seeks to identify and protect polluted rivers and determine sources of pollution. The organization recently established links with E-Law in the US, which aims to provide information and support on issues of international conservation law, liability for environmental damage, biodiversity legislation, and the effects on the environment of trade.

BoomIran is currently working to organize opposition to the proposed freeway project that would link Tehran with the Caspian coast, and to put together an environmental impact statement since the government has failed to do so. With six chapters now located around the country, BoomIran also has a birdwatching club that is currently monitoring eight endangered bird species in Iran, including the Siberian crane.

The Green Front of Iran (Jabheh-ye Sabz-e Iran), founded in 1989, is another environmental NGO that has become increasingly visible in recent years, with over two thousand members nationwide. Avowedly apolitical, the Green Front aims to increase public awareness of environmental concerns and to foster public participation in clean-up projects. The most extensive such project involved thirty-three sites over eight hundred kilometers along the Caspian seacoast on 27 and 28 August 1999, when over ten tons of garbage was picked up on beaches from Astara near the border of Azerbaijan in the west to the southeast Caspian port of Bandar-e Torkaman. An earlier afforestation trip organized by the Green Front in March 1998 was attended by President Khatami.

Siamak Moattari, founder of the Green Front, offers his own perspective on the oft-proposed tension between the environment and development. “We do not feel that tending to ecological issues is a luxury,” he says; “it is a necessity.” He points out that environmental degradation and poverty constitute a cycle.

Economic, social justice, and environmental issues must be viewed together. While it may be unrealistic to expect a forest-dweller with an empty stomach not to cut down a tree, we must realize that in the following years there will be no tree for his children to cut down.

Yet, “In Gilan we met individuals willing to lie in front of trucks carrying away lumber and even risk their lives in defense of those trees ... These are people living in poverty.” In Moattari’s view, “individuals bring about environmental degradation not as a result of poverty, but as a result of ignorance or misinformation” (in Mokhtar 1998: 2). Despite its social justice agenda, the Green Front
is not explicitly Islamic; it has, however, established a committee that seeks out references to environmental stewardship in the Qur’an and hadiths (non-inspired traditions of the Prophet Mohammad), and sends them to religious leaders and organizations.

The Iranian Society of Environmentalists (IRSEN) is an organization founded by academics and scientists. It is part of the multinational Caspian Environment Programme (CEP), and studies among other things pollution point sources, wildlife, and aquatic systems in the Caspian region, with the aim of advising the government on environmental policy issues. More recently a related organization, The Iranian Association of Environmental Health, was established with a specific focus on health concerns. Both organizations have carried out various projects to monitor water, soil, and air pollution throughout Iran.

The major Iranian NGO concerned with wildlife is the Wildlife and Nature Conservancy Foundation. WNCF has undertaken an array of studies, ranging from wetlands assessments to drops in riverine fish populations, to problems of park management and the impacts of human population growth. It is also seeking to determine whether in fact the Caspian tiger and the Iranian cheetah are indeed extinct.

A group of mountaineers formed the Mountain Environment Protection Committee (Hefazat-e Mohit-e Kuhestan) in 1993. In Tehran especially, weekend family outings to the mountains, whether Darband above Tehran or the 18,400-foot Mt. Damavand a short drive to the east, are extremely popular. Unfortunately, 100,000 or more visitors per week are damaging the Alborz, leaving garbage behind them and disrupting the mountain ecology. The MEPC has been attempting to educate Iranians about the fragility of mountain environments, the need to pack out garbage and stay on trails to minimize erosion. According to Director Abdullah Astari, the government has failed to enforce existing laws that could protect the mountains from overuse.

All of the aforementioned NGOs are based in Tehran. One organization active outside the capital is Esfahan Green Message (Payam-e Sabz Esfahan). Originally founded by students at the University of Esfahan in 1994, EGM now counts five hundred members. Like the Tehran-based NGOs, EGM seeks to increase public awareness and participation in environmental issues through educational initiatives, formulate policies through consultation with specialists, and influence decision-makers through meetings and letter-writing campaigns. Other organizations spread throughout Iran’s 28 provinces include the Kerman Earth Lovers, Zagros Friends of Nature, Fars Friends of the Environment, Khorasan Green Thought Group, the Green Defence Society of Mazandaran, the West Azerbaijan Association for Reconciliation with Nature, the Green Artists Association, and many others.

**Women’s Involvement**

Public interest in environmental issues received a boost in the wake of the 1994 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, which was attended by some Iranian delegations. Mansoureh Shodjai, a self-described eco-feminist formerly of Iran’s National Library, credits the Beijing conference with dramatically raising Iran’s level of public awareness on both women’s and environmental issues.

Environmental action in Iran considerably predates 1994, however, as does women’s involvement. As long ago as 1970, a group of rural women in the arid southern province of Yazd embarked on an anti-desertification planting project for which they received support from the Office of Natural Resources. That project continues today as part of a microcredit scheme underwritten by the Ministry of Construction Jihad and the ONR. It inspired the United Nations Development Program to film a documentary called The Green Desert which took first prize at the first Iranian International Environmental Film Festival held in Tehran in 1999. The Iran office of the UNDP, which has been functioning since 1965, devotes half of its $25 million annual budget to environmental projects.

At least three Tehran-based NGOs currently combine women’s issues with environmental work. One is the Society of Women Against Environmental Pollution (Jami’at-e Zanan Mobarezeh ba Aludegi-ye Mohit-e Zist), whose aim is to raise awareness of environmental problems among Iranian women. Among their activities are the gathering of statistics on urban pollution, the publishing of informational articles and brochures for the general public, organizing seminars, and preparing educational materials for public schools. They have scored a number of notable successes, including getting the Ministry of Education to include the environment as a part of the public school curriculum.

A second organization, the Struggle for Survival Society (Jami’at-e Talashgaran-e Baqa) focuses on the poor, especially refugees, who suffer disproportionately from the effects of environmental degradation. A third group, the Children’s Book Council of Iran, produces educational materials on the environment for children.

Mansoureh Shodjai, who has been active in children’s environmental education programs, describes one technique she has found effective for engaging children with the natural environment, a technique she calls “nature concerts.” This involves having children sit down in a natural area and simply listen for a half-hour or so to whatever they hear going on around them. Afterwards they are asked their impressions. “For example, if a child mentions having heard a running stream,” says Shodjai, “we understand that this particular child has an attraction to water, and we work with that, teaching the child about water pollution and what causes it and how it can be
remedied. And so on for birds, wind, or whatever” (Shodjai, classroom visit, Columbia University, 1 May 2000).

ENGOs and the Government
The Iranian government under President Khatami has maintained a policy of encouraging the development of civil society, recognizing the important role of NGOs. The involvement of women and youth has been especially encouraged.

In 1998 representatives from several ENGOs met with the DOE and established the Environmental NGO Network. This has provided obvious advantages, including government recognition. On the other hand, the government’s relation with ENGOs are still “guided by suspicion and a control mentality and agenda enacted through stifling administrative, regulatory procedures” (Namazi 2000: 11). The concept of NGOs is still unfamiliar to the Iranian public, and environmental NGOs, despite the flourishing of popular interest in environmental issues, face ongoing obstacles, both financial and political. According to Shadi Mokhtari,

There are few NGOs in Iran that can really be considered NGOs because they are mostly dependent on the government both substantively and financially . . . Therefore, NGOs that served to hold state agencies accountable or protest the status quo were virtually non-existent (Shadi Mokhtari, personal communication, 15 November 1998).

And some critics argue that most of the Iranian government’s expressed concern for the environment is mere rhetoric.

At a meeting in May 1999 Yusef Hojat, however, Deputy Director of Iran’s Environmental Protection Organization acknowledged the Iranian government’s shortcomings in addressing the environmental crisis. He went on to suggest that Iran’s ENGOs were better situated to act than the government in many respects, and advocated increasing cooperative efforts with them.

This illustrates that Iran’s ENGOs appear to have succeeded for the time being in remaining in the government’s good graces, to the point where the government not only tolerates but encourages their activities in many areas. And at the very least, it may be remarked that strong rhetoric can be a significant first step in changing public attitudes as well as laying the groundwork for official policy.

In Iran today the government’s stand on the environment, formally enshrined in the nation’s constitution, as well as the energy and motivation of environmental NGOs and the rate at which public awareness of environmental issues is increasing, are all impressive. It may be that Iranians will have much to teach the rest of the developing world about environmental protection, perhaps especially Islamic countries, and that Iran will even provide a model for the industrial nations who still bear most of the blame for the rapidly deteriorating state of the Earth’s life-support systems.

Richard C. Foltz

Further Reading


See also: Islam [various]; Mountaineering; Rock Climbing; Sierra Club; United Nations’ “Earth Summits”.

Islam and Post-Anthropocentrism

Islamic theology tends to exalt the human species as the noblest of God’s creatures (ashraf al-makhlughat), who are bestowed with divine “vicerency” (khalifa) over the Earth. What has emerged so far in the growing literature on Islamic eco-theology is at best a soft anthropocentrism that emphasizes humankind’s moral obligations to nature and animals, without, however, relinquishing the hierarchical credo that forms the basis of Islam’s anthropocentric cosmology.
The quest for a post-anthropocentric interpretation of Islam need not proceed by focusing on those aspects of the Qur'an and, to a lesser extent, the Prophetic Tradition (hadith), which directly or indirectly support anthropocentrism (e.g., “Seest thou not that by His command God has made subject to you all that is on the Earth?”). Rather, the challenge is to find a creative process of reinterpretation that can illuminate the Qur'anic system of interspecies relations in a less anthropocentric way.

