

Secular Societies, Religious followers; Opportunities? Challenges?

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The challenges faced by religious followers in secular societies are frequently construed as one of adaptation or alienation, where religious followers either try to adapt to the demands of modernity, or find ways to deal with the alienating gaze of secularism. Yet, modern environmentalism presents a new praxis that challenges our conception about the relationship, where religious communities play a unique role in fostering moral forces to deal with climate challenges which are often thought of as the symptoms of secularism, and at the same time are interrogated by secular demands of effectiveness, pragmatism and consistency.

Religious communities bring in the language of divinity into discourses about the environmental crisis, and challenge the secular focus on utility. Genesis 1:1 says “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth.” The very notion of our earthly surroundings, air, water, and all creatures being God-given, is an entirely different language from the language of survival rampant in secular society. In modern society, the invisible hands of demand and supply run the livelihoods of many, and in order to flame up revenues, profit-maximising companies fuel consumers’ thirst of desires through advertisements, clickbait, and memes. The emphasis is on the self, and whatever that gets the self satisfied. Religious traditions, on the other hand, faithfully put God first, and draw inspiration from God’s words and deeds to guide men’s earthly life. From the language of divinity follows a reverence towards God’s creation, and a sense of balance that regulates one’s urge to receive and the generosity to give. Fazlun Khalid, a scholar and activist in the tradition of Islam, even went on the length of saying that to speak of Islamic environmentalism is to utter a “tautology”, “Islam is environmentalism.” Fazlun believes that Islam offers a conception of our place on earth, as one in harmony with other lifeforms and ecosystems. For example, the concept “*fitrah*”, often translated as “original state” or simply “nature”, beautifully speaks of an ideal natural pattern into which humankind fits¹.

Religious leaders have a unique role to play in providing thought leadership on the environmental crisis and can leverage their influence to impact the wider secular establishments. Caught in the pit of short-term thinking, companies and politicians tend to prioritise the gains of now at the expense of environmental degradation, often with the false promises of future progress to be made, as we have seen in those fits of climate denial. In such webs of inertia, religious leaders can have a key role to play. Rabbi Yonatan Neril, the founder and director of the Interfaith Centre for Sustainability based in Jerusalem, once said in a panel discussion at the interfaith centre, that “Religions are the biggest, richest NGOs in the world. Studies have shown that 85 percent of the people in the world identify with religion. They have huge resources, land holdings, media networks. They must be involved.” Religious communities are thought of as NGOs because of their central moral concerns and the fact that they function on a communal basis, with large followers and resources to be used potentially to leverage power. When Pope Francis published *Laudato Si’*, the first Encyclical in the history of

¹ Meara Priyanka Sharma@mearasharma et al., “Fazlun Khalid: Environmentalism Is Intrinsic to Islam,” Fazlun Khalid: Environmentalism Is Intrinsic To Islam | Center for Religion and Civic Culture, March 8, 2021, <https://crcc.usc.edu/fazlun-khalid-environmentalism-is-intrinsic-to-islam/>.

the Catholic Church on ecology, in 2015, it received unprecedented media coverage, including coverage in all of the major newspapers and media outlets in the United States, demonstrating the influence of high-level religious leadership on secular establishments. In the state of Israel, where religious communities are politically active and a religious consciousness is embedded in national holidays, calendars, the running of public transport and enlistment, the Orthodox rabbis played an active role in calling on the government to take a more progressive stance against climate change. In 2017, they issued a public letter to the media and to Israeli authorities that said “Jewish teachings mandate that we do everything possible to help avert a climate catastrophe”². On 3rd November, 2022, the first-of-its-kind interfaith climate conference was co-hosted by the Interfaith Centre for Sustainability and Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem, two days before the opening of COP27 UN climate change conference to be held in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, to which Israel will be sending a big delegation. Such examples show the possible roles that religious leaders can play in influencing key players at national and international level which have a say on the stakes of the earth. Bringing thought leadership in these areas certainly presents an opportunity for religious communities to establish their positive social and cultural influences in addressing the disease of environmental degradation, and to open up channels of dialogue and collaboration with secular establishments.

