Introduction to Special Issue

Islam and Ecology: Theology, Law and Practice of Muslim Environmentalism

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Abstract
For religious Muslims, preventing climate change and loss of habitat can be thought of as the preservation of God's revelation. This essay provides an introduction to how Islam is engaged in protection of the environment, analyzing the four essays in this special issue.

Keywords
Islam, environment, climate change, Indonesia, Islamic law

This collection of essays on Islam and the environment provides heartening evidence that Muslims throughout the world are engaged in protecting and preserving precious natural resources. Two of these articles focus on Indonesia, where official Muslim institutions are serving to reinforce Indonesian state interests by strengthening and justifying environmental laws. But such activities are not unique to Indonesia. In his article, David Johnston gives a brief overview of four influential Muslim intellectuals and activists who argue, in very different ways, that all Muslims must respond to environmental threats as part of their religion.

Johnston gives examples of experts who make their arguments out of the legal-ethical framework known as Shari'a. For example, Mawil Izzi Dien, at the University of Wales, has written a book that outlines a Shari'a-based response to ecological challenges. Importantly, Johnston notes that when authors like Izzi Dien use "Shari'a," it seems to mean "an ethical ideal rather than a body of laws." Johnston therefore addresses the notion of Shari'a as
"rhetorical strategy," a markedly religious term that is recognizable to Muslims worldwide and can mobilize a broad response. In this sense, Shari'a-based arguments are more effective and more broadly influential than esoteric mystical discussions of famous Muslim philosopher S.H. Nasr, whose works are also analyzed by Johnston. As we will see below, however, there is still an important role for the esoteric and affective side of religious traditions to play in any effective response.

Johnston is aware that some of his authors seem almost apologetic in their attempts to describe Islam as environmentally friendly. In other words, some Muslim authors seem anxious to defend Islam as being just as earth-friendly as Christianity, Judaism and other traditions. This serves as a reminder that this collection of essays is designed to highlight the work of Muslim activists, not to represent the broad range of discussion in the Muslim world as a whole.

Iran, with its oil production, its relatively wealthy population and its heavy industry, also happens to have the largest carbon footprint of any majority Muslim country.1 In Iran, as in the United States, high carbon output is a means to a comfortable, even opulent, lifestyle. But this is the exception in the Muslim world. For example, the 150 million people of Bangladesh produced 46,000 kilotons of CO₂ in 2008. The 16 million of Niger produced only 851 kilotons.2

It is a sad irony that the very same Muslim countries, which have contributed almost nothing to the rise in greenhouse gases will be among the hardest hit. Already, the droughts in East Africa in 2011 and the endless rains that brought devastation to Pakistan in 2010 serve as harbingers of the changes scientists have predicted for our climate, not to mention the possibilities that the Maldives and half of Bangladesh will be under water within the next one hundred years.

This imbalance of cause and effect, our overconsumption causing their suffering, is outrageous and violates every ethical principle of love for neighbor, caring for the poor, and stewardship of the earth that religious

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1) Even so, its annual output of 538,000 kilotons of CO₂ is only double that of Pennsylvania, while Iran's population is six times greater; and of course, Iran's output pales in comparison with 5.5 and 7 million kilotons for the United States and China respectively. All carbon emission data is cited from the World Bank. http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.KT accessed on Feb. 26, 2012.

2) For a comparison, consider that this number is approximately double the carbon footprint of the Pennsylvania State University, where I work. Penn State has been steadily reducing its greenhouse gases, down to 460 kilotons in 2010. See http://www.ghg.psu.edu/ accessed on Feb. 26, 2012. This calculation does not include the carbon load of university-related travel.
traditions preach. How did we arrive at such a point in our development as a species that we so easily dismiss the lives of millions so we can live in climate-controlled comfort?

Forty years ago, Lynn White, Jr. offered a provocative thesis that laid blame at the feet of monotheistic views of God that, he argued, separated human beings from nature. Where pagan, polytheistic devotees saw the natural world as alive, enchanted and full of spiritual meaning, monotheistic men subjected nature to the scientific gaze to be exploited, her secrets revealed. Ahmad Afzaal deftly points out in his contribution to this journal that White's thesis does not map on to the empirical experience of either Christianity or other monotheistic traditions. To the extent that it works at all, it is a critique only of one very specific view of God as supremely transcendent, distant from the natural world. Afzaal calls this "supernatural theism" and argues that this notion of God has only recently gained prominence, and even so, only in certain circles. Afzaal's key point is that while religiously motivated activism is valuable, theology is even more important. The magnitude of ecological crises facing humankind right now is one that requires a massive reconsideration of the most basic questions of the meaning and end of human existence.