A de-centering of humans in Islamic theology might proceed from applying analogical reasoning to the Qur'an’s view of humans and other animals: “And there is no animal on the Earth nor bird that flies with its two wings but that they are communities like ourselves.” This verse clearly grants nonhuman animals the right of co-habitation, since the Earth is “spread out” for “His creatures.” Similarly, a proscription against animal abuse is seen in hadiths such as: “Do you wish to slaughter the animal twice: once by sharpening the blade in front of it and another time by cutting its throat?”

What the hadiths reveal, however, perhaps even more than the Qur'an, is not simply an Islamic reverence for animal life. The Prophetic commentary on the cruelty of animal slaughter, which takes the form of a “minimum damage” doctrine, is not easily reconciled with dualist conceptions of a sacral unity of humans and nature. The organicist views of mainstream Islamic thought, particularly in recent attempts at “Islamic eco-theology,” overextend the divine unity (tawhid) to a cosmological totality, and in so doing ignore the inherently disruptive aspect of Islam’s nature theology which would seem to preclude perfect harmony. The partial disharmony between humans and nature is actually the epiphany of the eternal present which illuminates the transcendent self-revelation of God, the sole owner of all things, the creator of “all worlds.”

The earthly worlds of nature, animals, and humans, notwithstanding their ontological contingency, are fully anchored in the creative attributes of God’s omnipotence and embody his eternal glorification. Islam’s recognition of a living tension among these worlds is linked to an eschatological fulfillment of time in which prayer, as act of reconciliation between man and nature, plays a crucial role. Both prayer and fasting are humbling theological experiences that remind practicing Muslims of their divine origins in nature, their uncoupling and distance from both nature and celestial life, and the profound requirements to fulfill the promise of salvation. In Shi’ism, this is joined by an apocalyptic messianism that is open to the impulses of eco-justice and eco-eschatology. For example, in a post-anthropocentric Shi’ism, the motif of divine suffering, reflected in the principle of martyrdom (shahadat) as the linchpin of its liberation praxis, could assume a new meaning in the form of compassionate suffering for the sake (and preservation) of nature.

Islamic eschatology-as-apocalypticism provides yet another rich source for a post-anthropocentric epistemology, insofar as humans can foresee their destruction of the environment and, consequently, of their own species, and yet utilize this knowledge for self-restraint in accordance with the divine command (amr) for “measured” or “balanced” existence. The potential failure of humans in this duty is internally inscribed in the eschatological wisdom of Islam, yet this very failure could serve as another log in the furnace of post-anthropocentrism. In contrast to the classical Islamic ideal of the “perfect man” (insan al-kamil) who finds his perfection in his spiritual liberation from the confines of nature, a post-anthropocentric approach would focus on the limitations of humans in fulfilling the divine promise.

The approach to developing a post-anthropocentric Islam proposed here is based on a marginalist, or “bottom-up” re-prioritization of texts, centered on the twin agenda of deriving both a theology of the nonhuman and a new eco-eschatology. So far this remains a hypothetical undertaking, but one which could potentially be accomplished within an Islamic framework.

Kaveh L. Afrasiabi

Further Reading


See also: Animals in the Bible and Qur’an; Biocentric Religion – A Call for; Islam, Animals, and Vegetarianism; Qur’an, The.

Islam, Animals, and Vegetarianism

Although Sufi saints such as the Suhrawardi Hamid al-din Nagori in medieval India, as well as other pious Sufis in North Africa, are known to have practiced vegetarianism, to date any serious discourse on the viability of an “Islamic” vegetarianism is absent. The Qur’an explicitly allows the eating of meat, as in verse 5:1 which reads,

O ye who believe! Fulfill your undertakings. The beast of cattle is made lawful unto you [for food] except that which is announced to you [herein].

Thus, Islamic eschatology-as-apocalypticism provides yet another rich source for a post-anthropocentric epistemology, insofar as humans can foresee their destruction of the environment and, consequently, of their own species, and yet utilize this knowledge for self-restraint in accordance with the divine command (amr) for “measured” or “balanced” existence. The potential failure of humans in this duty is internally inscribed in the eschatological wisdom of Islam, yet this very failure could serve as another log in the furnace of post-anthropocentrism. In contrast to the classical Islamic ideal of the “perfect man” (insan al-kamil) who finds his perfection in his spiritual liberation from the confines of nature, a post-anthropocentric approach would focus on the limitations of humans in fulfilling the divine promise.

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game being unlawful when ye are on pilgrimage. Lo! Allah ordaineth that which pleaseth him.

Medieval Islam’s tensions with Buddhism (and, in India, Hinduism), seen as an idol-worshipping religion, historically provided a “guilt by association” argument against vegetarianism. The medieval legal scholar ‘Iz al-Din b. ‘Abd al-Salam (1181–1262), in his work Qawa’id al-ahkam fi masalah al-anam, (“The Foundations of Laws Benefiting the Human Race”) states that

The unbeliever who prohibits the slaughtering of an animal [for no reason but] to achieve the interest of the animal is incorrect because in so doing he gives preference to a lower, khasis, animal over a higher, nafis, animal.

Another medieval scholar, Ibn Hazm, provides an argument against moral consideration being extended to animals which anticipates those heard in nineteenth-century England, when he writes that “the laws of Allah are only applicable upon those who can talk and understand them” (Hazm 1964: 69).

Within the admitted hierarchy of creation in which human beings occupy the highest rank, the Qur’an and the Sunna (lit., “tradition,” understood as the example of the Prophet Muhammad as attested in hadith reports) nevertheless strongly enjoin Muslims to treat animals with compassion and not to abuse them. The Qur’an states that all creation praises God, even if this praise is not expressed in human language (17:44). The Qur’an further states that “There is not an animal in the Earth, nor a flying creature on two wings, but they are peoples like unto you” (6:38).

Thus, when in the nature of things (fitrah), the Muslim must kill in order to survive, the Prophet Muhammad called for compassion: “If you kill, kill well, and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each of you sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters.” On another occasion he is reported to have said, “For [charity shown to] each creature which has a wet heart (i.e., is alive), there is a reward.” He opposed recreational hunting, saying that “whoever shoots at a living creature for sport is cursed.” In another hadith, Muhammad is said to have reprimanded some men who were sitting idly on their camels in the marketplace, saying “either ride them or leave them alone.” He is also reported to have said, “There is no man who kills [even] a sparrow or anything smaller, without its deserving it, but Allah will question him about it [on the Day of Judgment],” and “Whoever is kind to the creatures of God, is kind to himself.”

Medieval Islamic law prescribes that domestic animals should not be overburdened or otherwise mistreated, that they should not be put at risk of survival, that their young should not be killed in their sight, that they should be given adequate shelter and rest, and that males and females should be allowed to be together during mating season. The legal category of water rights extends to animals through the law of “the right of thirst” (haqq al-shurb).

Probably the richest material that Muslim civilization has produced with regard to animal rights is a tenth-century treatise entitled The Case of the Animals versus Man by a group of philosophers who called themselves the Ikhwan al-safa, or “Pure Brethren.” A briefer example of sympathy for animals can be found in a story about the eighth-century female Muslim mystic Rabi’a of Basra. According to the medieval hagiography of Farid al-din ‘Attar,

It is related that one day Rabi’a had gone up on a mountain. Wild goats and gazelles gathered around, gazing upon her. Suddenly, Hasan Basri [another well-known early Muslim mystic] appeared. All the animals shied away. When Hasan saw that, he was perplexed and said, “Rabi’a, why do they shy away from me when they were so intimate with you?” Rabi’a said, “What did you eat today?”

“Soup.”

“You ate their lard. How would they not shy away from you?” ’Attar 1996: 160.

At least one contemporary Islamic legal scholar has taken issue with the dominant anthropocentric view of animal rights. B.A. Masri writes in the preface to his book, Islamic Concern for Animals, that in his opinion “life on this Earth is so intertwined as an homogeneous unit that it cannot be disentangled for the melioration of one species at the expense of the other” (1987: vii). Masri understands the superiority of the human species to consist only in its spiritual volition (taqwa), that is, its capacity to make moral choices. Without this distinction, Masri believes, the differences between humans and other animal species are superficial. Masri stops short of discussing the option of vegetarianism, however. His concern is with eliminating the kinds of unnecessary cruelty and exploitation of animals that he sees as prevalent in modern society, such as laboratory testing. Masri’s discussion implicitly acknowledges the reality that Muslims often fail to respect the Prophetic directives regarding animal welfare.

One issue which is prominently connected with meat-eating in Islam is the customary sacrifice performed once a year on the occasion of ‘Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice commemorating Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. On this day, Muslims traditionally slaughter the largest animal they can afford, from a sheep to a camel, and distribute the meat to the poor as an act of charity. However, during the 1990s, King Hassan of Morocco on two occasions banned this slaughter for economic reasons, citing the well-being of his Muslim subjects. It may be
noted in passing that a number of religious traditions, including Judaism, Vedism, and others, historically evolved metaphorical substitutions for blood sacrifice (and in the case of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, this change was quite rapid). It is therefore not inconceivable that such a development could occur in the future within Islam. In any event, ritual slaughter in Islam is merely customary, and not prescribed by law.

The Qur’an and Sunna have been shown to enjoin Muslims to treat animals with compassion. This is clearly reflected in the established procedure for halal (lawful) slaughter. Few Muslims have made the observation that not slaughtering the animal at all would be even more compassionate; animal rights activism and vegetarianism are exceedingly rare among Muslims, and where present are most often motivated by extra-Islamic ethical principles.

