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Religious Environmental Humanism in a Wounded World

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From Religious Humanism to Religious Environmental Humanism

The Buddha once shared a parable to illustrate the rarity of human birth: Imagine the vast ocean covering the earth and a yoke with a single hole floating on its surface, drifting aimlessly with the winds. Meanwhile, there is a blind sea turtle living deep under the sea and rises to the surface just once every hundred years. The odds of the turtle's head passing through the yoke's hole upon its rise are astronomically low, about 1 in a quadrillion.[1] Yet, the Buddha said, gaining human life is just as rare. This story communicates how precious and uncommon human existence is, and the profound opportunity it offers for spiritual awakening.

This insight is a gateway into religious humanism, a worldview grounded in spiritual traditions with emphasis on principles such as human dignity, ethical living, and the cultivation of moral character. While it has a long history, the term humanism today is employed to refer to a whole gamut of worldviews, both secular and religious. Secular humanism is a broad and diverse philosophy that calls for human reason, ethics, and justice without reliance on religious doctrine. It encompasses a range of perspectives that may focus on science, civic engagement, cultural enrichment, social justice, or individual meaning-making. Despite these variations, secular humanism is unified by an espoused commitment to improving the human condition, and often the well-being of non-human life, through rational thought, ethical living, and a sense of shared responsibility.

[1] This value is based on a calculation performed by ChatGPT. The query was done on October 14, 2024.

Within religion, various forms of humanism exist, including Christian, Confucian, and Buddhist humanism, with some scholars also proposing Islamic and Hindu humanism (Goodman 2003; Nadkarni 2011). Chinese scholar Tu Weiming (2020) employs the term "spiritual humanism" to describe a Confucian worldview that integrates ethical, spiritual, and communal dimensions of human life. Tu's interpretation highlights Confucian humanism's unique emphasis on cultivating virtue, strong social relationships, and harmony with nature. This approach, distinct from secular humanism, prioritizes individual spiritual and moral growth as crucial for self-realization essential to tackling global challenges of the contemporary world.

This essay proposes that religious humanism can provide the foundation for a religious environmental humanism, a form of humanism specifically attuned to ecological concerns. As previously noted, humanism is a term adopted by a wide array of traditions and perspectives, often acting like a chameleon, shifting in meaning depending on its philosophical or theological context. Yet beneath these variations lies a unifying thread: a profound respect for human dignity, moral integrity, the capacity for goodness, and the agency to shape one's life as well as to impact the world. Whether rooted in religious or secular worldviews, humanisms share a common aspiration: to empower individuals to flourish, to become their fullest selves, and to live in ways that honor their shared humanity. This endeavor is not about becoming something foreign or extraordinary but about peeling away the layers that conceal our true nature. As the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi insightfully observed, "Realization is not the acquisition of anything new nor is it a new faculty. It is only the removal of all camouflage" (quoted in Lawyer 2022). Like a lamp obscured by dust, our inner light may be dimmed, but not extinguished. Humanism invites us to clear away that dust, to rediscover the brilliance within. In doing so, we not only find personal fulfillment but also contribute to the healing and flourishing of the world around us.

Every philosophical system offers its own distinct vision of authentic personhood and the path to attain it. Christians look to Jesus as the perfect embodiment of humanity, Muslims seek to emulate the Prophet Muhammad, and Buddhists follow the example of Gautama Buddha in their pursuit of self-realization. For atheist humanists, human transformation is a personal journey that unfolds without reference to spiritual or transcendent beings (Engelke 2015). In this essay, however, I argue that religious and spiritual traditions play a vital role in guiding individuals toward authentic personhood. While self-realization can be pursued through both secular and religious paths, engagement with a religious tradition provides a framework of meaning, community, and spiritual discipline that can support and deepen this journey. One does not first become a fully realized human and then join a religious tradition; rather, participation in a tradition can be the very means through which authentic personhood is cultivated.