Despite these opportunities, it is interesting to note that religious communities do not necessarily have the unique or the most special claim towards the position of earth stewardship. A large wave of environmental awakening has already occurred in the last century with the New Age Movement, as well as diverse forms of ecological philosophies which derived its persuasiveness from a wide range of sources such as paganism, Eastern religion and philosophies, as well as various embodied meditative practices. The Gaia Hypothesis formulated by the chemist James Lovelock in the 1970s proposed that the Earth is a self-regulating complex system of which all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are a part. Such a conception too emphasises the unity and harmony between men and their surroundings, to which Fazlun might agree with on the basis of the belief itself. Yet the conception couches itself in the language of science, and that of Greek mythology - ‘Gaia’ as the name of the Greek goddess of the Earth, and as such carries with it a wealth of pagan associations. The Norwegian deep ecologist Arne Naess draws much influence from the excommunicated Jewish philosopher Spinoza, and Eastern traditions such as Buddhism. He sees ethical environmental action as a natural consequence of the process of Self-realisation, which involves the process of diminishing one’s ego, an idea much influenced by Buddhism.

As such, it is easy to understand why there are concerns within religious communities about environmentalism becoming the coveted form of a secular religion. William James, an influential American psychologist and philosopher of religion, defined religion as “a belief that the world has an unseen order, coupled with the desire to live in harmony with that order”³. Such a conception is wide enough to include diverse forms of

² Dan Drollette, “‘Rabbis Should Grow a Spine’ - Orthodox Jewish Leaders Call for Response to Climate Change,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, June 28, 2018, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/08/rabbis-should-grow-a-spine-orthodox-jewish-leaders-call-for-response-to-climate-change/>.

³ Robert H. Nelson, “Environmentalism as Religion,” The New Atlantis, September 26, 2020, <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/environmentalism-as-religion>.

religions, and even the popular secular position of “spiritual but not religious”. Underneath these concerns are really the contentious relationships between religion and spirituality, particularity and universality, which challenge the self-understanding of religious followers. Such internal introspection manifests itself outwardly in phenomena such as JewBu, where a person with a Jewish background practises some forms of Buddhist meditation and spirituality. Such phenomena are a manifestation of modern men’s internal search towards the depth of religion, not only as communities, rituals and practices, but also deep religious experiences. As dives into ecology inevitably bring to surface such concerns, a challenge is also presented to religious followers to better make sense of their own religions in dialogue with diverse forms of spirituality, as well as claims to universality e.g. Baha’i.

And I believe that involvement in ecology will bring to surface such deep questioning and make its call to difficult reflections felt by every attentive member of the religious community, not only mystics or philosophers. This is because ecological activism, whether religiously motivated or not, must test its authenticity against and within the background of secular society, with its hedonism, power-dynamics, and utilitarianism. What’s more, religious environmentalists must come to face the issues of Eco-justice to test their faiths and resolve. If ecologically conscious religious followers really want the best of the earth, then surely they will want to unite all forces possible - that certainly will include the weak, the powerless, the socially-marginalised, followers of alternative forms of religion and spirituality, secularists and even atheists. Then surely one will open his or her eyes to all forms of subjugation, intolerance and violence, and see that they are part of the obstacles to realising the interconnectedness that is so worth aspiring to. As part of the collective effort, one will have to find ways to talk to everyone else, and to do so not only based on exchanges of benefits, but most importantly, exchange of hearts. And to find such hearts, they have to look deep within their religious traditions to find the guidance they seek.

I think that the environmental challenge we are all facing now is presenting many opportunities and challenges to religious followers in secular societies, and they are worth pursuing and wrestling with. It is a good time for religious followers to take up their roles as advocates of moral action in the climate crisis, to use and expand the connections they have, to talk to others, and to look deeply into their own faiths, as well as their inner depths.