Faith and the Environment Conference

The Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies

David L. Johnston

March 1, 2024

Is the Human Vicegerency Bad Theology in the Anthropocene?

The Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University in New York, Jeffrey D. Sachs, was, among other influential positions, Special Advisor to three general secretaries of the United Nations from 2001 to 2018 and he is currently the SDG advocate (that is, advocate for the UN Sustainable Development Goals) to Antonio Guterres. His 2015 book, *The Age of Sustainable Development*,[[1]](#footnote-1) is considered the most influential blueprint for the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by all nations that year. In his Preface, Sachs declares that we live in the Anthropocene, “the human-made new era,” or the “unprecedented epoch of the Earth in which the Earth’s physical change – climate, biodiversity, chemistry – is mainly driven by human activity” (viii). Then in his first chapter, he summarizes some of the changes humanity has forced upon our planet Earth:

Humanity is changing Earth’s climate, the availability of fresh water, the oceans’ chemistry, and the habitats of other species. These impacts are so large that Earth itself is undergoing unmistakable changes in the functioning of key processes – such as the cycles of water, nitrogen, and carbon – upon which life depends. We don’t know the precise scaling, timing, and implications of these changes, but we do know enough to understand that they are extremely dangerous and unprecedented in the span of humanity’s 10,000 years of civilization (2-3).

These changes are massive indeed and they have come with brutal speed, compared to changes in Earth’s past history. Though the term “Anthropocene” is not yet the official label for our current geological era, it helpfully expresses the scientific consensus that we humans have badly damaged our God-given environment, and unless we change course rather drastically, we may well join other species that have already gone extinct. That is why at least five of the seventeen SDGs, which take aim at 2030, target either our human adaptation to these new realities or seek to mitigate the worst trends like climate change. For example, SDG 11 is about building sustainable cities and communities, since over half of humanity will be living in cities by 2050. The next goal, “Responsible Consumption and Production,” aims for a more “efficient management of our natural resources,” the reduction of toxic waste and pollutants produced by industry, and a decrease of fifty percent of “the per capita of global food waste at the retailer and consumer levels.” Then there’s SDG 13, “Climate Action” followed by “Life Below Water” and “Life on Land,” SDGs 14 and 15 respectively.

I bring all this up as an example of humanity coming together in an unprecedented way to solve the problem of poverty (SDG 1) and the myriad challenges in our environment that need urgent fixing. This would spell good news, if indeed current wars could be stopped, if tensions between the great powers don’t escalate into much greater conflicts with the prospect of nuclear warfare, and finally, if the United Nations still manages to keep us working together. To be honest, we humans are teetering on the edge of the abyss. And this is precisely where we should insert the quranic and biblical teaching about the vicegerency of humanity, or the dominion, trusteeship, stewardship of the earth God gave his human creatures at creation. This entails both power, as humanity is put in charge under the Creator’s watchful eye, but also responsibility and accountability on the Day of Judgment. And much sooner than that, we are already paying a hefty price for our greed and unbridled exploitation of the Earth’s precious resources. And, as we all know now, it is the world’s poor who pay the highest price.

In this paper, I want to question this caliphate of humanity. It’s clearly stated in the sacred texts of the Abrahamic faiths, but is it still relevant? Or perhaps, have our modern eyes and minds clouded our interpretation of it? My first point here will be to say that, indeed, the latter is the case, and that other texts point to a different paradigm, and therefore we have to reconsider our relationship with nature, or the rest of creation. We also need to learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Finally, I will circle back to the SDGs and try to show that, beyond all the good we can do for our environment in our respective communities, as Christians and Muslims and people of all faith and no faith, working shoulder to shoulder, the realities of this new era of the Anthropocene urgently call us to support and strengthen the institutions and goals of global governance.

# The Modern Hijacking of the Human Vicegerency

When it comes to the trusteeship or vicegerency of humankind as laid out in Qur’an and Bible, I have “some skin in the game,” as we say. My 2010 book, *Earth, Empire and Sacred Text: Muslims and Christians as Trustees of Creation*,[[2]](#footnote-2) was actually very little about “Earth,” but much more about “Empire” and “Sacred Text. I was more interested in hermeneutics and the misuse of political power, namely empires, colonialism and the like. I devoted 133 pages to my scanning the major qur’anic commentaries – the Tafsir tradition – and seeing how verse thirty and following of Surat al-Baqarah was interpreted in various periods of history. What stands out, is that a wide spectrum of Muslim thought in the last century or so sees this concept of *khilafat Allah* as demonstrating God’s empowerment of humanity over the rest of creation, on the one hand, and God’s command to humankind to manage the earth’s resources in a responsible and equitable fashion. Many others see it too as the affirmation of the inherent worth of all human beings on an equal plane, thus underpinning the values of democracy and human rights.