Despite their varied approaches, even having opposing epistemologies, humanistic ideologies generally share an optimistic view of human potential and the collective good that can arise from its realization. Religious environmental humanism, in particular, embraces this perspective, asserting that the cultivation of the self toward authentic personhood is essential for contributing meaningfully to environmental protection and fostering the flourishing of both humanity and nature. Religious

environmental humanism rejects the zero-sum mentality, the idea that one group's advancement must come at the expense of another. Instead, it affirms the intrinsic connection between human authenticity and environmental flourishing, seeing both as essential to true and lasting happiness. This perspective posits a causal relationship between the spiritual quality of the human person and the health of the natural world. Through self-cultivation, individuals can contribute meaningfully to environmental well-being, leading to personal transformation, spiritual growth, and ultimately, freedom from suffering. In this view, the pursuit of personal happiness is inseparable from the care of the Earth.

Without self-cultivation, negative qualities arise that damage our relationships—with ourselves, with others, and with nature. From the perspective of religious humanism, self-cultivation is not a self-centered or isolated pursuit but a path to relational harmony. It fosters greater unity and balance across all aspects of life. The core claim is this: religious environmental humanism holds that human flourishing is deeply intertwined with the sustainability of the natural world. What may seem like an individual journey of self-improvement is, in fact, a transformative process that reshapes every relationship we have, including our relationship with the Earth.

In the face of the ecological crisis, the present context demands awareness of the human-nature relationship as constituting a part of the totality of relationships in our lives. Therefore, the virtues and wisdom gained from the process of self-cultivation prescribed in religious traditions must also be applied to the relationship with nature as well as with other people. In other words, it's not enough for religious self-cultivation to only impact our relationship with family, friends, and fellow humans but also need to bear upon our engagement with all members of the community of beings.

In this essay, we will explore religious environmental humanism through four separate lenses: Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, and Islam. As we will see, while there are significant metaphysical differences in their worldviews, they each in their own ways, advocate for a religious humanism that benefits both humanity and the natural world.

Religious Environmental Humanisms

Buddhism

Buddhist environmental humanism presents a spiritually grounded and ethically coherent response to the contemporary ecological crisis, offering a middle path between human-centered moral considerations and a reverence for all life. Rather than succumbing to strong anthropocentrism or human chauvinism, which prioritizes human desires and interests above the non-human world, or retreating entirely into nonanthropocentric paradigms like biocentrism or Deep Ecology, Buddhist environmental humanism is rooted in a holistic vision of human flourishing that necessarily includes the flourishing of nature. It draws from the deep well of Buddhist humanism, especially as practiced in Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, to affirm that the journey toward authentic humanity is also a journey toward environmental harmony.

The foundation of Buddhist environmental humanism lies in the recognition of human life as uniquely precious. In Buddhist cosmology, a human birth is exceedingly rare and valuable because it provides the optimal conditions for moral discernment, spiritual growth, and ultimately liberation from suffering (Kalupahana 1977; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1998). Unlike beings in other realms—animal, ghostly, or divine—humans possess the capacity for insight and self-transformation. The historical Buddha himself emphasized the human condition not merely as a given, but as an opportunity for awakening and for acting with compassion toward others. The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment as a human, and not in some celestial form, grounds the entire Buddhist path in the real, embodied, moral choices of ordinary human beings (Ikeda 2010). This emphasis on human self-cultivation is not an exaltation of humanity above nature, but a commitment to realizing the best of what it means to be human in relationship to all beings.

Such self-cultivation involves overcoming the three spiritual poisons—greed, hatred, and delusion—which lie at the heart of both personal suffering and ecological destruction (Sahni 2007). These poisons are not simply individual moral flaws; they manifest in social systems, economic structures, and behaviors that degrade ecosystems and diminish the quality of life for all sentient beings. Greed drives overconsumption and exploitation of resources. Hatred leads to violence against other beings and disregard for ecological integrity. Delusion blinds us to the interconnectedness of life, fostering the false belief that we can dominate nature without consequence. Buddhist environmental humanism insists that unless these inner afflictions are addressed, no amount of external policy or technology will resolve the environmental crisis.