Factory farms did not exist in seventh-century Arabia, nor were large percentages of arable land being used for fodder crops in preference to food for humans while 20 percent of the world’s population went chronically malnourished. Times have changed. Though in Sunni Islam the tradition of interpreting divine revelation (ijtihad) has been largely in abeyance since the eleventh century, Islamic modernists have long been arguing that “the gates of ijtihad” must be reopened if Islam is to continue to meet the needs and conditions of the present age. But for a contemporary Islamic legal scholar to make a case for vegetarianism, the Qur’anic verses cited above in particular would have to be addressed.

The possibility for such a re-reading can be seen in the example of the verse: “The beast of cattle is made lawful unto you [for food]” (5:1), which might be compared with other verses (16:5, 66; 40:79) where the wording is equally vague. The theme common to these verses is that of deriving sustenance; in 16:66 milk is explicitly mentioned whereas 40:79 begins, “It is Allah who provided for you all manner of livestock, that you may ride on some of them and from some of them you may derive your food.” Nowhere does the Qur’an refer to the eating of flesh as such. Even the gloss “for food” in verse 5:1 is merely inserted into the English translation, being absent in the original Arabic.

Humankind – A Special Creation

All cohabitants of our planet work under and according to the natural laws or divine guidance, which one often refers to as their natural instinct. Thus, under favorable conditions and if allowed to function naturally, a root would always absorb water and a green leaf would always photosynthesize, a clay particle would always hold water strongly and wind currents would always move toward

Richard C. Foltz
The Hadith and Shari’a on Man and Nature

The Prophet Mohammad was sent by Allah as “a mercy to all being” (21:107). He put the commandments of Allah into practice and thus established a working model for all human spheres. It has been interpreted further by different scholars who have laid down legal codes (Shari’ā). All these details run into thousands of pages and even to summarize them is beyond the scope or capacity of this write-up. Some very illustrative Sayings and Shari’a Laws are mentioned here to give a glimpse of the vastness of Islamic literature dealing with environmental issues.

Hadiths:

“Show mercy to those on Earth, and He who is in the Heaven will show mercy to you.”

“Provide for the needs of any animal under your care. If a person causes an animal to die of starvation or thirst, he will be punished by Allah.”

“There is a reward in doing good to every living being.”

“God is pure and loves purity and cleanliness.”

“There is no Muslim who plants a tree, or sows a field and man, birds or beasts eat from them, but it is charity for him.”

“Whoever brings the dead land to life, that is, cultivates waste land, for him is reward therein.”

Shari’a:

Based on the Prophet’s practice, Muslim legal scholars have ruled that Allah’s creatures possess inviolability (Hurmah) which pertains even in war.

In Islamic Law all animals have certain legal rights, which are enforced by the Islamic courts or by the office of the “Hisbah.”

One of the fundamental principles of Islamic Law is the Prophetic declaration: “There shall be no damage and no infliction of damage.” This “No Damage Law,” is of immense significance in the human–nature relationship.

Another relevant Shari’a rule is: “The averting of harm takes precedence over the acquisition of benefits.” It aims at achieving good and securing benefits without causing significant damage, injury or corruption.

“A private (smaller scale) injury or damage is accepted to avert a general (larger) injury to the public.” While enforcing certain laws or restrictions, interests of a small section of the community are usually affected. In such a situation the interest of the larger community takes precedence over smaller damage.

Further Reading


a low pressure area. They have no choice but to act according to the laws of nature (i.e., they have no freedom to act otherwise). In contrast to the rest of the creatures, human beings have been given the choice either to act according to divine guidance (read laws) or to follow their own whims or desires. Since Islam is a system which has been revealed to ensure peace and harmony, it guides humanity to a set of laws and directives which preserve and maintain the divine balance and order on our planet. It defines the position as well as responsibilities of human beings on this temporary abode.

Position – As an Inheritor or Viceregent

Allah defines humankind as “Khalifa” on this Earth (Qu’ran 35:39; 6:165), which literally means the guardian or vicegerent who inherits the planet from its forerunners. According to Islam, man is not the conqueror or master of nature, he is its guardian and hence protector who ensures continuity and availability of all its bounties.

Responsibilities

To seek knowledge

There are 756 verses in the Qur’an which deal with knowledge or Ilm. Without knowledge one can understand neither the complexities and interdependence of all the creatures, nor one’s own role and responsibilities, particularly as the guardian of the planet. Knowledge is the basic ingredient and foundation for “Belief” or “Iman.” Iman is complete faith in Allah, His Laws and Commands, based on reason and knowledge – almost a state of conviction. The Qur’ān lays much emphasis on reason, and hence humankind has been gifted with mind, which enables one to think, and the intellect, which helps one to build up knowledge. Once acquired, knowledge helps one to understand the working and significance of divine laws. It is this knowledge which motivates the person to submit to Allah’s command. It becomes clear to him that if nothing can survive by defying natural laws, how can he act against the Laws set for him? However, if people do not
utilize the faculties of thinking, observing and hearing (to grasp the truth), they will be destined to hell as they remain un-heedful of the Laws of Allah (7:179).

To ward off evil by good deeds
In any system of governance, we find those who are obedient and those who are disobedient. Those who are disobedient and do not submit to Allah’s Laws would definitely disturb the harmony on this planet. They would spread evil ideas of exploitation and injustice. Believers in Allah’s System are advised to counter such evil moves by good deeds (13:22). In an atmosphere where evil and the things harmful and destructive for humanity are prevalent, believers should not get carried away and should not adopt the same attitude; rather they should continue to do good as it is only such perseverance in doing good which wards off evil attitudes and designs. All such people who practice righteousness and remain steadfast in doing good, have been acknowledged as Friends of Allah who would be in peace with Him (6:127).

To do justice
Islam lays great emphasis on justice. It expects the Believers to do justice in every walk of life and in every situation, which includes the equitable distribution of natural resources.

Surely Allah commands you to make over trusts to their owners and that when you judge between people you judge with justice; surely Allah admonishes you with what is excellent; surely Allah is Seeing, Hearing (4:58).

O you who believe! Be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably (justly); act equitably, that is nearer to piety, and be careful of (your duty to) Allah; surely Allah is Aware of what you do (5:8).

These suras have affinity with what many in the West today call “environmental justice,” showing that the equitable distribution of natural resources is a religious duty, even when dealing with people one does not particularly like, and that the burdens of environmental decline and pollution ought not to fall disproportionately on the poor.

To establish balance
Thanks to the advancement in environmental sciences, we all know about the delicate inter- and intra-community/commodity balance that exists among all the living as well as non-living components of our environment. In several verses of the Qur’an (54:49; 15:19; 55:7–9), Allah reveals about this balance which He has established among His creations and commands His Believers not to transgress it (55:8–9). The concept of balance is applicable to every sphere of human activity whether it is harmony with nature or human justice, commerce or even in personal relations and emotions. Hence, Believers are thus expected not to indulge in any such activity that disturbs any sort of natural balance, be it between oxygen and ozone or land and vegetation or prey and predator. However, Islam does not forbid the use of nature’s bounties; it just reminds us to remain within limits and to ensure their continuity in due proportion. *Ulemas* like Maulana Abdul Kareem Pareekh, Maulana Waheeduddin Khan and Maulana Akhlaq Hussain Qasmi (of the Islamic Foundation for Science & Environment), for example, often speak along these lines.

To improve the society
Whenever any unbalance occurs in nature, it results in chaos or disorder. Our current problems of pollution and ozone depletion are very relevant examples. The Qur’an terms the mischief which results in chaos or disorder as “Fasad” and forbids it (7:56). Elaborating upon different types of mischief or disorder, the Qur’an declares the destruction of cultivated land and stock as mischief (2:205), as well as incomplete measurements, insufficient payment for someone’s labor, economic disparities and encroaching upon other’s rights as mischief (26:183; 7:85). Disrupting a just system (27:34) and committing crimes is also termed as mischief (12:73). All this mischief by people of evil intent results in all round chaos and corruption:

Corruption has appeared in the land and in the seas on account of what the hands of men have wrought, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return (30:41).

In contrast to these "Mufsideen" (corruptors, spoilers, mischief-makers) who have spoiled the natural balance to serve their own ends, Allah characterizes Believers as "Musleheen" (rectifiers, correctors or reformers) of society (2:11). They have been commanded to do “Aml-e-Salehat” (acts of correction and reformation which would undo the damage done by the spoilers or corruptors; 2:82; 95:6; 103:3). Thus it is the duty of all Believers to take up corrective measures for improving society and to ameliorate the condition of people suffering because of inequalities, unbalances and disorders in society. As the social problems and maladies vary with time and space, these “good deeds” to be performed by Believers would also be different according to the challenges faced by the society at any particular time and place.

Nature – An Islamic Perspective
The Qur’an emphatically declares that nature has been created by Allah (3:191; 38:27; 46:3). By correlating
different verses where Allah has mentioned nature, it emerges that Allah has created nature for two specific purposes:

Blessing provides sustenance, shelter and other necessities to all creatures through the perfectly balanced and self-sustaining systems operating in nature according to Allah’s Laws. Through the intricate network of food webs and food chains, through cycling and recycling systems, through displacements and succession, decay and decomposition, autotrophism and heterotrophism, He provides sustenance to all (2:22, 164; 6:96–99; 10:31; 11:6; 16:5–8; 16:10–16, 65–70, 79–81).