Farhana Mayer, in her excellent book comparing and bringing together Islamic views of creation and the environment with those of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudate Si’*, draws from some Sufi traditions and in particular from Osman Bakar, in saying the following,

But the human being – divine deputy on earth, made of earthly matter – is a uniting of divine spirit, intellect combined with moral character, and physical earth. The human connects these different dimensions and elements in a way that angels do not, since angels do not contain within themselves physical matter. It is because humankind is made ‘in the total image of God’ that humanity is the vicegerent, *khalīfah*, on earth, whose ‘purpose is to reflect God in a total way in the world’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There is nothing problematic here in this fine-tuned qur’anic theology of humanity. And then if you add her emphasis on nature or creation as infused with God’s signs (*ayat*) and spirit (*ruh*), there is a call here to treat with love and respect this book of creation. In this light, how could we “continue to desecrate this incredible and intricate, exquisite and thought-provoking, challenging and life-fulfilling book?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Unfortunately, the story of European civilization, already in the Renaissance period, was about a new focus on the human being and on his mastery of nature. I will be following the thoughts of Jürgen Moltmann, one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the last century, yet still writing now in his 90s. His 2019 book, *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril*, is very relevant to our reflection here.[[5]](#footnote-5) He quotes the Renaissance writer, Pico della Mirandola, who in his 1486 discourse, *On the Dignity of the Human Being*, has God saying to humanity, “I have set you in the center of the world . . . so that as your own, completely free and honorably acting sculptor and poet, you yourself may determine the form in which you wish to live.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Because they are in the image of the Creator and because the world runs by laws humans can discover and use to their advantage, modern people see themselves as “the measure of all things,” “the inventor of their own selves, and the lords of their own world.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is reminiscent of Surat al-‘Alaq in the Qur’an: “But man exceeds all bounds when he thinks he is self-sufficient.”[[8]](#footnote-8) You might call this unhinged hubris, and there is but a small step from here to saying, “I don’t need God,” or even, “There is no God.” What is more, this kind of arrogance easily leads to a sense of entitlement, to trampling on weaker people for one’s own gain. Francis Bacon had declared, “Knowledge is power” and, unsurprisingly, this was also the beginning of the colonial age, accompanied by the massive genocide of the American indigenous population.

Such power discrepancies can often lead to abuse and much worse. Moltmann says, no, knowledge should lead to wisdom. But the modern view of the human being is that he is God’s deputy and representative on earth. Yet according to the worldview of the church fathers, the human person was also a “hypostasis of the whole cosmic nature,” or in today’s ecological discourse, “a microcosm in which all previous life forms are integrated.”[[9]](#footnote-9) That is why Moltmann is calling us to “cosmic humility.” He explains:

Before we human beings “till and keep” the earth and assume any rule over the world or any responsibility for creation, the earth cares for us. It creates the conditions that are favourable for the human race and has preserved it down to the present day. It is not that the earth is entrusted to us: we are entrusted to the earth. The earth can live without us human beings, but we cannot live without the earth.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Both Qur’an and Bible teach that man was formed out of the dust of the earth and that it was God’s breath breathed into him that made him a living person. Moltmann, however, goes a step further. On the basis of Psalm 104, he asserts that God breathed into all of his creatures. In verse 24 the psalmist exclaims, “O Lord, what a variety of things you have made! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures.” Then he mentions how God feeds them all and “they are richly satisfied.” Then this passage:

But if you turn away from them, they panic.

When you take away their breath, they die and turn again to dust.

When you give them your breath, life is created,

and you renew the face of the earth (Ps. 104:29-30, NLT).