The Four Noble Truths, foundational to Buddhist teaching, can be reinterpreted through an environmental lens. The first truth acknowledges suffering (*dukkha*), including the suffering caused by environmental degradation. The second truth identifies the root causes of this suffering, craving and ignorance. The third truth offers the possibility of cessation: a life free from destructive craving and alienation. The fourth truth prescribes the Noble Eightfold Path, a program of ethical, mental, and wisdom training that includes right action and right livelihood, principles that inherently align with ecological ethics (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1998). These teachings do not isolate spiritual growth from the world but locate human flourishing within a relational, moral cosmos. In this way, Buddhist environmental humanism ties the quest for enlightenment directly to ethical engagement with the Earth.

Critics have charged Buddhism with anthropocentrism, arguing that its emphasis on human spiritual liberation relegates the non-human world to a mere backdrop. Indeed, early Buddhist texts do prioritize the human state as the realm from which liberation is possible (Harris 1991: Harris 1997; Waldau 2002). Some monastic rules even rank the killing of humans as more severe than the killing of animals (Vinaya Piṭaka, IV). But these anthropocentric elements are not absolute. Rather, they function within a moral framework that mandates compassion, non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), and loving-kindness (*mettā*) toward all beings. The concept of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) teaches that all phenomena arise in interdependence; thus, human well-being cannot be isolated from the well-being of other beings and ecosystems.

This interdependence lends itself to ecological interpretations. Buddhist thinkers such as Joanna Macy (2007) have integrated Buddhist principles with Deep Ecology, emphasizing the spiritual and ecological necessity of recognizing our radical interconnectedness with the Earth. Others have interpreted Buddhist precepts as extending moral concern beyond humans to the entire universe, a perspective that resonates with predominant ecocentric worldviews. Some Mahāyāna teachings even attribute Buddha-nature to all beings, including plants, suggesting a deep ontological and ethical regard for the more-than-human world.

However, the most fitting term to describe Buddhism's approach is not anthropocentric or ecocentric, but *humanistic*. Buddhist environmental humanism acknowledges the centrality of the human condition, not to assert dominance, but to recognize the human capacity and responsibility to cultivate wisdom, compassion, and ethical engagement with other members of the community of beings (Le Duc 2025). This approach resonates with what David Kalupahana (1977) called a "comprehensive and systematic form of humanism," grounded in empirical insight and moral transformation, rather than transcendental command or dominion. The path to environmental sustainability, in this view, runs through the interior transformation of human beings.

This transformation is not merely individualistic. As the Buddha taught, the highest form of life is one that benefits both self and others. The person who contributes to the well-being of both is "the foremost, the best, the preeminent" (AN 2.95). Buddhist environmental humanism extends this relational ethic beyond the human to include all beings. It critiques the myopic mentality that pits human flourishing against environmental health. Instead, it sees human fulfillment and ecological balance as causally linked. In safeguarding nature, we fulfill our own highest potential; in cultivating ourselves, we serve the Earth. This view reflects the dual dimensions of Buddhist pedagogy: the relational (ethical engagement) and the developmental (personal transformation), held in dynamic tension and harmony.

Moreover, this humanism is not abstract but deeply rooted in cultural practices. In countries like Thailand, Buddhism has long been intertwined with beliefs in spirits inhabiting trees, rivers, and mountains. Spirit houses on properties, rituals of reverence to natural elements, and veneration of bodhisattvas who vow to liberate all beings; all these reflect an ecological consciousness embedded in spiritual life. While modern minds may critique these as superstitions, they serve to sacralize the environment and instill a sense of awe and responsibility toward nature (Le Duc 2022).

In this light, Buddhist environmental humanism is best understood not simply as an ethic, but as a *spirituality*. As Buddhadasa Bhikkhu warned, the environmental crisis is a spiritual disease, a manifestation of moral degeneration that cannot be cured merely by science or policy (Swearer 1997). Healing the Earth requires healing ourselves. Through self-cultivation, mindfulness, and ethical action, we overcome the delusions that separate us from the web of life. Our relationship with nature, like our relationships with family and society, is moral and spiritual in nature. To ignore this relationship is to undermine our own humanity. Ultimately, Buddhist environmental humanism offers a compelling path for our times. It affirms that becoming "fully human" in the noblest sense is the key to resolving not only personal suffering but also

the ecological devastation that threatens our planet. As thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist philosopher Nichiren Daishonin declared, "The Buddha is an ordinary human being; ordinary human beings are the Buddha." By embodying this truth, we fulfill not only our spiritual destiny but our ecological responsibility.

