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Series on Climate and Major Religions

## 'Green Muslims,' Eco-Islam and Evolving Climate Change Consciousness

*John Wihbey* — April 11, 2012



*High levels of climate concern, bounded by costs of managing climate risks, characterize much of the Muslim world, with interesting differences from the West on the science/religion relationship ... and with a preference for viewing climate change through a broader prism of global environmental concerns.*

The Iranian-born intellectual [Seyyed Hossein Nasr](#), whose seminal writings helped build the foundation for contemporary thinking about Islam and the environment, was once a lonely voice preaching the virtues of conservation to all who cared to listen.

"I often spoke about it on television and radio," he recalls, "but it was a very unpopular subject. Nobody wanted to hear anything about it. Everyone thought that the West was polluting the Hudson River and the Thames River and getting rich, and nobody said anything. Now it's our turn to get rich, and they say, 'Don't do it because the world will collapse.' That kind of argument [was common.]"

Nasr, now University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, says it took a while for environmental ideas to get traction in the Muslim world. But over time they've done just that.

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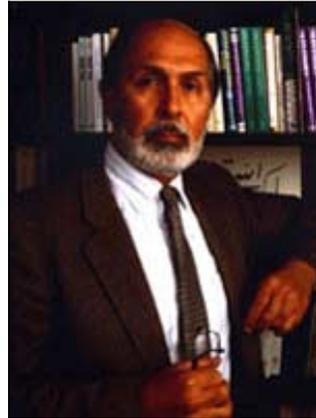
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"Like all of the other non-western religions, Islam did not take a serious interest in the environmental crisis in the beginning," he said in a recent phone interview with *The Yale Forum*. "Because these were societies engaged with very immediate problems ... So even thinking people thought this was a kind of western problem, created by western industrialization and capitalism and so forth. And it wasn't their problem."



*Seyyed Hossein Nasr, University Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. Photo Credit: George Washington University.*

Educated at MIT and Harvard, Nasr had returned to pre-revolutionary Iran to continue his scholarship on issues of spirituality and ecology, science and Islam. His path-breaking work *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* garnered wide attention for these interrelated issues. He also helped advocate for national parks and pro-environmental projects during his days in Iran.

"Gradually a number of people from the 1970s onward began to take this more seriously in the Islamic world," Nasr said. "I would say that a kind of Islamic environmental consciousness goes back to the late 70s and early 80s. From that time, a number of people began to write about the environment in the Arab and Islamic world. It was very significant."

He notes that there is now an "authentic Islamic environmental movement" in many major Muslim countries. Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, and Malaysia are the leaders in this respect, he says, with Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco, and Nigeria also seeing significant activism.

## The Prophet's Ecological Teachings

For many contemporary "green" Muslims — those of Islamic faith concerned with the environment — the 7th-century teachings of the Prophet Muhammad have clear implications for, and applications to, Industrial Age problems stretching from species loss to climate change.

The major Islamic texts themselves, the Koran (or Quran) and Hadith, are replete with references to nature and its sacredness. Various stories and sayings associated with the Prophet encourage thoughtful stewardship and suggest care for God's creation, and there's a strong intellectual basis for a kind of proto eco-Islam, [scholars note](#).

Muhammad variously instructed lessons about water conservation, avoiding the wasteful consumption of resources, proper land use, stewardship of trees (the word is mentioned more than two dozen times in the Koran), and compassion for animals and birds; he even designated a special forested park near one of the holy cities.

Frederick Denny, Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at the University of Colorado, quotes the following Koranic passage in [his overview on the subject](#) for the Forum on Religion and Ecology at

Yale: "Do you not observe that God sends down rain from the sky, so that in the morning the Earth becomes green? (Sura 22:63)." Denny concludes, "The color green is the most blessed of all colors for Muslims and, together with a profound sense of the value of nature as God's perfect and most fruitful plan, provides a charter for a green movement that could become the greatest exertion yet known in Islamic history, a 'green jihad' appropriate for addressing the global environmental crisis." (Jihad in this context derives from the word's more general definition — roughly speaking, a Muslim's duty to struggle toward God.)