Moltmann reasons here that if humankind’s creation in the image of God is tied to his Spirit (*ruh* in Arabic, *ruah* in Hebrew, and in both cases meaning both spirit and breath or wind), “then all created beings in which God’s Spirit dwells are God’s image and must be respected accordingly.” Then, following the Apostle Paul in Romans 8, he notes that we humans share with all other creatures the same suffering and the same hope for redemption. In Paul’s words, “But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay” (verses 20-21, NLT). As Moltmann puts it, “Men and women will not be redeemed from transience and death *from* this earth, but together *with* the earth.”[[11]](#footnote-11) If we are to survive as a human race, he argues, we will have to find our place in the community of fellow human beings and respectfully consider any “intervention in nature.” “True knowledge is not power,” he concludes, “but wisdom.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

That wisdom has been in short supply throughout the modern period, to say the least. The now famous “hockey stick graph” shows a very gradual warming since the last ice age 9,500 years ago, and then this dramatic rise in global temperature in the last century. We now know that this is mostly caused by the burning of fossil fuels, but also by contributing factors such as deforestation, modern intensive agriculture, and more. We have polluted our air and our oceans, almost beyond repair, and the loss of biodiversity points to a very different future for all creatures on our planet. And much of this can be traced to the great multinational corporations that until recently had little incentive to improve their social and environmental impact and the capitalist system that runs the world and has turned us into a consumerist society. This is what I am calling the “hijacking of the human vicegerency.” But there is wisdom to glean from the indigenous peoples of our earth, the so-called Fourth World.

# Learning from Indigenous Wisdom

Theologian George E. Tinker’s mother was from a family of Norwegian immigrants, but his father was a citizen of the Osage nation, and it was his indigenous heritage that he mostly clung to growing up. After teaching 32 years at the United Methodist Iliff Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado, Tinker retired in 2017 but still does some teaching there and speaking in different venues around the world. But he has always been active in Native American circles. He served many years on the leadership council of the American Indian Movement of Colorado and founded and directed the Four Winds Indian Council in Denver. As a theologian he also had to be an anthropologist and historian in order to sort out the struggles and dysfunctions of his fellow Native Americans, both in the church and outside of it. This is the poorest segment of the United States population and its life expectancy is about 18 years below that of the white population.

In his book, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty*, Tinker has concluded that there are “four fundamental, deep structure cultural differences between Indian people and the cultures that derive from european traditions.”[[13]](#footnote-13) These nicely summarize some of the wisdom we can glean from these peoples.

First, Indigenous traditions are spatially rooted, as opposed to Western ones which are temporarily rooted. Their identity revolves much more around their land than their history. In Western culture, “history and temporality reign supreme,” and people’s goal is progress and time is money. But native peoples prioritize spatial rather than temporal thinking.

A second pillar of American Indian, Alaska Natives, and all other indigenous populations is that whereas euro-westerners prioritize the individual and his or her rights, they are “communitarian by nature.”[[14]](#footnote-14) For them, he explains, “spiritual involvement in the ceremonial life of a community is typically engaged in ‘for the sake of the people’ and not for the sake of personal salvation or personal self-empowerment.”

A third pillar of indigenous worldview is “a firm sense of group filial attachment to particular places that comes with a responsibility to relate to the land in those places with responsibility.”[[15]](#footnote-15) That’s why, for instance, the Trail of Tears was such a traumatic event for many Native Americans. About 60,000 were forcefully displaced and many did not survive the long trek from southeastern United States to “Indian lands” beyond the Mississippi in the 1830s.

A deeper reason for this attachment to land can be found in a fourth worldview pillar, and that is that everything in nature or creation is intimately related. As opposed to “euro-westerners” who see themselves as distinct from and above the natural world and its living beings, indigenous peoples “live and experience themselves as part of creation.”[[16]](#footnote-16) As Tinker puts it, their wider community includes “animals (four-legged), birds, and all the living, moving things (including rocks, hills, trees, rivers, and so on), along with all the other sorts of two-leggeds (e.g., bears, humans of different colors) in the world.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

What is “the most precious gift” American Indians can share with their fellow Americans? Tinker answers that it’s “our perspective on the interrelatedness of all creation and our deep sense of relationship to the land in particular. . . . Just as there is no category of the inanimate, there can be no conception of anything in the created world that does not share in the sacredness infused in the act of creation.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Creation is the theological bedrock of indigenous communities and its symbol is the circle, as seen in particular in their community prayers, as they most often pray in large circles. The circle encompasses the tribe’s connection to other tribes and to all humans, and then to all the universe in creation. In this worldview, hierarchy is absent. Chiefs are chosen by consensus and they are expected to embody the collective will of the tribe. This is an egalitarian worldview that applies not only to other people but to their animal relatives and all physical elements of the physical world created by God, or the Great Spirit, or some other similar concept, depending on the tribe.