Confucianism

Confucian environmental humanism offers a profound rethinking of the human place in the cosmos. Rooted in the ancient Chinese tradition and enriched by Neo-Confucian thought, it envisions an ethical and cosmological framework in which humanity flourishes not through domination of nature, as in many Western paradigms, but through relational harmony. Rather than emphasizing rational autonomy and control like secular humanism, Confucian environmental humanism unites ethical self-cultivation, social responsibility, and cosmological awareness to form a spiritually grounded ecological ethic (Le Duc 2024).

At its core, Confucian philosophy affirms that authentic personhood is cultivated through education in rites, literature, and music, enabling individuals to embody the virtues of benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trustworthiness (*xin*). These virtues are not merely individual traits but the moral scaffolding through which one engages relationally—with others, society, Heaven, and (Earth) nature itself. As Huston Smith (2009) explains, *ren* involves a simultaneous feeling of care for others and respect for oneself, a recognition of the dignity of life wherever it is found. It is a lived reality cultivated in concrete relationships. Confucius and his followers believed that *ren* is innate but must be nurtured through moral education and ritual practice. As the *Analects* teach, "If I simply desire goodness, I will find that it is already here" (Analects 7.30). Confucian learning, as Tu Weiming (2001) put it, is "learning to be human"—a communal and moral project that radiates outward in concentric circles, from the self to family, society, and the cosmos.

In the Confucian worldview, relationality extends beyond interpersonal ethics to include a triadic relationship among Heaven, Earth, and humanity. Heaven (*tian*), though not personified as in monotheistic traditions, is understood as a cosmic moral principle that governs the universe and serves as the ultimate standard of ethical living. The "Mandate of Heaven" (*tianming*), from an ecological understanding, is not limited to rulers but implicates every individual in the responsibility to live in alignment with the Way of Heaven. Virtue and moral discipline thus become ecological imperatives, as ethical treatment of the natural world is part of fulfilling Heaven's mandate.

This integrative vision situates the human not as an isolated ego but as a dynamic participant in the cosmos, forming one body with all life. According to Neo-Confucianist philosopher Wang Yangming, "The great man regards Heaven and Earth and the myriad things as one body," not as metaphor, but as an ethical reality (Quoted in Zhang and Wu 2006). Chang Tsai's *Western Inscription* echoes this ontological unity with the declaration "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother," and affirming that "all people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions" (de Bary et al. 1960, 524).

Tu Weiming contrasted this view with Enlightenment secular humanism, which in prioritizing reason, individualism, and control over nature, has served as the primary cause of the modern ecological crisis. In response, Confucian environmental humanism re-centers the human not as master but as ethical co-participant. For Tu, true humanity is not defined by self-centered happiness but by relational existence, expanding from family to society, to the world, and the cosmos. Anthropocentrism, in this paradigm, becomes a distortion of human potential. Instead, the human must become "anthropocosmic," integrally linked to both social and natural systems. Tu emphasized that the "illuminating virtue" endowed by Heaven must be nurtured through persistent human effort, not divine intervention, an expression of Confucianism's unique blend of immanence and transcendence (Tu n.d., 80).

Self-cultivation is therefore not only a moral process but a transcendent one, uniting humans with Heaven and Earth. It draws on vital energy (*qi*), life (*sheng*), and consciousness (*zhi*), all conferred by Heaven, and enables human beings to participate in the ongoing transformation of the cosmos. Wing-tsit Chan characterized Chinese philosophy as a humanism that affirms "the unity of man and Heaven," not by rejecting transcendence but by grounding it in lived moral practice (Chan 1969, 3). This shared life force of *qi* and moral ecology were already embedded in Chinese cosmology during the Chou Dynasty, which viewed nature as animated by the same cosmic energy as human life. Natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes were interpreted as reflections of human virtue or vice, especially among rulers, whose moral failures could prompt Heaven to withdraw its mandate (Yu 1999, 164). Environmental degradation, from this perspective, is not merely technical but a symptom of moral disorder, a humanity estranged from the Way of Heaven.