Ayat (or Sign) signifies that all the creations of Allah are “Ayat” (Signs) of Allah’s Wisdom, Knowledge and Grandeur. The Qur’an describes all these creations as His “Ayat,” which means sign, mark or indication. Allah is supreme, unlimited and beyond human comprehension. Humankind with its limited vision and knowledge, cannot comprehend the unlimited. But His signs help people to understand His mastery, perfection and omnipotence. Thus by understanding his creations, humankind can appreciate Allah’s supremacy. For this very reason Allah asks humankind to observe and study nature and ponder upon its mysteries – and hence the emphasis on acquiring knowledge (2:73, 164, 191; 6:46, 65, 97; 7:185; 10:5–7; 12:105; 13:2; 21:30–32; 23:17–22; 24:41–46; 25:53–54; 26:8).

Natural Resources
Nature provides necessities of life to all creatures through its bounties. Some of these resources are available naturally in large quantities, while others need to be tapped, reared or cultivated. At the dawn of civilization, human population was thin and scattered. It traveled throughout the land and used all natural resources freely and without any restriction. However, the situation changed with the establishment of kingdoms and empires and the emergence of class systems based on riches. Money started breeding and multiplying through the spread of trade, interest and banking systems, until it established its own clan. Since then, the world remains divided between those with much and those with little.

Equitable Distribution
Since justice, equity and balance are the main planks of the Islamic system, it asks Believers to treat all natural resources with the same spirit. The Qu’ran declares it without any ambiguity: whatever is on Earth He has created it for all (2:29). There is no discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, color or religion. According to the Islamic system, the wealth, produce, or any other resource which anyone gets, earns or inherits does not belong to him alone. It must be shared with all the needy, starting from one’s own close relatives to neighbors, travelers, displaced and dispossessed to anyone in need (3:92; 14:31; 17:26; 32:16). Allah thus judges the resourceful and elevated ones (6:165). Allah warns those who accumulate wealth of a crushing disaster (104:2–4). Those who withhold the necessities of life are declared deniers of the day of Judgment (107:7).

To facilitate distribution and ensure the availability of resources, Islam has made it mandatory on all rich people to establish the institution of “Zakat,” which in essence means a Development Fund for the needy (2:43, 83, 110, 177, 277; 4:162; 5:12; 7:156; 9:5, 11, 18, 71; 21:73; 22:41, 78; 24:37, 56; 27:3; 30:39; 31:4; 33:33; 41:7). “Zakat” prevents hoarding of money and causes the wealth to grow so that people can earn their living instead of depending on charity. The Islamic system does not encourage the provision of sustenance to the poor and needy merely through charity; it can be a short-term remedy but on a long-term basis the surplus of the rich should be invested to generate gainful employment for the needy, distressed and displaced.

Islam encourages individual Muslims to participate in the conservation and proper development of resources by creating endowments or “Awqaf,” which constitute the major avenue for private contribution to the public welfare. In India, and elsewhere as well, there are thousands of such “Awqaf” taking care of, and maintaining mosques, schools, hospitals and other welfare activities.

Judicious Use
Islam does not approve of a lavish or unjust consumption of resources, wasteful attitude and extravagance (6:141; 7:31; 17:26). The permissible provisions of modern development in Islam can include all those articles which enhance efficiency in terms of time, space and material utilization, provided they do not disturb the socioeconomic equilibrium at any particular place or situation. Islam links “Israf” or wastefulness to “Fasad” (i.e., chaos, disorder and mischief in society) and declares wasters to be corruptors of society and spoilers of social order and harmony. It considers the extravagance of one person as economic deprivation of the other because extravagance by the former is certainly an encroachment upon the accessibility rights of the latter. Instead of wasting resources in a demonstrative and extravagant lifestyle, it asks the Believers to spend whatever surplus they have on needy people (2:219).

Conservation
Allah forbids unjust killing of any soul (6:151; 25:68). The two earliest inviolable sanctuaries (“Haramayn”) established in Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia reflect the Islamic spirit of conservation. The Qur’an declares Mecca a “city of security” (95:3). The sacred territory surrounding Mecca is a sanctuary for human beings, wildlife and native vegetation. Perpetuating the same spirit, Islamic Laws designate various inviolable zones within
which developments are prohibited for the sake of conserving resources. Similarly, wildlife and forests are safeguarded in “Hima” or reserves which are established exclusively for conservation purposes.

Conclusion
The doctrines of Islam are equally explicit and emphatic about man’s role as guardian or viceroy on this planet. His relation to nature should be one of stewardship and not mastery. All the creations of Allah are a divine work of art. They all have been called “Ayat” or signs to man, indicative of the greatness, the goodness, the subtlety, the richness and so on of the Creator. To deface, defile or destroy nature would be an impious or even blasphemous act.

Though man is accorded the right to use natural resources, he is not permitted to abuse it with impunity. Besides, this Earth is a temporary abode for man and according to his deeds done on Earth, Allah rewards or punishes him here in this world as well as hereafter. Therefore, those who act against Allah by damaging, defacing or destroying His creations will certainly be punished. Secondly, though the Earth is only a temporary abode for man and is at his service, man is an integral part of it. He is made of the earthen stuff and is a creature among creatures. Hence, according to Islam there should be a kind of organic relationship between man and all other creatures. According to Islam, all human beings are descendants of Adam and Eve, and regardless of color, creed, race or nation they are equal members of one extended family. Lastly, Islam values the knowledge of nature and encourages its followers to acquire it.

It is supported by the doctrine of signs (“Ayat”). As we learn about nature, it becomes abundantly clear that the entirety of nature is an integrated whole. Therefore the destruction of one part of the environment will have its repercussions on its each and every component, including man. This is almost a self-destruction, which is strictly forbidden in Islam.

Even a cursory look at the present state of our planet and human society, provided it is unbiased and unprejudiced, would pinpoint imbalance and inequity as the sole reason of all ills facing humankind. The Islamic System which ensures balance, and hence peace, is the available remedy. If put into practice, as was done by the Prophet, it brings peace and tranquility here in this world as well as in the life hereafter. That it has always been opposed and resisted by vested interests, including Muslims, is a historical fact.

Mohammad Aslam Parvaiz

Further Reading
See also: Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences; Islamic Foundation for Science and Environment (and adjacent, Hadith and Shari’a on Man and Nature).

SP Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection

The idea of “conserving the environment” as it is understood today is relatively new, having emerged as a matter of concern to the human race only recently. This is seen to be a reaction to human excess, which is increasingly threatening the mizan (balance) of Allah Ta’ala’s (Allah the Exalted) creation. The main reason for this is that the Earth once considered by humankind to be sacred has now been reduced to an exploitable resource.

At its most basic the Islamic approach to understanding the environment is based on an awareness of the fitra (primal condition of humankind in harmony with nature). Conservation in Islam is about mu’amalat (acting in the public interest; civic responsibility). It is an integral part of life, an expression of existence in submission to the will of the Creator in harmony with the natural pattern of creation. As there was an Islamic code of conduct that governed social behavior and an individual’s rights and responsibilities within a community, so there was a code of conduct governing an individual’s behavior toward other sentient beings and the rest of the natural world. This however was not expressed as an “ism,” but rather as an integrated expression of life in all its manifestations. It would seem that this was how the human species, in spite of all its faults, lived within their respective traditions until very recent times.

The natural order works because it functions within certain limits. Similarly, there are limits to human behavior and the Qur’an defines these limits for us, which were subsequently clarified and codified by the Shari’u (legal modality or code) that evolved in the Islamic milieu. Living within these limits may be defined as living holistically – that is, in Islam and as if there was no separation from one aspect of Allah Ta’ala’s creation and the rest of the natural order. The problem now is that Muslims live mostly outside the precepts of the Shari’u and in doing so have lost the understanding of their relationship with nature. We now have to look for and recognize those aspects in the Shari’u, which specifically regulate our behavior in relation to the environment and
contrive an “ism” that in previous times would have been superfluous.

The Ethical Foundations of the Qur’an

If the Shari’a can be described as a vast carpet with intricate patterns woven into it, what we are doing here is to borrow some of these patterns from the complex weave of the carpet and make sense out of them. The primary element of the Shari’a is the Qur’an. It is the font of all knowledge in Islam and its precepts could be likened to the core of each pattern in this carpet. We may begin by examining some of these patterns, which amount to basic principles and which may collectively be seen as providing the basis for Islamic conservation practice. They are:

**Tawhid** which embodies the principle of unity of the Creator and His creation and is the basis of the holistic approach which is intrinsically Islamic. Fitra which imparts an understanding of the creation principle and locates the human species firmly in it. Mizan which recognizes the principle that every aspect of creation holds together because it is in a state of balance. Khalifa which identifies the responsibility principle and the role of the human in the grand pattern of creation.

**Tawhid – The Unity Principle**

Tawhid is the foundation of Din al Islam (The Way of Islam). It has three aspects, and for our purposes we are looking at just one of these, which is Tawhid al Rububiyyah (the unity of Lordship). This requires us to believe that there is only one Creator and that is Allah the Lord of all creation. (The other two aspects are Tawhid al Uluhiyya – to believe that none is worthy of worship except Allah – and Tawhid al Asma was Sifat – to believe that the names and attributes of Allah are uniquely His alone.) Understanding Tawhid al Rububiyyah leads us to the recognition that Al Khaliq (the Creator) is one and khalq (creation) is a unified whole. Its essence is contained in the shahada (declaration), the first pillar of Islam, which every Muslim accepts and is a constant reminder of Faith. It is la ilaha illal lah (there is no God but God), and it affirms the unity of the Creator from which everything else flows. The second part of the shahada is Muhammadur Rasulullah (Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah) whose example we follow. The Shari’a evolved from the Qur’an and the sunnah (practice) of the Prophet as he interpreted the revelations.

