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Islam and the Environment

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This is a transcript of a presentation at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Peace Studies Conference at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University on September 18, 2023. The presentation provides (1) some background information about Islam; (2) related ideas about Christianity; (3) a discussion of some verses in the Quran, which relate to the environment, and some Islamic interpretations of them; (4) an analysis of Ibrahim Abdul-Matin’s ideas on Islam and the environment; and (5) a tribute to Father Rene McGraw, OSB.

Keywords: Christianity, Ecology, Environment, Environment and Religion, Environmental Justice, Islam

Introduction
The focus of this presentation is on Islam and the environment. Specifically, this presentation will emphasize the aspects of Islam which obligate all humans to protect the environment. Before delving into Islam and the environment, I would like to provide some brief background about Islam.

While the name of the religion is Islam, the adherents of that religion are Muslims (Denny, 2011). Muslims believe that Islam originated in the year 610 CE when the Prophet Muhammad began receiving messages from God through the angel Gabriel, which are called revelations. These messages, which Muhammad received in the language of Arabic, came to him periodically until before his passing in 632 CE. These messages are written in the Quran, all of which is in Arabic, that Muslims believe contains the actual words of God and is a perfect sacred text (Denny, 2011). The Quran functions in a somewhat similar way in Islam as the Bible does in Christianity. In both Islam and Christianity, adherents of those religions believe that their respective sacred texts carry messages from God, and constitute the foundations of their respective religions (Cory & Hollerich, 2016).

Indeed, the Quran, like the Bible, contains many verses that call on all humans, including Muslims, to care for the earth and its resources. In addition, according to Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad, the most important role model for Muslims, also taught Muslims about the importance of caring for the environment (Suteria, 2021). An important Islamic principle related to humans’ responsibility for caring for the environment is the following: God created everything in the universe, including the earth and humans, and God gave humans the responsibility for caring for the earth and everything else that he created.

The Quran and the Environment
According to many Muslims, humans have the obligation of doing whatever may be necessary to care for the environment (Suteria, 2021). Along these lines, I will quote some verses from the Quran, and explain the ways that Muslims believe that they call on humans to care for the environment. Quran 2:60 states, “…And do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption.”
For Muslims, this verse makes significant connections among the Islamic concepts of human sin, greed, corruption, and the possibility of harming the earth, as result of these tendencies. Indeed, selfishness is one reason that humans exploit the environment, sometimes for their own greedy purposes. This Quranic passage reminds Muslims to rely on God to enable them to block their self-centered inclinations and focus on the results of their positive actions in such a way that they will protect the environment (Suteria, 2021).

Quran 6:99 states, “And it is God who sends down water from the sky. With it, we produce vegetation of all kinds, from which we bring greenery, from which we produce grains in clusters, and palm-trees with hanging clusters, and vineyards, and olives, and pomegranates - similar and dissimilar. Watch their fruits as they grow and ripen. Surely in this are signs for people who believe.” For Muslims, this verse discusses God’s all-powerful and life-giving nature. One manifestation of God’s omnipotence is his ability to imbue life on creation. In this passage, the forms of life, with which God has endowed the earth, include greenery, vegetation of all kinds, grains, palm trees, vineyards, olives, and fruits. While God has created all forms of life, God sustains them in many ways which includes sending water from the sky to nurture them. Yet, for Muslims, humans have a crucial role in the sustenance of life, in that this verse states “Surely in this are signs for people who believe.” For Muslims, there are at least two aspects to those signs. One is that God is the world’s creator. Second is that humans should look upon God’s example of sustaining the environment, and do so themselves (Suteria, 2021).

Quran 21:32 states that God “made the sky a protected ceiling; yet [the unbelievers] turn away from its wonders.” Some Muslims view the protected ceiling as the ozone layer and interpret this passage as placing an obligation on humans to protect it. Along these lines, some Muslims believe that the Quran reminds humans that God cares for them by creating the world with the ozone layer to protect humans from ultraviolet radiation that can harm humans and other organisms. Yet, from a Muslim perspective, God knows that if humans are not careful, they may destroy the ozone layer. In this context, this Quranic verse reminds humans that they need to protect the ozone layer and God’s creation in order to protect themselves and the rest of God’s creation (Suteria, 2021).

Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, Islam, and the Environment
In connection with these ideas, the contemporary Muslim environmentalist, Ibrahim Abdul-Matin (2010), emphasizes six core principles for Islamic environmentalism in his timely book entitled Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Environment. These six principles involve (1) Understanding the oneness of God and his creation; (2) Seeing signs of God everywhere; (3) Being a steward of the earth; (4) Honoring the covenant, or trust, humans have with God to be protectors of the planet; (5) Moving toward justice; and (6) Living in balance with nature (Abdul-Matin, 2010). In order to show that his ideas are firmly rooted in the original Arabic version of the Quran, he includes, in his book, key Quranic words in the original Arabic next to the corresponding English translations. These Arabic words include the words tawhid for God’s oneness, ayat for God’s signs, khalifah for human’s stewardship of God’s creation, aманa for the trusting relationship between God and humans, adl for God’s justice, and mızan for the balance between humans and nature (Abdul-Matin, 2010).