The process of self-knowledge and transformation, accessible through rigorous study and practice, becomes a way to realign with this moral and ecological order. Chi (2005, 267) described this as achieving complete self-knowledge, through which one uncovers their deepest nature and harmonizes with the cosmos. In this role, human beings become co-creators with Heaven and Earth, not merely by transforming the environment, but by transforming themselves.

Wang Yangming's thought reinforces this ecological ethic. He shows how spontaneous compassion for all beings is the natural expression of cultivated humanity. For example, "when we see tiles and stones shattered and crushed, we cannot help a feeling of regret. This shows our humanity forms one body with tiles and stones" (Quoted in Chan 1969, 260). Such radical empathy expands Confucian humanism beyond interpersonal ethics into ecological responsibility: the more one cultivates virtue, the more one senses the suffering and dignity of all beings.

From this perspective, nature is not a resource or backdrop to human activity, but an extension of the self. The goal of Confucian cultivation is not merely personal harmony but reciprocal, transformative relationship with Heaven and Earth. As the *Doctrine of the Mean* teaches: "If they can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth" (Quoted in ICEA 2013). This is not a metaphysical abstraction but a practical invitation to each person to realize their full humanity by embracing the interconnectedness of life.

Confucian environmental humanism thus offers a robust ethical alternative to exploitative anthropocentrism. While it remains human-centered in its epistemology, it avoids egocentrism by cultivating expansive empathy and ecological consciousness. It teaches that the path to environmental harmony begins within, through a transformation of one's desires, values, and relationships.

As Tu Weiming (2001) noted, Confucianism's concentric model of ethical concern moves from self to family, family to society, and society to the cosmos. The move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism, and the further move toward the transcendent overcomes egotistical anthropocentrism. The Confucian vision is not only about personal virtue or social order, but about cosmic participation. To flourish as human is to recognize the world as one's extended body, the natural world as kin, and Heaven as moral guide.

In this way, Confucian environmental humanism responds powerfully to contemporary ecological crises. It reminds us that sustainability is not merely a matter of policy or technology, but of virtue, self-cultivation, and spiritual alignment with the cosmos. Only through this ethical and cosmological reorientation can we hope to restore balance, between self and other, society and nature, humanity and Heaven.

Christianity

Christian environmental humanism represents a holistic vision of life rooted in the fundamental Christian belief that the flourishing of humanity is inseparable from the flourishing of the entire creation. Drawing on the Catholic Church's rich theological tradition, Christian environmental humanism affirms Irenaeus of Lyons's insight that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." To be fully alive requires living in right relationship not only with God and with one another, but also with the natural world. This perspective is deeply grounded in the scriptural and doctrinal understanding that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and therefore bear a vocation to reflect divine love, justice, and stewardship in all aspects of life, including ecological care (Le Duc 2024).

Fundamental to Christian humanism is the insistence on human development be undertaken as part of humanity's divine calling. According to Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain (1939), human beings must not be reduced to material or autonomous subjects, but instead be seen as open to the divine, capable of transcending themselves through grace. He warned against "anthropocentric humanism," which makes humans "their own centre, and therefore the centre of all things" (Maritain 1939, 19), and affirmed that authentic humanism must lead to "a deeper and fuller sense of the dignity of the human person," one discovered in God (Maritain 1939, 7–8).

Louis Janssens's ethical personalism builds upon this by emphasizing the person not as an isolated individual but as a "complex totality" whose self-actualization is achieved in loving, reciprocal relationships with others and God (Janssens 1939). The person, both bodily and spiritual, finds fulfillment not through domination or utility, but through cooperation and communion. Thus, the human vocation is communal and ethical, not individualistic or exploitative.

This vision of human development has come to be described as *integral human development*, a concept articulated in the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* and reaffirmed by Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Christian humanism insists that authentic human flourishing cannot be achieved in isolation from the rest of creation. Rather, it is realized in relationships marked by mutual care, justice, and ecological harmony. Pope Paul VI asserted in *Populorum Progressio* that integral development finds its perfection in Christ, "a transcendent humanism which gives him his greatest possible perfection" (PP, no. 16). Similarly, Pope John Paul II warned against divorcing human progress from its Christocentric foundation. He insisted that such disjunction leads to environmental devastation and a "culture of death" marked by disregard for human dignity and the natural world alike (*Evangelium Vitae*, no. 38).