Knowing the Creator is the first step to understanding His creation and the very familiar Sura Al-Ikhlas (the chapter on Sincerity) lays down the basis of this understanding –

Say: “He is Allah, Absolute Oneness, Allah, the Everlasting Sustainer of us all. He has not given birth and was not born And no one is comparable to Him” (112:1–4)

This is an affirmation of ahad, that is, the oneness of the Creator and the unity of all creation of which the human race is very much a part. The Qur’an further illuminates Tawhid in the context of khalq under the following themes:

*Rab Al Alamin* (The Lord of All Creation) – there is only one real power

“Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds” (1:1).

*Al Khaliq* (The Creator) – everything that exists was brought into being by Allah

“He is Allah – the Creator, the Maker, the Giver of Form.
To Him belong the most beautiful names. Everything in the heavens and the Earth glorifies Him.
He is the Almighty the All-Wise” (59:24).

And –

“He who originates creation and regenerates it and provides for you from out of heaven and Earth” (27:66).

*Al Muhit* (The Encompasser) – this is the bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam as it affirms the interconnectedness of the natural world.

“What is in the heavens and the Earth belongs to Allah. Allah encompasses all things” (4:125).

**Fitrah – The Creation Principle**

The fitrah principle describes the origination of the human species within the bosom of the natural world. It is a profound reminder of our place in the natural order. Fitrah has been described as the natural state. Some translators of the Qur’an call it the natural pattern, others the original state or pattern, and yet others describe it simply as nature. Some scholars describe fitrah as the pure state or the state of infinite goodness and point to the possibility that everything in creation has a potential for goodness, the conscious expression of which rests uniquely with humankind. It is commonly held that the real meaning of The Qur’an in Arabic is untranslatable into any other language, but we may conclude that fitrah denotes the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation including the human in its newborn state. The term fitrah is a noun derived from the root F T R and
occurs once in the Qur’an. It appears in its verb form, *fitrah*, fourteen times. The key verse in The Qur’an in which both the noun and the verb form occur is in Surah Rum (the verse on the Romans):

Set yourself firmly towards the Deen [the way, the life transaction],
As a pure natural believer,
Allah’s natural pattern on which He made mankind.
There is no changing Allah’s creation.
That is the true Deen –
But most people do not know it – (30:29).

The part of this verse that concerns us here is the one that reads “Allah’s natural pattern on which He made mankind.” Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, the translators of the version the Qur’an used in this entry, render *fitrah* as natural pattern and *fatarah* as made. Here is how two other translators see it: Yusuf Ali: “The nature in which Allah has made mankind.” *Fitrah* is translated here as nature and *fatarah* as made. Arberry: “Allah’s original in which He originated mankind.” *Fitrah* is translated here as original and *fatarah* as originated.

As the translators grapple to convey the meaning of this verse, there is simplicity inherent in this message that conveys two things to us. The first is a sense of where we belong in the pattern of Allah Ta’ala’s creation. The human race was originated, indeed like all other sentient beings, in the bosom of creation that Allah Ta’ala originated. Humankind was made part of a vast natural pattern, which cannot be changed. Secondly, it could be said that taken together with the rest of the verses in the Qur’an on creation this lays down the foundation for the deep ecological principles inherent in Din al Islam. An appreciation of this should lead us to addressing the environmental concerns of today at their roots. The Qur’an comprehensively defines our place and our relationships within this pattern as the following verse further demonstrates –

The creation of the heavens and the Earth is far greater than the creation of mankind.
But most of mankind do not know it (40:56).

Muslims start every one of their five daily prayers with this verse acknowledging the Creator –

... I have turned my face to Him
Who brought the heavens and Earth into being
[fatarah]
A pure natural believer.
I am not one of the mushrikun [Mushrikun plural of Mushrik – one who ascribes divinity to any thing other than Allah] (6:80).

**Mizan – The Balance Principle**

*Mizan* is the principle of the middle path. The natural world, which we are a part of, is held together because it is in *mizan*, a state of dynamic balance. This is another way of saying that the natural order works because it is in submission to the Creator. It is Muslim in the original, primordial sense. In one of its most eloquent and popular passages, the Qur’an describes creation thus –

The All Merciful taught The Qur’an.
He created man and taught him clear expression.
The sun and the moon both run with precision.
The stars [the word *najm* in the Qur’an is translated sometimes as herbs or shrubs] and the trees all bow down in prostration.
He created heaven and established the balance,
So that you would not transgress the balance.
Give just weight – do not skimp in the balance.
He laid out the Earth for all living creatures.
In it are fruit and date palm with covered spathes,
and grains on leafy stems and fragrant herbs.
So which of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?
(55:1–11)

The introductory verses of this surah (chapter) remind us of the unique nature of the human species in creation. Our intelligence, the ability to make sense of our surroundings and to express our intentions clearly, is what differentiates us from every other sentient being in the universe. Allah Ta’ala has given us the gift of intellect with reasoning powers that can distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, honesty from dishonesty, conservation from destruction, moderation from greed, purity from pollution and so on.

The sun and the moon, the two objects in the cosmos most closely associated with us, have exacting functions. The stars and the trees bow down in prostration. For the Muslim these verses go beyond the metaphor to the realms of the real. Everything in the universe is in *sujud* (prostration), that is in *Islam* (submission), and that is how the universe remains in *mizan* (balance). Everything we see around us works because it is in submission to the will of the Creator as these verses further explain –

Do they not see the things Allah has created,
Casting their shadows to the right and to the left,
Prostrating themselves before Allah in complete humility?

Everything in the heavens and every creature on the Earth
Prostrates to Allah, as do the angels.
They are not puffed up with pride (16:48–49).

The humbling fact is that we can only look at existence and recognize it in this way because everything is held
together for us. However, and paradoxically, we are the only sentient beings in creation who can through the very gift of reasoning choose not to prostrate and destroy everything around us by our presumed cleverness.

He created man from a drop of sperm and yet he is an open challenger (16:4).

As Allah Ta’ala has laid down the Earth for all living creatures, our responsibility lies not in denying His blessings through acts of folly that destroy the environment, but through actively recognizing the order that is around us both for the sake of ourselves and the rest of the natural world.

Khalifa – The Responsibility Principle
This principle establishes our role as the guardians of the natural world. The human race has a special place in Allah Ta’ala’s scheme. Having given us the gift of intelligence He has appointed us as His Khalifa (viceregent) or His representative on Earth. We are thus required to act as protectors of the environment Allah Ta’ala has placed us in.

It is He who appointed you khalifs on the Earth And raised some of you above others in rank So He could test you regarding what He has given you.
Your Lord is swift in retribution;
And He is Ever-Forgiving, Most Merciful (6:165).

Although we are equal partners with the rest of the natural world, we have added responsibilities by virtue of the powers of reasoning the Creator has given us. These responsibilities, as the Qur’an points out, are to uphold what is right –

Let there be a community among you who call to the good,
And enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.
They are the ones who have success (3:104).

And, in doing so, to show no favors –

You who have iman [faith] Be upholders of justice, Bearing witness for Allah alone,
Even against yourselves or your parents and relatives.
Whether they are rich or poor, Allah is well able to look after them.
Do not follow your own desires and deviate from the truth.
If you twist and turn away, Allah is aware of what you do (4:134).

And, finally, to compete in doing good –

... Had Allah willed, He would have made you a single community, but He wanted to test you regarding what has come to you. So compete with each other in doing good... (5:48).

Everything we see around us is Allah Ta’ala’s n’ihma (gift) to us. It is, however, a gift with conditions and the Earth is a testing ground for us. The tests are a measure of our ehsan (acts of worship) in its broadest sense. In other words, we are to live in a way that is pleasing to Allah, striving in everything we do to maintain the harmony of our inner and outer environments.

Will the reward for doing good be anything other than good?
So which of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny? (55:59–60)

As Khalifa, we are trustees of Allah Ta’ala’s creation –

We offered the trust to the heavens, the Earth and the mountains
But they refused to take it on and shrank from it.
But man took it on.
He is indeed wrongful doing and ignorant (33:72).

The Qur’an expresses this responsibility in this form because of its enormity, and our wrongdoing takes many forms –

... Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit And pay their due on the day of their harvest, And do not be profligate.
He does not love the profligate (6:142).

And –

You who have iman [faith]
Do not make haram [unlawful]
The good things Allah has made halal [lawful] for you,
And do not overstep the limits.
Allah does not love people who overstep the limits (5:87).

There is however a way out of our conundrum –

Corruption has appeared in both land and sea Because of what peoples’ own hands have brought about so that they may taste something of what they have done so that hopefully they will turn back (30:40).
Institutions and Accountability

The Qur’an provides the moral foundation for human interaction with the natural world. As the Shari’a evolved, it manifested itself into a range of rules and institutions, as an expression of life in all its manifestations embodying what is truly holistic. Taken as a whole as it was intended to be, caring for Planet Earth, our only home, was integrated within the framework of the Islamic value system. This was an everyday concern for the Muslim, as the Qur’an draws attention to in the verses, “We have not omitted anything from the Book” (6:39) and “He said ‘Our Lord is He Who gives each thing its created form and then guides it’ ” (20:49).

