

Key Concepts in Interreligious Discourses: The Concept of Environment and the Concept of Economy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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I. The Concept of Environment

1. The Concept of Environment in Judaism (Prof. Dr. Jeremy Benstein)

While there are problems with the terms “Judaism” and “environment”, and there is no unified concept of anything shared by all Jews, some trends can be discussed concerning Jewish perspectives on the interaction of human beings with the world. Prof. Benstein mentioned four common themes shared by Abrahamic traditions: 1) the world as creation, which therefore has inherent value, 2) stewardship ethic: man having responsibility for creation, 3) the emotional connection to the natural world, the wonder and awe it inspires, and 4) the emphasis on spiritual over material values. A central rift in modern environmentalist thought (beginning with two seminal essays by Lynn White Jr. and Garrett Hardin) is between the emphasis on beliefs and values on the one hand, or on behaviour and legislation on the other, as the root of the crisis and the field for potential solutions (a useful conceptual distinction, though not a strict dichotomy). While many Christians, and Jews following them, have focused on the former in religious environmental thought, Benstein argues that from a Jewish perspective, a focus on the latter is more in line with halachic tradition, as the Mishna, for instance, holds that someone who harms the public must be held responsible. Though the examples in these texts concern local issues such as a shared water source as there was no concept of a global community, the idea of the public good is not limited to a particular religious group. Linking the idea of “mutual coercion” to protect the environment to the notion of the Biblical covenant gives it a more positive meaning, beyond mere prevention of harm. Although there are also anti-naturalistic strains in modern Jewish thought, rooted in radical transcendentalism, Jewish ideas about transcendence can nevertheless be reconciled with care for the natural world. Some central practices for the latter are rooted in the tradition of the Sabbath and the sabbatical year, which discourage an exclusive focus on wealth and growth and are therefore not just spiritually, but also environmentally important, as they encourage humility and restraint, the basis for a Biblical stewardship ethic. The focus is on this world, rather than an eschatological perspective on a new creation as is a common consideration in Christian thought.

2. The Concept of Environment in Christianity (Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Gabriel)

In the Biblical creation narrative, human beings have a double-sided position, as they are part of creation but also given responsibility to rule over (the rest of) creation. The interpretation of this as a mentality of domination, however, is unlikely as in its cultural context, it more likely carried meanings of “leading to pasture” or “cultivating land”, tying into the ideas of land stewardship discussed in the previous talk. Humans are even seen in Christian theology to function as “co-creators”, helping to shape the world with our own creativity. Human actions have a more than proportional effect on creation. Western ideas of domination and progress, however, rooted in the idea of human reason in opposition to nature, are a more modern phenomenon, going back to Cartesian subject-object. This includes the idea that man should exercise control over the natural world as an inanimate “environment”, and is in opposition to the interconnectedness and intrinsic value of nature communicated in the Biblical text,

particularly the psalms. From the Christian perspective, too, the concept of an “environment” external to human beings is problematic. The problem can be approached by cultivating a set of Christian virtues that can be conceptualised as “ecological virtues”. These include humility, i.e. recognising the limitations of nature and mankind’s mastery of it; measure and modesty, the avoidance of excess and concentration on basic needs; and gratitude, that is, appreciation for the beauty of nature without taking our right to use it for granted. A revival of fasting regulations could be one area where such change could take place, providing a parallel with the role of the Sabbath and the Sabbatical year in the discussion around Jewish environmentalism.