The ecological crisis, in this vision, is not simply an environmental problem; it is a human problem, rooted in a distorted view of humanity's place in creation. As Pope Benedict XVI warned, "A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism" (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 78). When humans displace God as the center and measure of all things, they forget the divine gift of creation and usurp a dominion that becomes tyranny. The resulting "anthropological error," as John Paul II described it, leads to the exploitation of both people and nature, betraying the intended harmony of God's creation (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 37).

Christian environmental humanism thus requires a radical conversion, a transformation of the human heart and consciousness. This "ecological conversion," as first named by Pope John Paul II (1990) and taken up by Popes Benedict XVI and Francis (*Laudato Si* - LS, 2015), calls for a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness with all of creation. It compels us to see the environment not as an inert backdrop for human activity, but as a community of life imbued with intrinsic value and divine presence. This conversion is not limited to private virtue but demands public responsibility. Pope Francis emphasizes that ecological conversion must be both personal and communal, encompassing attitudes of gratitude, humility, and generous care toward the earth as our common home (LS, no. 217).

Integral to this vision is the cultivation of an "ecological conscience," which is a moral awareness that links human choices and actions with their environmental consequences. Pope Francis, echoing the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, has explicitly named the destruction of the environment as an ecological sin, one that offends not only creation but also the Creator (Le Duc 2024). This sin stems from habits of indifference, overconsumption, and complicity in unjust systems that degrade the earth and its most vulnerable inhabitants. The development of ecological conscience, then, is both a theological imperative and a moral practice. It involves examining our lifestyles, consumption patterns, and spiritual attitudes through the lens of justice and solidarity.

This ecological conscience is deeply informed by Scripture, tradition, and liturgical life. Christian practices such as prayer, worship, Bible study, fellowship, and service—all essential components of spiritual self-cultivation—must be reoriented to include ecological dimensions. For example, prayer becomes a space for expressing gratitude for creation, seeking forgiveness for ecological sins, and discerning how to live more sustainably. Worship can incorporate liturgies that affirm the sacredness of

the earth and our responsibilities as stewards. Bible study can illuminate the scriptural foundations of environmental ethics, from the call to "till and keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15) to the cosmic reconciliation accomplished in Christ (Col. 1:15–20).

Moreover, Christian service, rooted in love for God and neighbor, must extend to care for the creation. Acts such as conservation, environmental education, advocacy, and support for green policies are not secondary to faith but are essential expressions of discipleship. As Pope Francis stated in *Laudato Si'*, "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (LS, no. 217). This vision is not limited to individual piety but calls for systemic change, including shifts in economic models, production systems, and power structures that currently fuel ecological injustice (Francis – *Laudate Deum* 2023).

Christian environmental humanism is also animated by the virtues of humility, simplicity, solidarity, and hope. It challenges anthropocentric assumptions and instead affirms an "integral ecology" that recognizes the dignity and rights of all beings within the created order (Le Duc 2024). It seeks to overcome the "globalized indifference" decried in *Fratelli Tutti* (no. 30), replacing it with active compassion, justice, and care for both the earth and the poor.

Christian environmental humanism is not merely a theological theory. Rather it is a lived ethic, a spiritual path, and a social mission. It affirms that human beings, made in the image of God, are called to reflect divine love in every aspect of life, including the way we relate to the earth. In a time of ecological collapse and moral confusion, it offers a coherent and hopeful alternative: a vision of the human person as both humble creature and co-creator, a being capable of reverence, wisdom, and stewardship. It proclaims that only by becoming more human in Christ can we become more faithful stewards of creation. And in doing so, we participate in the redemption of all things, anticipating the new heavens and new earth where justice, peace, and ecological harmony shall reign.