*Green Muslims Director Sarah Jawaid. Photo Credit: Green Muslims.*

Sarah Jawaid, director of the group [Green Muslims](#) in Washington, D.C., says these notions inform her life, practices, and civic work. Founded in 2007, Green Muslims engages in a variety of community activities focused on conservation and sustainability — everything from forming partnerships with a local farm to pioneering a "reusable tableware rental program," Jawaid says. In an e-mail interview, she continued:

*In the Quran, God identifies nature as a tapestry of signs for man to reflect upon his existence, just as the verses within the Quran are also considered signs, sharing the same Arabic word, ayat. This relationship is further deepened by many chapters within the Quran that take the name of natural phenomenon such as the bee, the fig, the light, and so on. This makes the conversation between nature and scripture explicit. Going further than contemplation of the universe, God bestowed mankind with vice regency on Earth, entrusting humanity with the duty to protect and restore balance in the environment and to protect the signs for future generations to enjoy.*

## High Levels of Climate Concern Generally ... with Important Qualifier

Survey data suggest that levels of worry about climate change are fairly high in the Muslim world. A [2010 Pew Global Attitudes survey](#) found that Turkey and Lebanon are second and third in the world in terms of the percentage of citizens who think climate change is a very serious problem (74 percent and 71 percent of respondents, respectively.) Over the past four years, levels of concern have also risen in places such as Egypt, Jordan, and Indonesia, in contrast to corresponding declines over much of that time in the U.S. and Europe.

When asked about a willingness to pay higher prices to address climate change, however, citizens of countries such as Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan, and Indonesia express some of the lowest levels of support relative to other countries, according to the Pew survey. Indeed, among all countries surveyed, Jordanians showed the highest levels of disagreement when asked if they would be willing to pay higher prices (73 percent.)



\* Indicates the use of a source with a small enough sample size to make these estimates somewhat less reliable. Due to this greater margin of error, percentages are rounded to the nearest integer rather than to the first decimal place and are therefore more approximate (~). The only exception to this rule is the display of Turkey's percentage of world population as 4.7% rather than ~ 5%.

"--" indicates that the number of Muslims is too small to be reliably estimated.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • Mapping the Global Muslim Population, October 2009

Still, Turkey — among the most economically developed of majority-Muslim countries — stands as an exception on these questions, and more of its citizens express a willingness to pay than do those in European nations.

Asked about these attitudes on economics and climate, Nasr said there is indeed a sense of "economic grievance, and it goes all the way through the non-western world. There is a sense that these people in the West have gotten rich, oftentimes at our expense. And now they talk about all of these things that need to be done, and first of all they don't do it themselves. They should do it much more than us ... Yes, there's a lot of grievance, and people are not stupid."

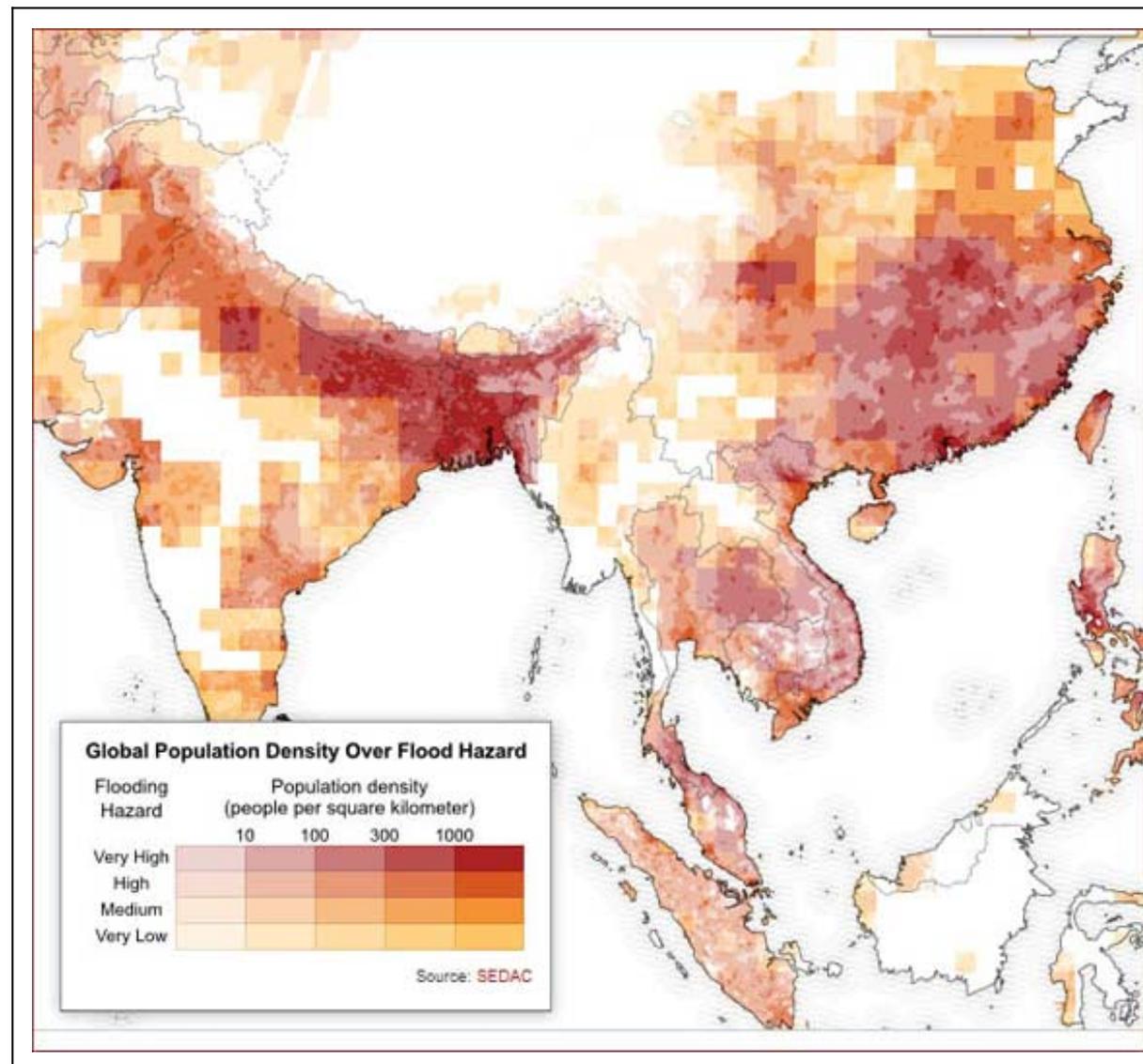
However, observers also note that the skepticism about climate change found in the Anglo-American world is not a prominent feature of the Islamic world.

