

The religious vision of nature in the light of *Laudato Si'*

Retreat Volunteers Belgium

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It is a real joy to be among friends this evening! I am honored to be asked to offer this short reflection on nature in the light of *Laudato Si'*.

The environmental crisis is undoubtedly one of the most critical and urgent problems of our times, and now more than ever we need to stand together for the protection of **our common home**. It's high time to think together, to act together and to pray together.

I am sure; we are all very familiar with Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* that has started in the Catholic Church and beyond a whole movement. In recent years, we have seen the publication of declarations on the environment from Hindu¹, Buddhist², Jewish.³

Of great relevance has been the Islamic environmental work particularly through the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change⁴ and more recently with *Mizan*.

But, why should we - people of faith - care about the environment?

Although our immediate perception of ecology is that of a problem of the industrialized societies, this – in fact - could also be seen through a *religious lens*. And this not only because religions must have a word to say on such a big issue which touches millions of people of faiths throughout the world, but rather – we might argue- because the environmental crisis seems to have its roots precisely in the way we interpret our relationship as human beings with nature in our holy books and religious traditions.

This evening we try to look together at some key elements that could help us motivate our ecological commitment from a spiritual angle.

¹ <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>

² <http://gbccc.org/>

³ <https://theshalomcenter.org/civicrm/petition/sign?sid=17>

⁴ <http://www.ifees.org.uk/declaration/>

In biblical monotheism, we find the radical new idea of a universe that is created freely by a God who is love. God remains present everywhere in creation and yet at the same time He is distinct from nature. Creation is therefore sacred because it is linked to God.

In Christianity, since the Middle Age the relationship between human beings and nature was fundamentally governed by natural laws and characterised by **collaboration**. Monasticism in the West, for instance, was so profoundly aware of this to preserve the most beautiful forests in Europe that in many cases have become UNESCO world heritage.

St Francis's life is itself an extraordinary testimony of such relationship. In his *Canticle of the Creatures* he calls the sun and the water *sisters* he is not just expressing something emotionally, but rather affirming a truth that he perceives, he sense unity present in the whole universe.

In the Franciscan Sources is found that '*Francis asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty.* In Francis' intuition, we can see more than just a poetic sensitivity but rather a profound attention at the preservation of biodiversity.

In the West, until this point in history human beings perceived themselves in the world mostly as in a mystical and sacred reality, larger than what one's mind was capable of grasping. With the Enlightenment, we assist to a progressive deterioration of that 'vision of the world' In this separation, this rupture of this enchantment lies the first sign of the ecological crisis.

However, humanity has preserved that holistic vision of its place in the cosmos in the religious and mystical experience. In Christianity and in Islam we find many examples of this.

Chiara Lubich, for instance, during a period of an enlightened spiritual experience, perceives a strong presence of God's love, who through his continuous creative action sustains all things and see all things in a web of loving relationships:

What appears to be distinct and separated – a flower, the sky, the sun and the moon, the sea or a puddle – the mystics saw unified by a loving Light governing everything as if all of creation were one song of love; as if the stones and snow, the flowers and stars, were so united in their essence with that Light and with one another that they seemed to have been created as gifts for one another, being one in love with all the others

Christian liturgy, especially in the Eastern traditions, plays a major role in keeping together the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘natural’. During our liturgical celebrations, we continually include material elements in our prayer as individuals and community. Starting with the bread and the wine, which come from the material world in the Eucharist, liturgy tends to involve all our physical senses: the eyes through the images of the icons and liturgical paraments, our sense of hearing through hymns and songs, our sense of smell through incense etc...

The Islamic vision of nature is rooted in the Quran. In Islam we find that God is primarily the God of creation

The Ramadan, which memorializes the descent of the Holy Quran upon the prophet Mohammed, is based on the lunar calendar.

We find in the Quran more than 750 verses that deal with nature and 16 of the 114 suras are named after animals of natural phenomena.

In Islam planting trees is particularly encouraged to the point that planting a tree is considered an act of worship. In a famous Hadith we find that: «If Resurrection is starting and one of you has a sapling in his hand which he can plant before he stands up he must do so»⁵.

In another Hadith we discover that animals enjoy rights for which human beings are held responsible: «whoever kills a sparrow without any reason will be questioned by God on the Day of Judgment»⁶.

⁵ Musnad Aḥmad, No. 12491 (Hadith)

⁶ Nahj al-Fasahah, No. 2224 & No. 2610 (Hadith)

A very powerful trait of Islamic spirituality holds that the whole of creation, the whole universe, **could be considered Muslim**.⁷ Here we refer to its etymological root *islām* that (I am told) could translate with ‘surrendered to’ God and to His rules. This also indicates a sense of ‘wholeness’ (physical and spiritual) ‘to be held together’ and not ‘disintegrated’. The point to this intuition is that God sustains creation in its unity. In other words, nature is saved because by obeying the rules (laws) of nature does the will of God.

But how about human beings?

Similarly to Christianity, in Islam human beings are fundamentally God’s vicars on earth. In Sura 2,30 we find a beautiful picture of this project

When your Lord said to the angels, “I am placing a successor on earth.” They said, “Will You place in it someone who will cause corruption in it and shed blood, while we declare Your praises and sanctify You?”
He said, “I know what you do not know.”

We notice here how God not only is putting human beings above the Angels but is also expressing **optimism** towards our capacity to know, protect, preserve and manage its resources.

Going towards the end now...

What I feel emerges more strongly on the theme of nature as we look through our religious traditions is that **Nature carries a spiritual significance pointing beyond itself, towards God.**

In *Laudato Si*’ Pope Francis underlines that by quoting the poet and mystic Ali al-Khawwas. This is the first time in history we find an explicit reference to a Muslim author in an encyclical letter. Here it is emphasized the ‘need not to put too much distance between the creatures of the world and the interior experience of God’ (Paragraph 233).

Prejudice should not have us criticise those who seek ecstasy in music or poetry.
There is a subtle mystery in each of the movements and sounds of this world.
The initiate will capture what is being said when the wind blows, the trees sway, water flows, flies buzz, doors creak, birds sing, or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted.

⁷ R. C. FOLTZ, F. M. DENNY, A. BAHARUDDIN, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2003.

It is only from this perspective that we can truly perceive **nature as a gift**. Therefore nature's **first purpose is that of creating a relationship rather than being consumed**⁸.

Today, all our hopes on the environment seem to be focused on science. That is clearly very important; however, science and technology by themselves cannot solve the ecological problem. **We need wisdom** to help us decide the path onto which we want to walk as humanity.

I am convinced that, the vision of nature that is embedded in our religious traditions – and that is so very beautifully put forward in the Laudato Si - is a call for responsibility **to think together and to act together**.

With this I'd like to close this moment of reflection by quoting a great champion of spiritual environmentalism His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew whose words I am sure will inspire us all this evening:

It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future.

Let that generation start now.

Because now is the kairos – the decisive moment in human history, when we can truly make a difference.

Because now is the kairos – when the consciousness of the world is rising to the challenge.

Because now is the kairos – for us to save the soul of our planet. Because now is the kairos – there is no other day than this day, this time, this moment.

Indeed, let it start now.

May God bless all of us to bring our labors to fruition.

Nino Puglisi

**For a more comprehensive overview on this theme see also*
<https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/6063>

⁸ Cfr. M. MAUSS, *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Routledge, 2002.