

Living with the Texts: Qur'anic Environmentalism

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Imagine a beautiful tropical island.
Lush green trees send their roots down
into the white sand beaches.
Wild, curvy rock formations
scoured out by the wind and the sea.
The smell of salt in the air.
The ocean waves, clear and shimmery in the sun,
lapping at the shores.
Turtles crawl up the beach to lay their eggs here.
And under the blue waves, a massive coral reef has grown
inch by inch over thousands of years.
This is a real place, Misali Island,
off the coast of Tanzania in East Africa.

People have been fishing here for generations,
sailing out in wooden boats
with sails that catch the wind and skim over the water.
The way they work looks clean and pure to our American eyes,
the wooden boats,
the beautiful sandy beaches.

But appearances can be deceiving.
In the 1990s, the fishermen started to fish with dynamite.
Dynamite fishing is easy,
it's quick, and it's cheap.
You just light a stick of dynamite and toss it into the water.
When it explodes, the shock waves kill the fish.
Some of the fish float up to the surface.
It's an easy catch for the fishermen.

The problem is the damage you don't see, under the water.
Most of the dead fish just sink to the ocean floor.
The dynamite kills mature fish and younger fish alike,
so the younger fish never have the chance to breed.
And it doesn't just kill fish,
it also turns the coral reefs into rubble.

The fishermen were destroying the ecosystem with dynamite fishing.
The fishing stock was heading toward collapse.
The reefs were devastated.
So the Tanzanian government launches a PR campaign
to get them to stop.
But it doesn't work.
The fishermen say, Why should we listen?
This is our livelihood we're talking about!
They say, all this talk of environmentalism—
it's just one more way white people are trying to control us
and keep us from making a living.

Now the government bans dynamite fishing outright.
It's illegal now.
The fishermen ignore it.
The government threatens to send gunboats.
The fishermen say, "Go ahead, bring it on!"

Until one day they go to the mosque—
almost all the people here are Muslim—
and at the mosque the imam reads from the Qur'an,
the holy book of Islam.
The imam tells them, Allah calls on us to protect the environment.
He says, the kind of fishing you are doing is against the Qur'an.
You cannot fish like this, blowing up the coral, destroying the fish.
You cannot fish like this and call yourself a good Muslim.
You have to change.
You have to start fishing in a sustainable way.

This is a religious imperative.
This is what they hear in the mosque.

And guess what?
The fishermen listen.
They listen to the passages in the Qur'an that say to people,
be good stewards of the earth.
They listen and they *change* what they're doing.
Today, the fishermen at Misali Island have gone back
to fishing sustainably. No more dynamite.
It's harder work, but the fish are coming back.
The reefs are growing back.
The fishermen say, we don't care what the government says.
But you can't ignore the word of God.¹

Environmentalism based on the Qur'an.
These days that sounds pretty counter-intuitive, doesn't it?
In this country, what do we hear about the Qur'an?
What we're told is, the Qur'an incites people to violence.
We're told, the Qur'an promotes terrorism.
It promises terrorists they'll be rewarded in heaven.
So we are told.
Now, we know these are half-truths at best.
We know extremists of every faith
can twist their scriptures to justify their violence.

But even we, who really get that Islam is so much bigger
than the people who misuse it,
even we do not know very much about what's actually in the Qur'an.
For most of us, I'm guessing,
what we know, or what we think we know,

¹ See Eliza Barclay, African fishermen find way of conservation in the Koran, *Christian Science Monitor*, October 31, 2007, online at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/1031/p01s04-woaf.html>, and Daniel Dickinson, "Eco-Islam hits Zanzibar peninsula," *BBC News*, February 17, 2005, online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4271519.stm>.

is mostly what we pick up from the North American media.
And what the media cares about right now—
not without cause but it's a narrow focus—
the media covers Islam
in the context of our so-called “war on terror.”

Right now, for example,
we're hearing a lot about the democracy movements
in the Middle East.
And what's the tie-in with Islam?
We're hearing so much anxiety about
what's going to happen if the new government in Egypt
gives power to Muslim political groups.
Mostly what we hear in the media is fear—
fear of conservative political Islam.
And even though Islam is so much bigger than that,
this is about it for what we hear in the news.

This is why, when we hear about Islamic environmentalism,
we almost do a double-take, right?
How many people besides me had no idea
there's a Muslim Green Team in the Bay Area
that puts on an eco-fair every year?
How many people besides me
had never heard of these Muslim young people in Washington, DC
who planned a week of environmental action
based on the Qur'an?²
Raise your hand if that was new to you.
Is it not *refreshing* to hear this good news?