Abdul-Matin builds on these and related and related Islamic concepts in his book, as he discusses from an Islamic perspective the problems of overconsumption, the environmental movement as a
response to overconsumption, and problems related to overuse of energy, water, and food resources. With respect to overconsumption, for example, Abdul-Matin believes that a starting point for being aware of one’s overconsumption begins with prayer, which Muslims must do five times per day (Abdul Matin, 2010). While prayer strengthens Muslims’ bonds with God and each other, environmentally-conscious Muslims can also utilize prayer to continually make themselves aware of their own consumption and ways to limit it, in a manner that is as disciplined and humble as their spiritual state when they pray (Abul-Matin, 2010).

With respect to the environmental movement as a response to overconsumption, Abdul-Matin suggests that there is significant overlap between some of the principles of Islamic environmentalism, on the one hand, and some principles of secular environmentalism, on the other. For example, Islamic and secular environmentalists both believe in the importance of human solidarity, as they look for signs of environmental harm while implementing ways to protect or resolve that harm (Abdul-Matin, 2010). Muslim and secular environmentalists also believe in the importance of human responsibility and stewardship, of nurturing trusting relationships between persons so they can work together to protect the environment, of fostering justice, and maintaining a balance between humans and nature. For Abdul-Matin, Muslims can maintain the strength of their Islamic faith while working alongside non-Muslim allies in establishing and perpetuating environmental protection and justice (Abdul-Matin, 2010).

Within this context, Abdul-Matin (2010) states that Muslims and others, who are involved in the struggle for environmental protection and justice, must be aware of the harm that colonialism has done to the environment. The negative effects of colonialism are particularly important with respect to Muslims because many majority-Muslim countries were colonized. The colonial powers used several methods including forms of domination that were political, economic, military, social, cultural, and linguistic in perpetuating colonialism while harming the environment, in the process (Abdul-Matin, 2010). While some believe that the colonial period has ended, Abdul-Matin (2010) argues that many forces that the colonial powers used perpetuate their power, continue to harm to the environment. Abdul-Matin (2010) believes that if Muslims stay true to their Islamic principles and act in partnership with their Muslim and non-Muslim allies, they can reduce and possibly correct the harms which colonialism and its effects have had on the environment.

Toward a Conclusion
In light of all these ideas, Islam obligates Muslims to protect the environment, while providing them with an ethical framework to enact ideas related to environmental activism. At the same time, environmentalist Muslims and Christians may be natural allies in the struggles to protect the environment because their religions have many similar pro-environmental ethical concepts. These ethical concepts include God as creator of the universe, humans as stewards of the environment, prayer as a spiritually nourishing factor in the environmental struggle, and justice and peace as goals that can motivate their religious and political partnerships. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus is believed to have said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you” (John 14:27). Similarly, the Quran states, “As for those who believe and do good works, God will guide them through their faith. Rivers will run beneath their feet in the Gardens of Bliss. Their prayer will be ‘Glory to You, Lord!’ and their greeting to one another, ‘Peace!’”(Quran 10:9-10). Shared concepts of peace can form a basis for allies, who work toward environmental justice.
Tribute to Father Rene McGraw, OSB

With these ideas in mind and in the spirit of this conference, I would like to pay tribute to Father Rene McGraw. Father Rene had a profound influence on my professional life, in many ways, including through the conversations that we had about the relationships among Peace Studies, Religion, and Theology. One of the early conversations that we had was during the 1997-98 academic year when I was a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute at Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota USA, where I was working on my Ph.D. dissertation. At a gathering of members of the CSB/SJU community, which included resident scholars from the Institute, Fr. Rene and I conversed about Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979, which overthrew Iran’s king, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, and brought to power Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Iran’s Islamic government. When I shared with Fr. Rene the idea that the revolution itself was largely nonviolent, he asked me whether the revolution’s leaders intended the revolution to be nonviolent. I responded yes, and explained the reasons for that, based on the revolutionaries’ interpretations of Islam’s sacred texts (Sazegara & Stephan, 2009). That conversation caused me to teach my courses and conduct research with even greater focus on the relationships between non-violence and violence, on the one hand, and religious and political ideas in Islam and Christianity, on the other. Fr. Rene’s ideas about the relationships among theology, religion, and peace studies continued to inspire me as I taught my courses, and as I wrote several publications on violence, non-violence, Christianity, and Islam. At the same time, his enormous support of my courses and scholarship on Islam and Christianity, and his scholarly expertise on environmental justice, catalyzed the writing of this paper. I am deeply grateful to Fr. Rene for everything that he did for me professionally and personally. In Fr. Rene’s memory, I will conclude with a verse from the book of Revelation 14:13 which states “‘Blessed are the deceased who die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them.’” Amen.

This is a transcript of a conference presentation entitled “Islam and the Environment” that was presented at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Peace Studies Conference, which took place at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University on September 18, 2023 (Peace Studies Department, CSB+SJU, n.d.). Dr. Jon Armajani is Professor in the Department of Theology where he teaches courses about Christianity, Islam, and the history and politics of the Middle East. His single-authored books are entitled Shia Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (2020), Modern Islamist Movements: History, Religion, and Politics (2012), and Dynamic Islam: Liberal Muslim Perspectives in a Transnational Age (2004). Books that he co-edited are Religion, Education, and Peace: Proceedings of an Online International Conference Held in March 2021 (2022) co-edited with Wilbert van Saane, and Historical Dimensions of Islam: Pre-Modern and Modern Periods; Essays in Honor of R. Stephen Humphreys (2009) co-edited with James E. Lindsay.
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