



Reconnecting people with the natural world through Islamic teachings

Islam and the encyclical of Pope Francis on climate change*

In his recent ecology encyclical, *Laudato Sii (Praised Be)*, Pope Francis invited every person on the planet into dialogue on the many pressing ecological issues facing humanity—and their impact on the poorest people of the world. The reality of climate change “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (#25), he stated. Humankind is responsible for care of the natural world, and that responsibility extends toward protecting poor and vulnerable people and our children and grandchildren.

Pope Francis made the following five key points in this teaching document, which are very much a part of Islamic teachings.

- 1 Climate change and environmental justice are moral issues.
- 2 Protecting creation and protecting people who are poor are interconnected virtues.
- 3 We are part of creation and kin to it.
- 4 Greed is the greatest threat—to the poor and to the earth itself.
- 5 The time to act on climate change is *now*.

It did not surprise me that there is much common ground in the position the Pope has taken and our own thinking on climate change. I am able to say this as we have been working with a group of experts and scholars in recent weeks to produce an Islamic Declaration on Climate Change and making comparisons emphasizes the common origins of our respective traditions. We will be setting in motion a global consultative process shortly and this will be widened leading up to a launch in August.

We are off to a good start as we speak the common tongue of creation but we haven't been that clever as people of faith in discharging the sacred trust of stewardship placed on our shoulders. Having brought the earth to its knees we now seek solutions to put her back on her feet again. Politicians have made a meal out of the successor talks to the Kyoto protocol, vying with each other in trying to get more out of an ever shrinking planet, the powerful nations holding the rest to ransom. The encyclical rightly draws our attention to the connection between a degraded planet and its effect on the poor, not forgetting that climate change has largely been caused by the rich over consuming nations. There is here common ground between the Pope's vision and the approach of the Qur'an when it asserts, “Corruption has appeared in both land and sea because of what people's own hands have brought, so that they may taste something of what they have done, so that hopefully they will turn back” (30: 41). And about our responsibilities to the poor the Qur'an addresses those who deny the divine law, “It is he who pushes aside the orphan and does not urge others to feed the needy.” (107:1–3).

The encyclical is rightly critical of the banking system and the events that led up to the financial crisis of 2008, but in our view it does not go far enough in that the problem is the system itself. People are slowly

beginning to realize since the banking collapse the power the banks hold over the rest of us. The misdemeanors of a small elite can bring the whole planet to its knees. The poor are still suffering the consequences while the perpetrators go scot free. And the wealth gap between rich and poor has steadily widened since then. Society is run on a debt based system of financial intermediation by a privileged elite that is at the root of our crises. In this we have a common denominator in our respective traditions and that is the prohibition of usurious transactions. The Bible asserts, "Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee" (Leviticus 25:36). And the Qur'an observes that those who indulge in usurious transactions are "... tormented by Satan's touch' (2:275).

It cannot be just a coincidence that the encyclical was released on what happened to be the first day of the holy month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar. This is the month in which Muslims throughout the world fast, and take no food and water during daylight hours as an exercise in frugality. Isn't this just the kind of message Pope Francis is attempting to put across?" There is depth to what is common between our faiths and we have much to gain by working together. We echo the Pope's call to climate negotiators to waste no time in coming to an agreement that is fair to all and we call upon rich nations to tighten their belts a little so that the poor may have a fairer share of Earth's gifts.

Fazlun Khalid
Founder/Director
Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences
Birmingham UK

Website: ifees.org.uk

*The original version of this op ed appeared in The Tablet on 26 June 2015