What emerged was a threefold process, which we may classify as legislative principles, institutions, and enforcement. The Qur’an laid down the basis from which the Shari’a evolved, which in turn determined the nature of fiqh (the science of the application of the Shari’a) and the subsequent establishment of relevant institutions. The body of the Shari’a allows us to deduce three general principles as follows –

- The elements that compose the natural world are common property
- The right to benefit from natural resources is a right held in common
- There shall be no damage or infliction of damage bearing in mind future users.

Muslim legalists have over the centuries worked out both principles and structures to give expression to this. These principles concern –

- Individual rights
- Obligations and responsibilities individuals owe to the community
- Accountability
- Benefits accruing to users from renewable resources held in common
- Penalties for improper use of natural resources.

Two of the most important institutions to emerge for this framework are the hima and the harim. The former lends itself to the setting up of a whole range of conservation zones, which may be established by a community or the state for the purposes of protecting land or species of flora and fauna. The latter permits the establishment of inviolable zones, not always but usually, for the protection of watercourses. People have a right in the Shari’a to create such zones managed by themselves and where use is severely restricted.

Having identified the ethical base and institutions, the third element that was needed to complete the picture was a system of accountability. From its earliest years the Islamic state established an agency known as the hisba, whose specific task it was to protect the people through promoting the establishment of good and forbidding wrongdoing (discussed earlier). A learned jurist (muhtasib) headed this agency, and he functioned like the chief inspector of weights and measures and chief public health officer rolled into one. He was also responsible among other similar duties for the proper functioning of the hima and harim zones and acted – to use today’s parlance – as an environmental inspector.

Muslims thus have a fully developed system of environmental protection in their hands but its implementation in the form described above would prove to be problematic in a context in which the secular paradigm is dominant and economic development receives the highest priority. The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) is conducting experiments in various parts of the world where compromises are being sought between state machinery and Shari’a institutions to achieve the best possible conservation outcomes. The most advanced project in this sense, at the time of writing, is the Misali Island Marine Conservation Project located in Zanzibar, Tanzania. There is much to be drawn from the Shari’a in extending and improving this knowledge base, and it is an endeavor that Muslims should now undertake with increasing urgency.

Fazlun M. Khalid

Further Reading


Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) based in Birmingham, England emerged as a result of the work begun by Fazlun Khalid who is its founder and director. His interest in reviving Islamic environmental practice led him in the mid-1980s to persuade a group of his close associates to join him in setting up an Islamic eco-community. It was officially recognized as a charity in 1994 and by the early twenty-first century the IFEES had become an internationally recognized body articulating the Islamic environmental position and practice.

The IFEES is a multidimensional organization and its objectives include:

- Setting up a center for researching Islamic conservation practice.
- Compiling a database and acting as an information exchange on environmental affairs.
- Producing teaching materials, books and journals.
- Training on practical and theoretical subjects. Training will take place by means of weekend courses and medium- and long-term programs.

Training modules under development are based on the principles of the Shari’ah. A range of subjects covering the environmental sciences are also taught. Projects include:

- The setting up of an experimental project focusing on land use and organic farming. Practical training will include sustainable land resource management and non-industrial, traditional farming techniques as a practical demonstration of self-sufficiency. IFEES will be drawing on the expertise already developed in the field.
- Developing alternative low-energy, low-cost technology. IFEES will function as a demonstration center for such technology and will participate in its promotion.
- Acting as a consultancy to various international NGOs, funding agencies and academic bodies.

Among its distinctive features are:

- An emphasis on resolving current concerns through the application of the Shari’ah.
- Developing projects worldwide that give expression to specifically Islamic conservation practice.

Our program is designed to activate those properties inherent in Islam capable of remedying the socio-ecological imbalances of our time. A dedicated core of people with a range of expertise and skills (administrative, research, technical, agricultural, crafts and training) will work together as a community with a commitment to the goals outlined.

IFEES networks worldwide with NGOs, international organizations, academic bodies and grassroots organizations and invites collaboration from organizations and individuals from all persuasions who are also dedicated to the maintenance of the Earth as a healthy habitat for future generations of humankind as well as other living beings.

Fazlun Khalid

See also: Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection

Islamic Foundation for Science and Environment

Islamic Foundation for Science and Environment (IFSE) is a voluntary nonprofit organization that was established in 1994 mainly to integrate Muslims with the scientific movement and to explain and clarify the Islamic point of view vis-à-vis science and environment. It has been working with a two-pronged strategy.

First, it spreads scientific and environment-related awareness among Muslim masses of this sub-continent, especially with regard to pollution, environmental degradation and resource management. (Whenever reference is needed, students are exposed to theories of evolution including Darwinism and Intelligent Design.) Since 1994 it has published a popular science and environment monthly called Urdu Science. Its main target readership
are students and graduates of Deenee Madaaris (Theology Schools).

Secondly, it is trying to emphasize the need to interpret the Qur’an in today’s context and in its right perspective, to understand what it says about scientific and learning pursuits, conservation of resources and the environment, and how a Model Muslim Society situated within the broader, pluralistic Indian society could be established to serve and guide humanity.

The Foundation has established a good rapport with the people of the Madarsa system. A meaningful dialogue has been initiated with them and a short-term orientation course for “Ulemas” (Religious Scholars) to make them aware of the present-day need to conserve resources and protect the environment has been proposed. An effort has been made to convince them to include these issues in their Friday sermons delivered every week to large gatherings, practically in every mosque.

The Foundation has organized lectures on relevant topics at various Madarsas and schools. Occasionally book exhibitions and other outreach programs are also arranged in different schools and Madarsas. School/Madarsa students are encouraged to write on relevant topics of science/environment and annual awards/cash prizes are given to the best three entries from either stream (i.e., Madarsa stream and School stream). There is a regular monthly Question and Answer column in the magazine where readers are free to ask any question on science/environment or their interaction or interpretation in Islam. The best question is given a cash prize every month. Many Madarsa students get this prize, which shows their indulgence.

The Foundation is official Consultant to the “Islamic Fiqh Academy” (Islamic Jurisprudence Academy) on matters of Science and Environment.

Another plan is to devise and introduce a short course for modern-education-system schools whereby students would be taught Qur’anic principles about: 1) nature, its resources and their conservation, 2) the role of humankind on this planet, 3) the purpose of seeking knowledge, understanding the working of nature and growing in tandem with it, and 4) serving humanity with acquired knowledge – putting others’ interest before self-interest – a Qur’anic model of selflessness and serving society.

The Foundation is developing linkages with other societies and religious groups to explain and clarify the Qur’anic teachings about development, coexistence with nature, and equity and distribution of resources for the ultimate good of humanity irrespective of caste or color, north or south.

Mohammad Aslam Parvaiz

See also: Islam on Man and Nature.

Islamic Law

Islamic law (Shari’a) occupies a central position in both the ritual and public lives of Muslims such that they consider a good life to be one that is lived in accordance with the provisions of Shari’a. Therefore, Muslims of every time and clime strive, as far as circumstances permit, to ensure that their activities comport with Shari’a provisions. The sources of Islamic law regarding protection of the environment seek to fulfill Shari’a’s role of providing guidance to the right path, and in this context, to the path of sustainability and harmony between all life forms through ascribing intrinsic value to every form of matter on Earth. Islam’s role in engendering consciousness about nature in particular, and cosmic beauty and order in general, cannot be overemphasized. Pondering about nature is an important aspect of Islam, and such contemplation breeds love for and circumspection toward the natural environment.

A fundamental concept from which the law flows is that every organism on Earth partakes in God’s creation, and as such deserves love and respect. A survey of Islam’s tradition and history reveals outward manifestations of love and respect for all of God’s creatures, such that Prophet Muhammad said of a mountain: “It is a mountain that loves us and we love it” [See Muslim Ibn al-Hajjah, Sahih Muslim, in AL-KUTUB AL-SITTAH § 3371 (Saleh A. Al-Sheik ed., 2000)]. God’s creatures are interconnected and united under one source of order according to which harm to one creature ultimately affects others. Yet, Islam is neither associated with historical profanation, nor the contemporary sacrificialization, of nature.

Generally, environmental rules are dictated by the manner in which Islam constructs the human–nature relationship. Accordingly, the ultimate ownership of all organisms inheres in God, which supercedes apparent human proprietorship, which is protected and enforced under the law. Under this competing human claims. This ownership confers the right of beneficial use to fulfill the material and spiritual needs of humans, but it does not extend to an unquestionable power to maintain, spare, or destroy these elements at will.

Flowing from this posture is the belief that most organisms are subject to common human ownership under the law and their appropriation is deemed to be for communal benefit. Water, air, the wilderness, and other natural resources such as oil and gas, are all in the public domain. Regulation of human behavior with respect to these resources is dictated by considerations focused on preventing harm to humans and nonhumans alike. The principle of harm prevention limits the exercise of otherwise justifiable rights where such exercise inflicts unacceptable damage.

Although Islamic law acknowledges the primacy of humankind with its attendant right use Earth resources,
such right is limited by the status of humankind as vice-gerent or trustee—a status based on humankind’s material/spiritual make-up as well as imbued intellect; and as such, we are accountable and owe a duty to maintain *mizan*, the balance of all life on Earth. The Qur’an states: “And the Earth We have spread out (like carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance” (Qur’an 15:19). It states further: “And the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice), In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance” (Qur’an 55:7–8). The Prophet also said in this regard: “The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you his stewards over it; He will see what you will do” [See Muslim Ibn al-Hajjah, *Sahih Muslim*, in AL-KUTUB AL-SITTAH § 6948 (Saleh A. Al-Sheik ed., 2000)].

