

“Birds with Wings Outspread:” Christianity, Islam and the Earth

Open and Relational Theology and its Social and Political Implications: Muslim and Christian Perspectives

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Preliminary Thoughts:

If the climate crisis can no longer be treated as a set of exceptional emergencies but only as an inescapable emergence, it belongs at the center of religious, and therefore interreligious, concern.

It is heartening in this multiply stressed moment of planetary existence to be thinking together – openly and relationally – between Christian and Muslim perspectives. And therefore across the world. Which is to say, across the earth. That planetary scale demands now new forms of religious attention. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann formulates the challenge concisely: “The so-called great world religions will only prove themselves to be ‘world religions,’ when they become *earth religions* and understand humanity as an integrated part of the planet earth.”ⁱ Of course the world religions, particularly in their Abrahamic modes, have sometimes been nervous about their own earthiness, fearing it could lead to idolatrous nature-worship, pantheist naturalism, modern reductionism, atheism, materialism.

We can think from the shared presumption that the *planetarity* of a world religion no longer refers simply to its universal outreach or truth claim. Planetarity now, as always, signifies at the same time our ecological responsibility. And for this Christians and Jews have endless recourse to Genesis 1. After all what God declares “very good” is not the exceptional human but rather “everything that God had made” [1.31]. That signifies the entire Genesis collective, what Lynn White in 1966 called “the democracy of all God’s creatures.” If “to except” means originally “to take out,” the *imago dei* does not then mark us as the *exception* to the creaturely collective; rather, we arise as its communicative *exemplification*.ⁱⁱ

As it happens, the theologies that emphasize the gift of creaturely diversity tend also to recognize the gift of *religious* diversity. Interfaith relations and ecological relations both express a deep--an ontological--relationalism, as is clear in the half-century traditions of process theology, for example, and of ecofeminism. A main reason I chose to study with a process theologian, John Cobb, is that he taught that it is not just secular liberalism calling Christians to be open to learn from other religions. It is Christ calling us. Not just to the conversion of others, not just to conversation, but to mutual transformation. But even we pluralist Christians have not gone far in recognizing how much we can learn from our sibling religion Islam precisely to help us overcome the Christian anthropocentrism.

The 2015 Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change offers an apt and timely entry point: “If we each offer the best of our respective traditions, we may yet see a way through our difficulties.”ⁱⁱⁱ Consider this citation it offers from the Qur’an: “No living creature is there moving on the earth, no bird flying on its two wings, but they are communities like you” [6.38]. The elegant evocation of the importance of animal communities does not contradict the bible but

adds something of crucial importance: birds, bees, bears, these are not just creatures, but communities, like ourselves. This lends them a specific register of relational complexity, and therefore of social dignity. And this: “Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is something greater than the creation of humankind, but most of humankind do not know [this truth]” [40:57]. I know of no sacred text of Christianity that in this way directly and pointedly names the whole cosmic context as at once greater than the human and also largely unknown to be such. This sense of cosmological mystery does not diminish human distinctiveness.... Instead, the text beautifully undermines human exceptionalism. And it forges a new sense of *tawhid*, a unity of peace that is not sameness but honors difference, what Abdul Asiz Said and Nathan Funk call “peace in Islam” as “ecology of the spirit.”^{iv}

Ibrahim Ozdemir and other Muslim environmentalists stress the following remarkable passage: “Don’t you see that it is God Whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds with wings outspread? Each one knows its own mode of prayer and praise. (And God knows well all that they do.)” [24:41-42]^v

May I respond: and do we not see how this text says something terribly fresh? It echoes old Hebrew psalms of trees clapping their hands, of all the earth worshipping the Lord; but the Islamic text makes the amazing claim that all beings pray. This simple acknowledgement undermines our sense of being the exception before God, and it frees prayer itself from anthropocentric talktalktalk into a form of cosmic attunement. Such cosmic attunement as we might want to relearn from the birds now, as we spread our wings to face the mass extinctions and other endless consequences of our species’ predatory destructiveness.

Put more abstractly, the alternative to sovereign exceptionalism can be couched as “entangled difference.” Our differences do not get diminished. Rather, they get emphasized--sometimes exaggerated, sometimes opposed--within our entanglements. This relationality echoes that of quantum entanglement, the physics that attests to the instantaneous “intra-activity” (Barad) of all things, at the most minimal material level of the electron, across any measurable distance whatsoever.^{vi} Quantum entanglement offers an elemental illustration of our “open and relational” universe. Recognizing that all relations are relations of difference--that however much we differentiate, decide and separate, we can never quite extricate, that indeed at the most basic material level we remain ontologically nonseparable from the universe of relations--keeps us thinking, perhaps even praying, cosmically. And the cosmos turns us always in our time back to our own planet and its ecology of badly frayed relations. To the

Entangled difference applies as much to interfaith exchange as it does to intercreaturely integrity. Do I become less Christian if I learn more from Islam? No. My Christianity just gets more complicated—folded together with the faiths of others. It was folded together with Judaism and with Hellenism from the start. Every new dialogue is an enfolding. Not a homogenization. In Christianity this critical insight seems to have been embodied by the early Renaissance Nicholas of Cusa, who studied the Qu’ran and who called for a religious peace based on awareness of divine mystery. In *Cloud of the Impossible*, I borrow from him a mystical language of enfolding and unfolding: the divine *complicatio* and *explicatio*. No one, and no one religion, cognitively masters God; the divine infinity is everywhere, and therefore unfolds in different ways exemplified in diverse religious Ways. I find Cusa’s argument from 1453--forged then in the

face of the catastrophe of the Ottoman defeat of Constantinople--still oddly credible. It lends ancestral help in constructing an interreligiously apt Christology... But what matters now is that the *oikos*, "home," at the root of ecu-mene and eco-logy, roots us into deep and earthy, truly planetary, consonance.

To conclude: the conclusion of the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change, which takes the form of a Hadīth narrated by the 7th century Abu Sa‘īd Al-Khudrī:

“We bear in mind the words of our Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him): The world is sweet and verdant, and verily Allah has made you stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.”^{vii}

ⁱ Jürgen Moltmann, “Eine gemeinsame Religion der Erde (A Common Religion of the Earth): Weltreligionen in ökologischer Perspektive (World Religions in Ecological Perspective),” in *Verlag Otto Lembeck* 10/1605, “Okumenische Rundschau” (2011), 26 (my translation). As discussed in my *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 279-80.

ⁱⁱ I’ve worked elsewhere with the distinction of exceptionalism and exemplarity, esp. in *A Political Theology of the Earth*, Columbia 2018. This plays off of Whitehead’s key theologem: “God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification.” (P&R).

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>

^{iv} Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Funk, “Peace in Islam: An Ecology of the Spirit,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

^v Ibrahim Ozdemir, “Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*.

^{vi} Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 801-831. For an extended discussion of Barad’s work and more generally of the entanglement of quantum physics and negative theology please see “Spooky Entanglements: The Physics of Nonseparability,” in my *Cloud of the Impossible*, chapter 4.

^{vii} <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>