What is it that's motivating these Muslims?
What is it that's inspiring fishermen from Tanzania
to change the way they fish, how they earn their livelihood,

² See YouTube video “Islam and the Environment,” online at
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoAOIX60Ot8>; <http://dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com/>;
<http://muslimgreenteam.org/>.

to protect their environment?

What is it that's inspiring young Muslims in DC and the Bay Area to change *their* lives and teach other people how to live sustainably?

They are changing their lives because of a book, the holy Qur'an, the scripture at the heart of their faith.

Stay with me now for a minute, because I need to tell you what the Qur'an says about the environment, what Muslims all around the world are reading in this ancient text that motivates them to change their lives.

First and foremost,

the Qur'an tells people the power behind the universe is real.

The Qur'an calls that power Allah, God.

It says Allah created all things, the sun and moon,

the earth, the sea, the land,

everything that lives, everything that is,

animals and plants and people.

In today's reading from the Qur'an,

we heard Allah is the one that created all the food we eat.

Everything we have is a blessing from God.

And with that blessing comes responsibility.

The Qur'an tells people, eat and enjoy and be thankful,

but don't stop there!

You also have to give food to poor people too.

You have to take care of people who need your help.

And don't waste what you're given.

Take what you need. Don't take more than that.

Don't waste.

That's what the Qur'an says.

Today, the imams in that fishing community in Tanzania are reading that very text and

telling their congregations, what it means for *today*

is that we have to protect the environment.

We simply cannot trash the oceans

by fishing in this completely unsustainable way.
When we dynamite the waters,
we are wasting the future.
That goes against not only common sense
but the sacred law of God as expressed in the Qur'an.
And for those people,
that *means* something.

Because the Qur'an tells people,
to be a good human being,
you have to surrender to God's law.
All of you probably know already, the word Islam means *surrender*.
Not as in knuckling under,
not as in letting yourself be oppressed.
No, surrender in Islam
is acknowledging there is a power greater than yourself.
You follow the Qur'an as a way of honoring that power.
For Muslim environmentalists,
these texts in the Qur'an
that teach people to live sustainably,
these texts are life-changing.
Muslims take the Qur'an so seriously
because they believe what the Qur'an teaches
is what God wants them to do.
Following the text is following God.

And in a moment of ecological collapse,
the fishermen in Tanzania are saving themselves,
saving their world
because they have made a commitment to following the Qur'an.
Here at home, Muslims around the United States
are changing their lives, living more sustainably
and teaching other people how to do it too,
because they have made a commitment to follow the Qur'an.

So what does this mean for us?
I am both touched and challenged
by these stories of Muslim environmentalists,
and I can't help but ask, what in our own faith
has the power to motivate us that much?
What's the equivalent of those sacred texts in *our* lives?
What do we take seriously enough
to get us to change *our* lives
when changing is hard and costly and inconvenient?

In our tradition we have a real double-edged sword.
We believe the number one authority in our lives
is our own conscience—
not a book, not a minister, not even the traditions we love most.
We have to decide what *we* believe is right.
We change *our* lives
when our conscience tells us we *have* to.
Our freedom of conscience
is the priceless jewel at the heart of our faith.
But we cannot be sloppy about how we use it.

Because, even for the best of us,
it can be hard to motivate ourselves to do what we know is right.
It's hard to convince ourselves
that we need to sacrifice for our values.
And it's so easy to let ourselves off the hook
because no one's going to look over our shoulder
and tell us what to do.
We have to be super-attuned to that voice of conscience
if it's going to make a difference in our own lives
and in the life of the world.
We have to pay attention to what's going on around us.
We have to pay attention to what the world needs.
We have to pay attention to what our conscience

and our gifts move us to offer.

And we can't do it alone,
because alone, as Mark Morrison-Reed reminds us,
we can't see everything that needs to be seen.
I rejoice that we are here together today,
because we need the power of community
to keep us all strong
and faithful to the voice of conscience in our heart.
We need the power of community
to open our minds to everything we are not able to see on our own.

And finally we need community
because there is no power greater on earth
than the power of faithful community.
Our Muslim brothers and sisters in faith are teaching us
that nothing is more powerful
than people united by a common vision,
united in service to what is sacred to them,
and working together to transform lives,
transform communities,
transform the world.

And what unites *us*,
what makes us a faithful people,
are conscience and community—
not any book or creed,
but a living, changing community seeking to do what is right.
Conscience and community: these are *our* holy guides.
May we walk in their light
and bless the earth with our power.

So may it be.
Amen.