(Interestingly, Pew found the following in a [2011 survey](#): “Nearly six-in-ten Muslim Americans (59 percent) say they do not think there is generally a conflict between science and religion. Almost four-in-ten (37 percent) think there is. The balance among the general [American] public is reversed: 59 percent say they do see a conflict between science and religion; 37 percent say they do not.”)

## Floods, Droughts and Qayamat

The effects of climate change in the Islamic world will be governed in part by an unfortunate happenstance of geography and demography. Some of climate change’s greatest perils — sea level rise, drought, agricultural productivity loss — are predicted to have their greatest consequences for the middle ribbon of the planet where the majority of Muslims, [some 1.6 billion](#), live. (Approximately 2.6 million Muslims lived in the United States as of 2010, according to the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#). This figure is expected to rise to 6.2 million by 2030, with Muslims then comprising some 1.7% of the U.S. population.)

The risks are many: massive displacement in Bangladesh; flooding of Indonesian islands; starvation in the Sudan; water and agriculture crises across the Middle East. Though many of these same dangers haunt the developing world writ large, Muslim countries as a whole are disproportionately susceptible — particularly in comparison with those industrialized clusters of countries that have pumped much of the carbon into the atmosphere.



*World Bank map showing acute flood risks in Bangladesh and wider region.*

Prominent development thinkers such as Muhammad Yunus, whose microfinance and anti-poverty work in Bangladesh earned him the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, have addressed the intersection of climate change and the problems of the world's poor. "We can help the people to help themselves out of their poverty, but [climate change] is beyond the control of Bangladesh, beyond the control of microfinance," [Yunus has said](#), noting that his native country is inexorably sliding into the sea. "It is a global issue."

Early indications of climate change's possible effects are already filtering into public consciousness and informing attitudes, observers say, at least at an anecdotal level.

[Adil Najam](#), vice chancellor of Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan and a lead author of the 2007 U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, said the devastating floods of 2009 in that country were seen by some through a religious lens.

“In public sentiment and in the sentiment of religious practice, you do very often hear people talking about climate change in the context of natural disasters,” Najam, also a longtime professor [at Boston University](#), said in a phone interview from Pakistan. “You hear them talk about it in the same breath that they talk about religion .... So the metaphor gets mixed. The metaphor of a flood being a message from the Almighty, and the metaphor of the flood being a message from nature. That’s not that far removed.”