There is also the idea of “established boundaries” for the balance and harmony of creation to be maintained. Thus, if a tribe must cut down a tree to build a sweat lodge, for example, it will engage in a ceremony with some kind of sacrifice and prayers that symbolically apologize for this violence. The same goes for hunting. Often “prayers need to be spoken or sung and even words of respect spoken to the animal itself.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

One of the main objectives of Tinker’s book, American Indian Liberation, is to establish that Christian theology should not start with Christ and his redemption, but like the early creeds, it should begin with creation. This “theological priority of creation,” he contends, “is not a priority for environmental concern, but rather a firm foundation for justice and a vision for peace.”[[20]](#footnote-20) By confessing God as Creator and we ourselves as created, “there is hope for spiritual transformation that can bring us closer to the *basileia* of God in our midst (Luke 17:21).” This can lead us to repentance for the ways we have disrupted the harmony and balance of creation. “Confession precedes return,” he writes. That is the condition for “living in balance with God and all creation.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Tinker clearly has a wider agenda than just environmental concerns, though they are important to him as well. What we can learn from indigenous peoples who have been so badly beaten down by settler communities and also, frankly, by majorities of voters whose concerns clash with the needs of the poorest in their midst, is that the harmony and balance of creation includes a striving for greater justice and peace. At the end of his second chapter, “Creation, Justice and Peace,” Tinker states, “Yes, Indian peoples have experienced and continue to experience endless oppression as a result of what some would call the barbaric invasion of America.” And in that vein he continues,

Moreover, we suspect that the greed that motivated the displacement of all indigenous peoples from their lands of spiritual rootedness is the same greed that threatens the destruction of the earth and the continued oppression of so many peoples and ultimately the destruction of our White relatives. Whether it is the stories the settlers tell or the theologies they develop to interpret those stories, something seems wrong to Indian people. But not only do Indians continue to tell stories, sing the songs, speak the prayers, and perform the ceremonies that root themselves deeply in Mother Earth; they are actually audacious enough to think that their stories and their ways of reverencing creation will someday win over our White settler relatives and transform them.”

Tinker then ends his chapter with a prayer: “May justice, followed by genuine peace, flow out of concern for one another and all creation.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

# The Circle, the Web, and God’s Call to Care for all Creatures

Let’s name it for what it is: the modern Western interpretation of the Islamic and Christian tenet of human dominion over creation is simply bad theology. Clearly, both teach that God gave great gifts to humankind, both in intelligence and moral acuity, and calls them to use those gifts to steward the created order. But this also represents a test, because they will be held to account for how they carried out this mandate. Further, the Bible agrees with the qur’anic verse which has God say, “We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea; We have provided good sustenance for them and favoured them specially above many of those We have created.”[[23]](#footnote-23) In Genesis 1, in Psalm 8, and other places as well, we find the same sentiments. But theology is always formulated in context. There is first of all the context of scripture itself. The Qur’an consistently reminds its readers and hearers of the danger of human arrogance and the temptation to live life without God’s guidance and help. Both texts show the rich often misusing their power to crush the poor and powerless; and they castigate political leaders of powerful nations for trampling on the rights of their people and waging brutal wars of conquest against other nations.

But the other context worth interrogating is the historical one – what the socioeconomic and political dynamics at play in the life time of the reader and intepreter. I was co-guest editor of a 2012 issue of the journal *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, Ecology* on Islam and ecology and my own article was about the role of Sharia in current Muslim debates on ecology.[[24]](#footnote-24) While researching that piece, I discovered that Seyyed Hossein Nasr delivered a series of lectures on Islam and ecology at the University of Chicago in 1967, just months before the publication of Lynn White’s groundbreaking article laying the blame for the ecological crisis at the feet of the monotheistic faiths, and Christianity in particular. But though he wrote more than others on this topic, Nasr never dealt with the practical aspect of how this crisis might be solved. That said, White’s piece sparked a good deal of soul-searching among Christian theologians and the idea of the dominion of humankind over nature would undergo yet another interpretation, in parallel with the growing environmental movement and the discoveries of more and more grievous havoc we have wreaked on our land, seas, air, ozone and climate. The tide was turning.