Norms of Islamic law regulating the human/environment relationship therefore draw from the trusteeship of humankind and its responsibility to maintain the Earth’s ecological balance. Preserving animal life, limiting the justification for killing wildlife to only nourishment as well as placing restrictions on the genre and mode of the killing, preventing harm to all life forms except when human life is exposed to immediate threat, even then limiting the elimination of the threat to the extent of force necessary to remove the danger, and providing site-specific mechanisms are all examples of traditional Islamic norms implementing its conception of the human/environment relationship toward maintaining the Earth’s balance.

The site-specific rules applicable to inviolable (or *haram*) regions further illustrate the prescribed human–environment behavior. In these regions, all persons are subject to civil and criminal penalties for disturbing, much less killing, any wildlife from its chosen habitat in the regions, or for cutting leaves or branches of naturally grown trees, even if they happen to be thorns.

The law denounces intemperate use of resources, such as water, even if one is by a flowing river and performing ritual washing. Consumption of resources that do not satisfy a legally identified function or need is considered wastage; as such the Prophet prohibited riding on the fur of tigers. We may note the implicit postulation of Islamic law regarding maintenance of a pristine environment (fitrah) and harmony among species. There is, therefore, a considerable challenge when the law tries to redress and rehabilitate a global environment that is being severely degraded. One noticeable challenge and opportunity for further development of the law is the lack of extended protection of marine life on an explicit basis comparable to that which is guaranteed terrestrial wilderness.

However, the implications of these basic provisions for the development of modern environmental management is that they offer a new foundation for opening human awareness of the need for a wider dialogue on the environmental problem. Islamic law seeks to prevent harm not only to humans, but also to all other organisms because those organisms participate in declaring the glory of their Creator and aspire, like humans, to fulfill a certain spiritual function even as humans “understand not how they declare His glory” (Qur’an 17:44).

This non-anthropocentric posture justifying the independent existence of other organisms apart from their apparent utility to humans presents a functional mechanism beyond moral suasion in that they are designed to prevent harm not only to the present generation of human beings, but also to future ones and to other life forms on Earth. Islamic law is amenable to such a comprehensive framework since most mediums and mineral resources involved in polluting the environment are largely managed for communal or state benefit, and are therefore subject to public-oriented regulation with little challenge posed by private interests. The law does not make waste, excessive consumption or pollution an extension of property rights. Rather, it treats them as part of a notional responsibility toward nature.

Extending the prohibition of harm to all creatures rather than to humans alone does away with humanism and other limitations that have influenced the determination of environmental problems such as unsustainable consumption patterns, population growth, and warfare as based merely on costs and short-term benefits.

Muslim communities can utilize Islamic law in formulating, implementing, and redirecting environmental policies in their domestic programs on the one hand; and on the other, for guiding their positions toward a non-anthropocentric agenda in negotiating international environmental agreements. Environmental programs of some Muslim states are beginning to reflect Islamic law principles, as those states have hinged their biodiversity programs and various Biodiversity Country Reports submitted to the relevant U.N. body on the divine order of the Prophet Noah to protect pairs of every species from peril. Scores of environmental statutes of these countries also proceed from the Islamic concept of harm prevention as explained above. For example, article 50 of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran limits and forbids all activities, especially those in the economic sphere, which may necessitate “damage to the environment.” The challenge for Muslims is to cooperate with others in devising means of operating their economic activities in harmony with other environmental postulates of Islamic law.

*Further Reading*

Ahmad, Ali. *A Cosmopolitan Orientation of the Process of International Environmental Lawmaking: An Islamic*
Israel and Environmentalism

Environmental History Prior to the Foundation of Modern Israel

Efforts to protect the land of Israel or the Holy Land from environmental damage are recent. Since the advent of the Roman conquest and the destruction of the second Jewish commonwealth, evidence exists of steady land degradation, overgrazing and deforestation. Yet, none of the many occupying powers who governed the land seems to have considered environmental issues meaningfully during their rule prior to the twentieth century. Rather, the ecological deterioration was frequently exacerbated by policies that sought to maximize tax revenues from the largely agrarian population. Environmental conditions in Palestine worsened noticeably during World War I when the Ottoman armies devastated forests in their war efforts. For instance, one third of the olive trees in Palestine were destroyed in order to produce the wood necessary to run and extend the railways.

The British Mandate, which began its rule during the 1920s, implemented a limited policy of conservation. Laws were passed creating forest reserves and, for the first time, hunting ordinances were introduced, although poorly enforced. While several species of large animals disappeared from Palestine during the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., the Syrian bear, the crocodile, the cheetah), beyond biodiversity damage, environmental impacts were minimal. Indeed, in many ways the Palestinian environment may have improved, with malaria essentially eradicated, soil conservation measures encouraged and rudimentary urban sewage systems installed.

Nevertheless, during the three decades of British control, the antecedents to modern pollution problems emerged. The population swelled from some 400,000 residents (at the turn of the century) to 1.8 million, an extensive road infrastructure introduced automobiles to the northern half of the land, and heavy industry was introduced, as was the mining of the Dead Sea. During this period, with the exception of the admonitions of a few bold botanists and zoologists, practically no organized protest over the environmental problems existed. The chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook consistently expressed concern for the natural world, but his efforts were limited to the theological realm and did not address the actual environmental policies of the Mandate government.

The Establishment of Israel, Rapid Development and Nature Protection

Subsequent to declaring its independence as a Jewish state, Israel began aggressive efforts to encourage “the ingathering of the exiles,” absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrants. To meet the needs of a growing population, the young country expanded its agricultural production as well as afforestation efforts dramatically. An increasing percentage of the population, however, settled in cities and towns, with industry and services as the major source of employment.

It was during this period that the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet L’Yisrael), a corporation owned by the World Zionist Organization, changed its institutional focus from land acquisition to forestry. During most of the 1950s, the JNF planted some six million trees a year, six times more than foresters had planted during the British mandate. The trees planted were primarily confers, in particular the Aleppo (Jerusalem) pine tree, that had proven to be a very fast-growing and tenacious species, given the poor soil and steep slopes where they were planted. While there were initial efforts to create a local timber industry, the confers were not sufficiently productive. Debates regarding the indigenousness of this species still continue. What is no longer in doubt is the vulnerability of this species to an aphid that devastated vast swaths of the Jewish National Fund forests. This, along with a growing ecological sensitivity within the JNF, has led to a more recent emphasis on diversity of species with a corresponding growth in traditional Mediterranean forests. In retrospect, the results are dramatic. After their almost complete disappearance, today, roughly 10 percent of Israel’s lands are designated as forests under the National Master Plan, largely due to JNF efforts, and areas that had previously been considered to be semi-arid deserts are now forests that provide recreational benefits.
Ironically, agricultural expansion and the JNF’s plan to drain the Huleh swamp to that end were also the catalyst for the creation of the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), the first and still the largest environmental organization in Israel. This unique wetlands ecosystem, located at the northern tip of Israel, was considered to be a source of malaria and potentially arable. When the protests of scientists and amateur nature-lovers failed to prevent the draining of the swamp, in 1953 with the leadership of Professor Heinrich Mendelssohn and Amotz Zahavi, this group formally launched the SPNI. Its original mission involved nature protection and soon thereafter education. While its involvement in enforcing hunting laws by fielding a force of amateur rangers came to a halt with the establishment of Israel’s Nature Reserve Authority, the SPNI continued to be a leading force in environmental education through its extensive field school network, as well as a high-profile advocate for conservation, primarily through monitoring the planning process.

Like most of the population in Israel at the time, the new activists were decidedly secular in their outlook, espousing at once a Romantic and Zionist ideology toward nature. Yet, their affiliation with the historic biblical aspects of the Holy Land was pronounced and Jewish heritage became an integral part of the SPNI educational message. Hundreds of thousands of school children pass through this informal program of hiking, taxonomy and reference to the long history of the land, in particular the natural history that appears in the Bible and the Talmud.

After considerable lobbying, the SPNI helped pass legislation creating a Nature Reserve Authority in 1963 that was independent from the parallel National Parks Authority whose mandate included development of parks, primarily of historic importance. Israel’s biological diversity is remarkable, largely as a result of migrations and mixing from the three adjoining continents. The country is home to 2600 plant species (130 endemic to Israel) and 700 vertebrates. Under the leadership of former General Avram Yaffe, the Authority set out on an ambitious program to protect the country’s dwindling natural treasures through the declaration of nature reserves and the preservation of “Protected Natural Assets.” Today, some 25 percent of the lands in Israel have been earmarked for preservation and protection of ecological systems in the Reserve system. The tide of extinctions within Israel has largely been halted by the enforcement of hunting laws and the preservation of habitat. Recently, there has been concern expressed that present patterns of urban sprawl and development may threaten some of the impressive conservation gains.

Pollution in the Holy Land
Israel’s pollution profile has not enjoyed such progress. With a population growth of roughly one million per decade, the northern half of the country, in which over 80 percent of the residents live, has become one of the most crowded regions in the world. Almost all environmental trends, with the exception of oil/tar pollution on the beaches and concentrations of lead in ambient air, have become worse or stayed the same. Air pollution in the major cities, which was primarily caused by factories during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, is now produced largely by vehicle exhaust and has become increasingly acute. Water quality in the country’s two major aquifers has suffered and attempts to restore the country’s streams, which primarily serve as conduits for sewage effluents, have not been effective.