*Adil Najam, vice chancellor of Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan. Photo Credit: Boston University.*

Among scientists and elites in the developing world, the discourse has largely revolved around economics and justice, or about carbon emissions rates, he notes. But religion provides a “third narrative,” as the calamities mentioned in sacred texts such as the Koran or Bible may inform perceptions of reality.

“In Islam, there is a very strong concept of qayamat — the day of judgment,” Najam said. “Because these notions are already embedded in the psyche of many Muslims, the descriptions of what is now happening are meshing with the notion of climate change.”

Nasr said, however, that the ominous signs of environmental crisis do not necessarily lead to a complacent or passive attitude:

*In the Islamic world, we have a number of important religious thinkers of high authority who say that when the Mahdi comes, when the world comes to an end, that is in God’s hands. But that does not absolve us of our responsibility towards the world of nature .... There are those who say, “We cannot cut off our nose to spite our face. Yes, what you are saying is right, the West shares most of the blame for curing what’s gone on, but just because they won’t do it doesn’t mean we should sit down and commit suicide.” There are Islamic world leaders who say this also.*

## No Right or Wrong Religious Answers?

Islamic environmental consciousness has evolved since its birth in the 1970s, and the way it is responding to climate change may differ in important ways from the theological positions of western religious groups.

With the possible exception of Catholicism, Islam is more diffuse, more global, and more rooted in the developing world than other sects and religions discussed thus far in the *The Yale Forum’s* [ongoing series](#) on religion and climate change. Of course, in many of its global forms, Islam, and particularly the

majority Sunni sect, deliberately resists institutional hierarchy, making generalizations difficult regarding consensus preferences on political issues and doctrine.

Some groups have [tried to unite Muslim countries](#) around climate change issues, using their collective power to amplify their voice at the international bargaining table. But it [has not always proven easy](#), and such a religious block is not highly distinctive from the developing world and its general concerns as expressed within the IPCC process. Further, as might be expected, there are a number of think tanks and foundations, such as the [Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences](#) (IFEES) in the U.K., that seek to raise awareness.

It should also be said that not all Muslim thinkers actively embrace the sharp focus on climate change — especially when it crowds out other global environmental problems. Nasr remarks in this regard:

*Climate change entered this discourse when the western press began to talk about climate change. It was a completely passive reception of this western interpretation of the environmental crisis. I myself, who have been at the forefront of this for over half a century, believe that it's too bad that the environmental crisis has been forgotten about by many people because everyone just talks about climate change. Climate change should be used as an immediate signal for something that is even bigger than it, that involves the balance of the whole ecological structure of the Earth — the whole life cycle of the Earth.*

Moreover, viewing the problem of climate change purely through the prism of Islam may not be quite the right way of looking at the issue. Najam notes the diversity of interpretations:

*In talking about climate change in the Muslim world, I have sometimes been confronted by people who say, "You know this climate change is God's way of sending a message." I've also been confronted by people who say climate change is an opportunity to think about human responsibility and how God intended us to be custodians of the climate. I don't think there is a religiously right or wrong answer here. What's important is how people build and contextualize the phenomenon of climate change in and around their belief set.*

*Also see:*

[Nationwide Climate 'Preach-In' To Target Broad Faith-Group Congregations](#)

[The Catholic Church and Climate Change](#)

[Judaism and Climate Change](#)

[Episcopalians Confronting Climate Change](#)

[Baptists and Climate Change](#)

[The United Church of Christ and Climate Change](#)

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[Preachable Moments: Evangelical Christians and Climate Change](#)

[Mormon Silence on Climate Change: Why, and What Might It Mean?](#)

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### John Wihbey

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## 4 Responses to ‘Green Muslims,’ Eco-Islam and Evolving Climate Change Consciousness

### Iskrenost says:

April 11, 2012 at 12:58 pm

I enjoyed reading this really interesting article. It is good to know that someone is concerned for this topic. Thank you John! Keep up the good work.

Reply

### John Wihbey says:

April 11, 2012 at 1:41 pm

Many thanks, Iskrenost, for checking it out. Glad you enjoyed it! -John

Reply

**[Muaz Nasir](#) says:**

April 11, 2012 at 6:23 pm

Great article! It seems there has not been much movement on the climate agenda from the Muslim community in general, but it's great to see that strides are being made on the environmental front. ~ Muaz ([www.khaleafa.com](http://www.khaleafa.com))

Reply

**Huw Peach** says:

June 24, 2012 at 7:17 pm

Fascinating article. Thank you for all the work that went into it.

Reply

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