To respond to this crisis, Afzaal finds inspiration in the early twentieth century philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal. He writes, "For Iqbal, nature is not a thing but a process. Nature is not what God created in the distant past; nature is what God does, now." Here, Afzaal is marking two different theories of God's relationship with nature as a way of understanding the ideal human relationship with nature. In the understanding of supernatural theism, God is above and apart from nature, and nature is either negative or neutral, a thing to be tamed or exploited. What Iqbal is promoting is a form of panentheism, of God existent pervasively throughout Creation. In this case, it is through our human interaction with nature that we discover God. It is this vision of God that Afzaal believes Muslims (and I would say all believers) must recover in order to develop a viable eco-theology that will carry us through the trials of the coming century.

For students of Genesis, these two visions of God are familiar in the two creation myths. In the first (Genesis 1:1-2:3), God speaks the world into existence in an ordered fashion on a scale that is cosmic and timeless. In the second (Genesis 2:4-3:24), God walks in the garden, plants its trees and forms humankind out of the earth itself. Similarly, the Qur'an contains passages in which God seems separate from Creation and ones where God is intimately intertwined with nature's bounty. Arguably, anyone who actually works the land for a living finds it easy to meet God in garden and forest. Environmental stewardship, therefore, can be much more than
following God's commands to care for nature and preserve it for generations to come; it can also be what pre-modern scholars called reading the "second book" of revelation—a place to learn to know God.

In her overview of new environmental movements in Indonesia, which appear to be springing up everywhere, Anna M. Gade's informants describe the need for both a legal and an emotional framework for engaging nature. For example, K.H. Thonthawi develops messages about the environment for both the mind and the heart. He explains, "true religious norms are not issued or processed by the human brain; they come straight from and go straight to the hati (heart)."

This combination of rational and affective appeals seems to culminate in a new form of "eco-sufism." Gade attended a sufi "eco-dhikr" and found appeals to emotion in terms familiar from discussions in both Qur'an and hadith. In this case, however, hope for heaven and fear of hell are transmuted "in order to foster ecological conviction and commitment, whether with the anticipation of satisfaction and reward on the one hand, or with the warning of future regret and suffering on the other." Gade's article sums up themes that are implicit in each one of the other papers. What we are witnessing in the Islamic world is the development of a new theology, one based on rational arguments and emotional appeals in the sacred texts of the tradition but applied to new challenges.

Fachruddin Majeri Mangunjaya and Jeanne Elizabeth McKay give numerous examples of "green" practices in Indonesia, some arising out of local initiatives and some due to partnerships between European and Indonesian organizations. Indonesia is a particularly important player in the struggle to halt permanent environmental degradation. A nation of densely populated islands, it is at once the most populous Muslim country in the world and also the site of unparalleled biodiversity. As Mangunjaya and McKay discuss, the pressures on its forests and wild areas are immense, as agricultural and residential development continue to expand. As in the rest of the world, religious traditions play an important role, both in providing leadership on national projects and also framing discussion in a productive way. Mangunjaya and McKay even claim that, "Islam provides a comprehensive system for teaching the fundamental aspects of environmental care." As evidence, they cite well-known prophetic hadith (oral narratives passed down from the Prophet Muhammad) on preventing pollution of wells and streams. On the basis of these sources, the Indonesian Council of Ulama has produced authoritative religious edicts (fatwas) prohibiting the destruction of protected forests and illegal logging. Another fatwa on "environmentally friendly mining" was produced "to strengthen [the]
standing of state law, especially with respect to environmental justice in the sector of mining."

The engagement noted by Mangunjaya and McKay is backed up by new interpretations of Islamic law, expressed in the texts that Johnston analyzes. The significance of these changes are only fully understood through Afzaal's perceptive reading of White and Weber. Most important, Afzaal's and Gade's articles make clear that new green movements in Indonesia and elsewhere are not simply faddish responses to the issue of the day but fundamental shifts in the way that Islam is taught and understood. These are significant results for any student of Islam, but there are also lessons here for everyone concerned about the environment.

Religions are complex traditions that contain wisdom that can be applied to new situations. In the case of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, ancient stories, such as the creation narratives, can be reinterpreted and rediscovered. Second, true engagement is a combination of practical engagement with the hands, intellectual appreciation by the mind, and emotional attachment. Examples from Indonesia, Zanzibar, Wales and elsewhere can inspire people all over the globe to respond.

Our experience of working to care for creation, instead of exploiting nature, can lead to an engagement with God. Iqbal's vision of God as panentheistic brings to mind Qur'anic verses that challenge people to wander in the land and see there the signs of God:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of humankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, thereby giving life to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that he scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth—Here indeed are signs for a people that are wise (Q 2:164).

Nature, then, is much more than a storehouse to be plundered or a threat to be neutralized, it is a book full of God's signs ready for us to read. For religious people, then, preventing climate change and loss of species and habitat can be much more than an ethical imperative—it is also the preservation of God's revelation. To exploit these mysteries for short-term gain is to profoundly misunderstand both their meaning and our own role within the cosmos.