A Ministry of Environment was established in 1988, replacing a smaller and poorly funded Environmental Protection Service at the Interior Ministry. The Ministry remains small (less than five hundred workers) and has limited authority in critical areas such as pesticide registration, drinking water, and auto-emission standard setting and oversight. Politically, the position of Environmental Minister has had low prestige, with some eight Ministers filling the position during its first fourteen years. Yet, the Ministry’s competent professional staff boast impressive achievements in several important areas.

In response to the severity of the environmental insults, a virtual explosion of new environmental organizations has emerged at both the local and national level. Life and Environment, the umbrella group for Israel’s environmental organizations, has around eighty member organizations. Malraz, the Council for Prevention of Noise and Pollution, established during the 1960s, was the first legal advocacy group in Israel, providing free legal assistance on a range of nuisance cases. While dormant during much of the 1990s, the organization was revitalized in 2001 and operates a mobile inspection van that has been authorized to stop cars to check their emissions levels. Among the more influential of the new organizations is Adam Teva V’Din, the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, established as a public interest law group in 1990. The Tel Aviv-based organization boasts a large staff of lawyers and scientists that have successfully litigated numerous cases involving air quality, water quality and physical planning. Environmental organizations specialize in Israel today and focus on transportation, radiation, water quality and of course education. Almost every town and hamlet has either a formal or informal environmental activist group, with major cities sporting numerous initiatives, like the forty organizations that make up the “Sustainable Jerusalem” coalition.

Since 1998, Green Parties have begun to field candidates in Municipal and National elections. While public support has been insufficient for representation in Israel’s Parliamentary elections, elections in Haifa and Tel Aviv
have produced surprising success. Indeed, local Green party leader Shmuel Gilbert was part of a winning coalition in 2003 that lifted him into the position of Deputy mayor and chairman of the Haifa Planning and Building Committee. Voters for Green parties, were not, however, religiously motivated and came generally from among the liberal, highly secular public. (Typically, religious Israelis vote for parties affiliated with their ethnic or chosen theological inclination.)

Education in Israel is divided up according to religious affiliation so it is difficult to generalize about the interplay between religion and the environment in this context. The predominant secular educational program has expanded its environmental offerings, with many high schools offering advanced programs and national matriculation exams also offered on the subject. Religious themes, however, are not part of this curriculum. While Bible studies are mandatory from second grade, evolution is taught in biology classes as a matter of fact, with biblical descriptions of creation left to the realm of national mythology. Religious Jewish (as well as Moslem) education takes a more traditional track. Recently, some ecological materials have been integrated into religious educational programs and some institutions, such as the high school Yeshiva (rabbinic training program) in Mitzpeh Ramon, have made environmental studies a sub-specialty.

Religion and the Environmental Movement in Israel
Leaders of Israel’s environmental organizations are primarily secular and non-denominational in their personal affiliation. Indeed, until recently, the religious communities in Israel were completely marginal in activist activities. While some prominent environmentalists, such as ornithologist and former SPNI Director Yossi Leshem are Orthodox Jews, they have not tried to make their faith an important part of the organizations they run. Environmental groups most often reflect the prevailing ideologies of the Israeli environmental community, which continues to be a largely Romantic and occasionally Rationalist philosophical perspective that often contains some mystical elements, based on traditional Zionist adulation of the natural world in Israel. Indeed, sociologist Oz Almog has gone as far as to characterize the traditional perspective among Israel’s first generation of Sabras (native-born Israeli Jews) as “pantheistic,” where nature, rather than the traditional Jewish God, became the subject of worship. Nature was among the most “prestigious” of the compulsory subjects of study, hiking became a national pastime (with the Bible providing the most common travel book), and eulogies for fallen soldiers focused on their competence in field biology rather than their military prowess.

Israel’s environmental movement has been strongly influenced by Jewish immigrants, who assumed leading roles in environmental organizations as well as in academia. Immigrants from English-speaking countries have been extremely influential, with several new groups established and run by this cohort. In addition, Jewish foundations, based in the U.S. and Europe, have since the 1990s offered prodigious funding to Israel’s environmental movement, with most environmental organizations enjoying better support from Jewish communities outside Israel than from local philanthropists. Yet, Jewish environmentalists living in the Diaspora have not yet extended a meaningful influence on Israeli environmental thinking and remain unknown to their Israeli co-religionists for the most part.

Recently, there has been a move to integrate Israel’s religious Jewish community into the environmental movement as well as consciously to integrate Jewish traditional values of stewardship into the local green ideology. The Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership, an environmental educational and sustainability think-tank based in Tel Aviv, founded L’avo L’shamro (To Work and To Protect) based on the directive in Genesis regarding the Garden of Eden, an initiative that brings together religious Jews with pro-environmental leanings. In 2002, Life and Environment sponsored a teach-in day in Israel’s Parliament Knesset where rabbis (including Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Bakshi Doron) presented pro-environmental Jewish texts and teachings. When ultra-orthodox rabbi and politician Moshe Gafni became chairman of the Knesset Interior and Environment Committee, he became one of the most environmentally active Parliamentarians, winning an award from greens for his work and even making Jewish traditional commitment to environmental protection an election theme for his party. Several Orthodox and Ultra-orthodox communities have begun to field environmental interest groups, like the Committee for Quality of Life in Har Nof that has sponsored a range of initiatives to protect Jerusalem and even to recycle the water from mikvehs, the traditional Jewish ritual baths. As the word “water” appears in the Old Testament 580 times, as well as half a dozen different Hebrew words for precipitation-forms, rain-fed ritual baths seem to provide a natural bridge between environmental concerns and the spiritual routine of traditionally Jewish Israelis.

Involvement of the Moslem and Christian communities in Israel’s mainstream environmental movement remains fairly minimal. The few Arab organizations that are active environmentally, like the Galilee Society, and the Arab National Society for Health Services and Research, are decidedly secular in their approach and their leadership contains both Moslems and Arabs. The Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel (ICCI), a Jerusalem-based, interfaith coalition of seventy organizations, attempts to bring a range of religious persuasions and leaders together to work on environmental issues. In 2001 it began sponsoring an annual conference on Religion and the
Environment, along with the Jerusalem Institute. To date the event has failed to attract mainstream Israeli religious figures and institutions as participants. Perhaps the most influential religious influence on Israel’s environment can be found among Haifa’s Bahá’í community. Their recently expanded gardens have transformed the center of this scenic city, with sculpted terraces providing tranquil and aesthetic open spaces in the otherwise conventional urban setting.

Most of the cities that are deemed “holy” to the world’s monotheistic religions suffer from the environmental pathologies that characterize the rest of Israel. Hebron, Bethlehem, and East Jerusalem have inadequate sewage systems. Nazareth suffers from air pollution from chronic traffic congestion, with its municipal environmental protection unit closed for lack of funds. An improved quality of water in the Sea of Galilee is the source of some encouragement, which is the result of the concerted efforts of the Kinneret Administration, a local agency that has had success at reducing non-point and point source discharges into the world’s lowest freshwater lake.

Zionism’s insistence on the reemergence of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel (and rejection of a multi-cultural model) and the Arab unwillingness to tolerate such an entity has produced a cascade of violent events. The environment itself has only been marginally affected. While trees have been uprooted by soldiers in attempts to reduce sniping, and segmentation of habitats has been caused by border fences or bypass roads, these impacts may be largely reversible. Paradoxically, there are also unquestionable ecological benefits associated with the enmity, such as de facto no-man’s-land preserve areas typified by the Jordan River valley or the Lebanon border. Environmentalists certainly hope that among the confidence-building measures necessary to end the conflict there will be common environmental initiatives such as binational and multinational nature reserves, trans-boundary coordinated air and water management, pesticide-reduction policies, and joint anti-desertification measures. Religion has always had a central role in the now century-long Arab–Israeli conflict, and the environment may provide some common ground for diffusing these divisions, producing a more peaceful and sustainable future.

Alon Tal

Further Reading


See also: Bahá’í Faith; Gordon, Aharon David; Gush Emunim; Hasidism and Nature Mysticism; Hebrew Bible; Jewish Law and Genetic Engineering; Jewish Law and Vegetarianism; Jewish Environmentalism in North America; Jewish Law and Environmental Protection; Judaism; Kabbalah and Eco-theology.

Izzi Dien, Mawil Y. (1948–)

Among the very few contemporary Islamic thinkers to make the environment a central concern, Mawil Y. Izzi Dien (Izz al-Din, aka Izzi Deen; b. Baghdad, Iraq) has been one of the most prominent. Izzi Dien was trained in Islamic Law at Baghdad and Manchester Universities. In 1983, while on the Faculty of Law at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Izzi Dien helped formulate the first contemporary statement on conservation from an Islamic perspective, a paper which was published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in English, French, and Arabic. As an advisor to the Saudi government, he helped establish the legal and philosophical framework for that country’s Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration during the 1980s.

Izzi Dien’s 1990 essay, “Islamic Environmental Ethics, Law and Society,” as a result of being reprinted in numerous anthologies throughout the 1990s, came to be seen by many Western environmentalists as representing the normative Islamic view. In this essay, as in his later book-length treatment published in 2000, Izzi Dien emphasizes the moral obligations which Islam places upon humans, focusing on those aspects of the classical legal tradition of Islam and its sources in the Qur’an and *hadith* which apply to the management and distribution of natural resources, especially land and water. In particular he cites the legal principles of *hima* (protected areas) and *ihya al-mawat* (bringing to life of dead lands) in terms of their applicability in Muslim societies today.

Richard C. Foltz

Further Reading


See also: Islam; Islam and Eco-Justice; Islam and Environmental Ethics.