Islam

Islamic environmental humanism emerges as a compelling framework in the broader discourse of religious environmental ethics. Rooted in the Islamic worldview, it emphasizes the deeply interconnected responsibilities of human beings to God, themselves, society, and creation. Central to this vision is the virtue of responsibility, *mas'uliyyah*, which is not merely a behavioral imperative but a core characteristic of the human being as envisioned in the Qur'an and Islamic theological tradition. By advocating for Islamic environmental humanism, we assert that environmental care is a spiritual, moral, and communal obligation, guided by divine revelation and actualized through virtuous living.

At the heart of Islamic environmental humanism is the understanding that creation is not random or purposeless, but rather a manifestation of God's will and attributes (Aminrazavi 2001; Nasr 2001). The Qur'an asserts that Allah created the universe with purpose and balance (Qur'an 21:16, 38:27), and humankind was deliberately placed

within this order as *khalifah* (vicegerent), entrusted with the care and stewardship of the earth (Qur'an 2:30). This trusteeship (*amanah*) is unique to humans, and its acceptance signifies humanity's elevated status and corresponding accountability (Qur'an 33:72). Nasr (2001) emphasizes that the sacredness of human life only retains its meaning when understood in relation to this divine mission; otherwise, it devolves into a hollow sentiment. Therefore, Islamic environmental humanism views humans not as exploiters of nature, but as its ethical stewards, imbued with reason, will, and the capacity to reflect divine attributes such as mercy, justice, and compassion.

Responsibility in this context begins with the human being's relationship to God. The Islamic notion of *'abd Allah*, the servant of God, underscores a profound receptivity to divine will. Obedience to *Shari'ah*, the comprehensive moral and legal path revealed by God, is a form of submission (*Islam*) that integrates all aspects of life, including ecological concern (Aminrazavi 2001). Through this lens, peace, personal, social, and ecological, is attainable only through submission to God's will. This theological premise establishes environmental care not as a secular afterthought but as a direct expression of faith and religious devotion.

An Islamic environmental humanism also asserts that humans are not isolated agents but embedded within a broader network of relations. Human beings are responsible to themselves, not with narcissistic autonomy, but with a disciplined pursuit of physical, spiritual, and intellectual well-being. Acts like fasting, prayer, and pilgrimage are not only spiritual duties but also have ecological implications, such as promoting restraint, detachment from consumerism, and mindfulness of bodily and environmental health (Ansari 2023; Ahrabi-Fard 1974). This inner harmony radiates outward, informing ethical interactions with others and the natural world.

Islam's emphasis on social responsibility further strengthens the case for environmental humanism. The Qur'an commands justice, care for the vulnerable, and protection of communal well-being (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8). The institution of *zakat* (almsgiving) and principles like *Maslahah* (public interest) reveal that individual rights are never absolute but are conditioned by the common good (Bakar et al. 2021). Such concepts lay the groundwork for environmental ethics, since the environment is a shared trust and its degradation affects all, especially the poor. Prophet Muhammad's guidance against wastefulness, even in abundance, illustrates how ecological concern is embedded within Islamic ethical teachings (Le Duc 2023).

Integral to Islamic environmental humanism is the principle of *Tawhid*, the oneness of God, which establishes a theological basis for the unity and interconnectedness of all creation. As Khalid (1998) explains, *Tawhid* affirms a cosmic order in which everything plays a divinely ordained role. Disturbing this balance is not only imprudent but sinful. The Qur'an explicitly warns against disrupting the *mizan* (balance) of creation (Qur'an 55:7-10). The Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015) draws on this principle to condemn unsustainable consumption and environmental exploitation as violations of divine order. Through *Tawhid*, Islamic environmental humanism views all forms of creation, animate and inanimate, as sacred signs (*ayat*) that point back to the Creator (Naseef 1998).

This sacred cosmology is further deepened by the concept of *fitrah*, the innate disposition of humans to know and seek God. To live in accordance with *fitrah* is to live in harmony with nature. Forgetfulness (*ghaflah*) of this innate orientation leads to spiritual and ecological imbalance. The recovery of remembrance (*dhikr*) is thus vital. It reconnects humans to the divine presence that envelops all existence and prompts responsible engagement with creation. Nasr (1998) poignantly observed that modern scientism, by severing the sacred from the natural, has desacralized the world and enabled its exploitation. Islamic environmental humanism resists this by re-sacralizing nature and insisting on human humility within creation.

