A Muslim response to Pope Francis’s environmental encyclical: Laudato Si’

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Pope Francis’s environmental encyclical [*Laudato Si’: On Care For Our Common Home*](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), which was officially released on 18 June 2015, is undoubtedly one of *the* most important interventions in twenty first century campaigns for environmental justice. It is not surprising that the 184-page document, released in eight languages, took more than 18 months to draft. This second papal encyclical by Pope Francis has already had a significant impact on shifting the global debate in favour of those who advocate that humanity should act with greater care for our common home. This was clearly in evidence at the discussions that took place at the 2015 [United Nations Climate Change Conference](http://web.unep.org/climatechange/cop21/highlights) (COP 21) which convened in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015.

Moreover, *Laudato Si’*has had a ripple effect within the interfaith community. The imminent release of *Laudato Si’* inspired the issuing of a [statement](https://theshalomcenter.org/RabbinicLetterClimate) in June by more than 330 rabbis in a [Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis](http://forward.com/opinion/national/309548/rabbis-against-climate-change/). *Laudato Si’*no doubt also inspired the [*Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change*](http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/)released in Istanbul in August 2015.

I concur with Muslim scholars such as [Joseph Lumbard](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-e-b-lumbard/an-islamic-response-to-pope-francis-encyclical_b_7616762.html), [Anas Malik](http://arcoftheuniverse.info/towards-muslim-engagement-with-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si) and Ibrahim Ozdemir, who have each engaged with *Laudato Si’,* that the important themes in Pope Francis’s encyclical on the environment resonates well with the teachings of Islam. Here I would like to highlight only two of them.

First and foremost, one of *the* most significant aspects of *Laudato Si’* is that it frames the issue of environmental conservation within a framework of justice. *Laudato Si’* is a document about justice with a focus on the environment, rather than the other way around. Pope Francis sees the issue of climate change through the eyes of the poor and this is the key hermeneutic or interpretive lens. In other words, the pontiff wants the economic, social and environmental world orders to be fairer to the poorest of humanity.

*Laudato Si’* criticizes consumerist, profit-seeking economies, and emphasizes acute sensitivity to debt, inequality, and poverty, and suggests differentiated responsibilities based on wealth and ability. Compassion and justice require voices to speak up for the most vulnerable and marginalized – those often left voiceless, those who have been pushed into poverty, those who have been denied access to food, water and other basic human rights, those who stand to suffer the most from climate change, while having contributed the least to the problem. The social, economic and environmental dimensions cannot be considered in isolation, but should be treated integrally as a complex joint crisis. These social justice concerns resonate fully with the teachings of Islam.

It is most eloquently depicted in the Glorious Qur’an in *Surah al-Rahman*, chapter 55, verses 7-9, where God, the Lord of Compassionate Justice, proclaims:

**God has raised the cosmos,  
And set up (for all things) the balance.  
So do not transgress the balance.  
Weigh, therefore, (your deeds) with justice,  
And cause no loss in the balance!**

From an Islamic perspective, the environmental crisis facing humanity today can be viewed as a symptom of a deeper spiritual malaise. This spiritual malaise has come about through extravagant and consumerist lifestyles that have transgressed the balance between humans and nature. An imbalance or altering of the *mizan* (balance) has taken place at the individual, social and global levels and this is now being reflected in the environmental crisis. Moreover, it is significant to note that in the above verses of the Qur’an the balance can only be restored if humans act with justice and equity (*qist*).

A second novel theme that *Laudato Si’* takes up is that of acknowledging the existential rights of those with whom we share this planet—namely animals and plants etc.—and, more importantly, recognizing their spiritual essence. In the sixth chapter of the encyclical, Pope Francis writes that humanity can “discover God in all things.” Hence, the pontiff asserts, “there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face.”(No. 233)

Interestingly, in order to drive home and substantiate this point, in footnote 159 of the encyclical, Pope Francis credits a ninth century [Muslim Sufi mystic Amir al-Khawas](http://time.com/3927357/pope-francis-ali-al-khawas/) for the concept of nature’s “mystical meaning.” In his novel theological perspective Amir al-Khawas was obviously inspired by the abundance of Qur’anic verses that depict the natural environment in this manner. The Muslim scholar, Joseph Lumbard [in his response](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-e-b-lumbard/an-islamic-response-to-pope-francis-encyclical_b_7616762.html) to *Laudato Si’*has provided the following striking examples of Qur’anic verses wherein God affirms the spiritual essence of our natural environment. The Qur’an proclaims, “**whatsoever is in the heavens and on the earth glorifies God**” (59:1; 61:1; 62:1; 64:1). “**The stars and the trees prostrate**” (55:6), “**the thunder hymns His praise” (13:13),**and**“unto God prostrates whosoever is in the heavens and whosoever is on the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the beasts**” (22:18). In these and many other verses, the whole of creation is presented as a Divine symphony, for “**there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise. Truly He is Clement, Forgiving.**” (Q17:44)”

According to Argentinian priest Father Augusto Zampini, “it is certainly unusual for a Pope to cite a Muslim Mystic in support of his theology of environmental transcendence, but for those who have known Pope Francis since his days in the slums of Argentina this shows his personal touch on the encyclical.” By quoting Amir al-Khawas, Fr. Zampini argues Pope Francis is “inviting all human beings to transcend, to go out of themselves and therefore to improve the relationship that we have with other people, with the Earth, with God.” Moreover, Fr. Zampini contends that through his citing of a Muslim Mystic “Pope Francis is trying to foster ecumenical and interfaith dialogue about shared spirituality”. Such a view is confirmed by the following quote from *Laudato Si* where Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness and shared spirituality; “Everything is connected. Concern for the environment this needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.” (No. 240)

In conclusion, it is my considered view that through *Laudato Si’* Pope Francis has inaugurated another constructive platform for credible faith and secular leaders to enter into renewed dialogue on the critical question of climate change and discuss ways in which we can bring ourselves closer to living in harmony and reverence with nature. Moreover, by locating such a conversation within the broader framework of Pope Francis’s theology of compassion for the poor, which offers a powerful social critique of our global culture of consumerism, covetousness, and opulence – interreligious dialogue should find even greater resonance among Muslims.

It is my sincere hope that more Muslim scholars will take up the dialogical challenge presented in *Laudato Si’* in a comparable spirit of reverence and hospitality with which the twelfth century Muslim leader, Sultan al-Kamil, welcomed Saint Francis of Assisi from whom the current Pope takes his name. Muslims can and should engage substantively with *Laudato Si’* in order to build broad solidarity with meaningful global commitments for the collective good, through responsible stewardship of the earth.

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\*English translations of the Qur’anic verses are the authors own.

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