The landmark international response to this crisis was the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, or the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which set into motion a global agenda that eventually led to the formulation of the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the 2015 SDGs. It also spawned a five-year international effort to draft the Earth Charter in 2000, which declared in its Preamble that the only way forward was to recognize “that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with one destiny.” And then it presented an agenda that brought together social justice and care for the environment in a seamless way:

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This is the kind of language Tinker was using. This may not be surprising, as there had been already much discussion in UN circles on how to integrate the needs, aspirations, and contributions of the Indigenous Peoples of the world. This movement culminated in a document adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2007, The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.[[26]](#footnote-26) Though certainly much work remains to be done, we cannot but applaud this kind of progress in the global arena.

Finally, growing out of the Earth Summit at Rio in 1992, the United Nation Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came two years later, ratified by 198 countries. This kickstarted the yearly Conference of the Parties (or COPs), where government-level large-scale gatherings attract large numbers of “industry leaders, youth activists, representatives of indigenous communities, journalists, and other stakeholders.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The 2015 Paris Agreement was another milestone in this process of government accountability, in that for the first time “it was a legally binding international treaty on climate change.”[[28]](#footnote-28) It is set up in such a way that through yearly reports known as “nationally determined contributions” (NDCs), nations are incentivized to continually increase their level of ambition in both reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building resilience to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The framework also places more responsibility on the shoulders of wealthier nations to help the poorer ones, who have lesser means but also who bear the least responsibility for the high level of CO2 in the atmosphere.

This past year’s COP28 conference in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, was the biggest COP yet with 85,000 participants, “including more than 150 Heads of State and Government, . . . the representatives of national delegations, civil society, business, Indigenous Peoples, youth, philanthropy, and international organizations.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

How does this relate to Muslims and Christians working to heal our planet? At the highest levels of religious leadership, since COP26 a Global Faith Leaders’ Summit has been convened every year. For COP28 (Nov. 30-Dec. 12, 2023), the local Muslim Council of Elders (MCE) organized the gathering along with the COP28 presidency, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UAE Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence. The “Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP28” was prepared by faith leaders over several months before the gathering and was signed in Abu Dhabi by the 28 faith leaders. The signatories identified in the document as “representatives of diverse faiths and indigenous traditions” coming together to declare “shared concern for the escalating climate impacts that imperil our cherished planet, as well as our common commitment to jointly address the global crisis.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Also, for the first time, the Presidency, together with MCE and UNEP, hosted the Faith Pavilion, which hosted “panels with religious leaders, scientists, and political leaders, as well as encourage intergenerational engaging dialogue [with] young faith leaders and indigenous representatives.”

The Faith Pavilion itself was set up to engage a wide spectrum of activists. Think about it: this is an opportunity for local groups of Muslims and Christians, who are already involved in various projects in their own communities (and hopefully collaborating), to fund and send representatives who will participate and return with greater knowledge and motivation. This kind of grassroots religious activism has been going on for a long time. In the preparation for the launch of the SDGs, for instance, the World Bank blog documents a large gathering in September 2015 in New York of “over 140 faith-based organization and religious leaders, World Bank and UN officials, and UN ambassadors filled the chapel of the UN Church Center.”[[31]](#footnote-31) At the gathering, faith leaders presented a “Faith-Based Framework to End Extreme Poverty and Realize the SDGs.” This document had been ironed out in April of that year in a collaborative manner and now they were looking for organizations to adopt it. In the end, seventy FBOs signed on to it. The framework was built on three pillars:

strengthening the **evidence** base around the contribution and impact of faith organizations in helping to end extreme poverty; engaging in **advocacy** efforts to hold governments and other stakeholders accountable for the successful implementation of the SDGs; and enhancing effective **collaboration** between faith-inspired organizations and the World Bank, the United Nations, and governments.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Granted, this is not about the environment, but it represents the kind of activism that is taking place in that arena as well. Besides, all these different facets of sustainable development are intricately related, as we saw at the start of this paper. Jeffrey Sachs shows that undergirding the seventeen SDGs are four principal goals: “economic prosperity; social inclusion and cohesion; environmental sustainability; and good governance by major social actors, including governments and business.”[[33]](#footnote-33) If the first goal is about eradicating extreme poverty, the second one is about social inclusion. In a chapter devoted to the topic, Sachs notes what this social component aims to cover: “Social inclusion aims for broad-based prosperity, for eliminating discrimination, for equal protection under the laws. For enabling everybody to meet basic needs, and for high social mobility (meaning that a child born into poverty has a reasonable chance to escape poverty).”[[34]](#footnote-34) And then he broaches the topic of indigenous populations. He notes that in many regions of the world, past inequalities continue to bear down on some populations: “Social discrimination, racial discrimination, and ethnic discrimination continue, alongside gender discrimination.” Yet those populations most disenfranchised the world over are the indigenous peoples:

These indigenous populations are a window onto the human penchant for brutality against groups they do not understand, and groups that threaten their own wellbeing (or at least seem to do so). Indigenous populations around the world held land that was coveted by those who came later. And the newcomers typically lost no time in brutally expelling the indigenous groups from their native lands. These expulsions were backed by law, power, politics, and self-serving cultural stereotypes (typically that the natives were less than human).[[35]](#footnote-35)

Sachs, on the basis of numerous studies, states that sustainable development is above all a holistic vision of what a good society should be. Reducing inequalities is very high on the list. The greater the gap between rich and poor, the greater the likelihood of poor social mobility, discrimination against women, religious and racial minorities, and especially indigenous populations. But this too: ignore environmental degradation today and you will only reap heart wrenching suffering and conflict down the road.

Recall Tinker’s circle and how it stands for the egalitarian worldview of Native peoples and the interrelatedness of all creation, all living beings and all elements of their physical environment. All is sacred and precious in a spiritual sense. Therefore, let us repent for our words, attitudes and actions that have disturbed the good balance and harmony of God’s creation and seek to live so as to recover it. Let us keep within the circle of God’s love, justice and peace for his world.

Theologian Larry L. Rasmussen, in his book, *Earth Community Earth Ethics*,[[36]](#footnote-36) offers us another metaphor that could help us in the task ahead: the web: “webs of social relationships that define human community, together with ecosystem, webs and the regenerative capacities of both human and ecosystems communities.”[[37]](#footnote-37) As in the metaphor of the circle, the web connects everything in a dynamic, life-giving way. And like the circle, it reminds us of our interdependence as humans, animals, all living beings and the physical systems we all count on to live and thrive.

The last two chapters of the Bible speak of a new heaven and a new earth, and of a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, in which all the nations live in peace, bringing their glorious gifts to share with one another. In this vision the Apostle John is describing, he sees them all basking in the glorious light of God’s presence. No more night, just day. Then we read of a beautiful picture. I quote from Revelation 22:

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations (Rev. 22:1-2 NLT).

The Bible starts with a creation and a garden and it ends with a city hosting all the nations and a creation made new by God’s river of life, no doubt symbolizing his life-giving Spirit who breathed life into all his creatures. My parting wish, or maybe a call to us Christians and Muslims who believe in our Creator’s bounty and his ability to heal what is broken and defaced, that we move forward with greater faith to bring healing and hope to our world on the brink of disaster. Maybe it’s about cleaning neighborhoods, or expanding green areas and parks, or getting involved in more global matters with faith-based or secular NGOs that work on a variety of areas so that poverty will recede, greater equity and justice will spread where needed most, good governance will be strengthened, and where nature will revive and regenerate.

And may we who choose to trust the Creator and follow his call through the power of his Spirit demonstrate for all genuine humility in carrying out our divine trusteeship, always bearing in mind the symbols of the circle and web we have learned from our Indigenous brothers and sisters who have always lived closer to the Earth.

1. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Farhana Mayer, *An Introduction to Qur’anic Ecology and Resonances with “Laudate Si’* (Oxford: Laudate Si’ Research Institute, Campion Hall; Randeree Charitable Trust), 2023, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Qur’an 96:6-7, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tinker E. Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Qur’an 17:70, Abdel Haleem. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. David L. Johnston, “Intra-Muslim Debates on Ecology: Is Shari’a Still Relevant?” in *Worldviews:* *Global Religions, Culture, Ecology* 16 (2012) 218-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Available online, https://earthcharter.org/read-the-earth-charter/preamble/. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See, for instance, on the website of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. UN News, “Explainer: What’s COP28 and why is it so important?” https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1144042. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. UN Climate Change, “The Paris Agreement,” https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. UN Climate Change, “COP28: What Was Achieved and What Happens Next?” (Nov. 28, 2023), https://unfccc.int/cop28. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. COP28 UAE, “COP28 Presidency Receives ‘Abu Dhabi Interfaith Statement for COP28’ at Global Faith Leaders’ Summit,” https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1144042. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. World Bank Blogs, “Meeting the moral imperative to end extreme poverty” (Nov. 2, 2015), https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/meeting-moral-imperative-end-extreme-poverty. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 232-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. . [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rasmussen, *Earth Community Earth Ethics,* 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)