Human beings' trusteeship is not absolute sovereignty but delegated responsibility. As *khalifah*, humans must act within the bounds of divine law, always aware of accountability before God (Ozalp 2023). Eaton (1998) underscored that this position entails both privilege and accountability. When humans act as exploiters rather than stewards, they betray the divine trust and endanger all life. Islamic environmental humanism thus recognizes that power must be tempered by justice, and creativity by restraint.

In Islam, the belief that human beings are created by God in the best of molds (Qur'an 95:4) affirms a vision of authentic humanhood marked by faithfulness, moral character, justice, and submission to God's will. A truly good human is expected to be kind, honest, and compassionate toward all, especially the marginalized. Responsibility thus includes accountability to others and, ultimately, to God (Le Duc 2024). This aligns with the Islamic ideal of *insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, which Muslims are called to emulate. Most often associated with the Prophet Muhammad, this ideal represents a universal aspiration: to live a purposeful life that contributes to societal well-being while upholding Islamic ethical principles. It echoes similar aspirations in traditions like Buddhism and Confucianism, where authentic humanity is cultivated through self-discipline and virtue. In this light, achieving environmental justice becomes part of fulfilling human potential as God's vicegerents on earth.

The ethical principle of *Maslahah* concretizes these ideals into actionable guidance. Environmental policies grounded in *Maslahah* aim at the collective welfare, encouraging sustainable practices, protection of biodiversity, and just resource distribution (Avis 2021). Contemporary fatwas issued by Islamic authorities in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Egypt, which prohibit environmental harm and advocate for conservation, are examples of this principle in practice (Aman 2022; Alliance of Religions and Conservation 2014; Malay Mail 2016). These rulings signal the growing recognition that environmental care is not optional but obligatory in Islamic law and ethics.

Ultimately, Islamic environmental humanism calls for a reawakening—a moral and spiritual revival that restores the human sense of responsibility in all dimensions of life. It urges Muslims to move beyond anthropocentric entitlement and instead embrace a theocentric worldview where all creation is honored. The path forward requires overcoming the forgetfulness that obscures human vocation and cultivating a sustained remembrance of God, the self, and creation. By integrating theological, ethical, and ecological dimensions, Islamic environmental humanism offers a holistic vision rooted in virtue. Responsibility, as a primary environmental virtue, becomes the linchpin that

connects worship with action, doctrine with ecology, and humanity with the rest of creation. In doing so, it aligns with both the spirit and the letter of Islamic teaching, presenting a viable and morally compelling response to our environmental crisis.

Conclusion

The poet Alexander Pope claimed, "To err is human." While it is true that humans tend to make mistakes, religious humanism calls all individuals to embody the noble calling of humanity, as envisioned by the sacred traditions that inspire us. It is a vision that eschews egoism, narcissism, and human chauvinism. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems" (Quoted in Enotes n.d.). When we prioritize human interests above all else, we sow the seeds of destruction. However, true humanism requires us to transcend selfishness and myopism and recognize ourselves as part of a vast, interconnected community of beings in the cosmos. This profound recognition influences the way we treat others in our daily interactions, our development activities, and the way we use the natural goods of our world.

The words of Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic, echo this truth: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop" (Quoted in Auron 2017). Indeed, religious humanism offers us the possibility of realizing our unique identity while also becoming the medium through which the rest of the cosmos is reflected. Only by embracing the spiritual dimensions of our existence and recognizing the interconnectedness of all life can we truly become channels of life itself. This requires us to cultivate a sense of awe and wonder toward the cosmos, recognizing our place within it, and dedicating ourselves to loving and compassionate action.

As we live out this vision of humanism, we can help create a world that is more just, equitable, and sustainable, where all living beings can thrive and flourish. Our ultimate purpose is to attain the fullest expression of our humanity, by striving toward moral maturity, cultivating virtues, and embodying the image of the divine within us. Only then can we unlock our innate potential for goodness and compassion, and use it to uplift the world around us.

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