3. The Concept of Environment in Islam (Prof. Dr. Yasin Dutton)

There is no word corresponding to our “environment” in Classical Arabic; in Modern Standard Arabic *bī’a* is used, which also translates to “home”. While this usage of the word is modern, the idea of the world as our home is already reflected in the Qur’ān, e.g. Q 55:10: “He placed the Earth for people.” The environmental destruction and pollution that affects our world can be understood from a Muslim perspective with the Qur’ānic concept of *fasād* (corruption, despoliation, “messed-up-ness”). This *fasād* and also the task of resolving it lie in the collective responsibility of human beings (although such collective responsibility expands out from the individual and does not disqualify individual action), as an important *hadīth* highlights: If the people on the lower decks of a ship drill holes in the hull to get water, everyone on the ship will drown. However, the hold economic powers have over global politics makes it difficult for societies to act on this responsibility. An Islamic response to this can be based on Islamic economic values: The pillar of *zakāt* can be used as a basis for redistribution and easing the burdens on the vulnerable and help cultivate the values of gratitude and generosity, while the prohibition of usury can be understood in a more general sense as reflecting human responsibility for the world (i.e. referring not merely to usury in financial transactions, but “usury against” / exploitation of the earth). The Qur’ānic concept of human beings as *khalīfa* of God also ties into this idea of responsibility for the earth.

II. The Concept of Economy

1. The Concept of Economy in Judaism (Dr. Moses L. Pava)

The Biblical view of wealth sees it as a divine gift that elevates human dignity, nurtures people, and unites the community. Wealth in this context is primarily equated with the land, which is in turn governed by a number of rules about land use, such as the obligation to let land lie fallow every seven years and return it to its original owners every 50 years. There is therefore no standalone economic sphere, economic activity being instead defined through the divine covenant. The development of a political sphere in the time of the kings also brought economic changes. The Biblical prophets often criticised, among other things, the economic oppression of the poor. The Mishnaic tradition still envisions economic transactions as keeping a balance, where no true profit is possible, as there is a fundamentally finite amount of wealth that is not to be used to create more wealth but is a sacred gift. However, pragmatic compromises were sometimes struck between the uncompromising prophetic position and the reality of competition. This leaves open the question what the right development for today would be – a return to tradition or a re-interpretation of tradition and integration into the modern world. If business should be recognised as a meaningful sphere of human activity separate from spirituality, both sides need to recognise each other’s spheres.

2. The Concept of Economy in Christianity (Prof. Dr. André Habisch)

The term economy stems from the Greek *oikonomía* and originally meant the managing of a household. In the early Christian tradition, particularly the Greek church fathers, this term was adopted to mean the “divine economy”, that is, the “management” or stewardship of the world by God, that is, the way God interacts with the world, for instance in the life and death of Christ and the history of the church. This was later supplemented with the concept of “ecclesiastical economy”, meaning the management of certain issues within the church. The modern concept of economy as the study of the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services is primarily secular, but as it emerged in the 18th century, it did have links to the (Christian) moral philosophy of its time. Contemporary economic thinking is strongly shaped by ideas of change and innovation, which also have roots in the Biblical tradition, e.g. in Abraham’s leaving of his home, but also in the eschatological visions of the New Testament. Moreover, there is an apparent tension in the gospels between stories such as the parable of talents, which seem to encourage good business and the effective use of resources, and a pervasive disdain for material private property. This latter theme later also shaped many forms of monastic life, although while individual monks usually did not have material possessions, monastic communities often did. Late ancient and medieval monastic communities also brought about many social and economic innovations, including for example early forms of cooperative banking as seen in Franciscan “montes pietatis”. Christian political and economic actors also became a driving force in the shift towards a “social market economy” and more socially conscious approaches to innovation. There are often difficult equilibria to be struck in this area, e.g. concerning how many regulations ensuring the affordability of necessary goods are permissible or how they can be enforced.

3. The Concept of Economy in Islam (Prof. em. Rodney Wilson)

In the framework of Islamic economics, economic decisions always involve moral choices. Economics is therefore seen as prescriptive, it is not a separate sphere distinct from ethics. According to Umer Chapra, for instance, production and consumption of goods should be governed by the tenets of Sharī‘a and priority should be given to basic needs rather than consumer wants. In recent years, there is also a growing discussion of ecological concerns in this context of questioning conventional economic ideas of what is produced and how.

Good and bad economic behaviour has been recognised from early Islamic times; business itself was seen as something that serves the people, with the Prophet himself having engaged in trade. However, rules about conduct in trade transactions are also present from the beginning with the prohibition of *ribā* (usury), one of the central rules for economic conduct, going back to the Qur’ān. The Islamic scholar ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) was the first to analyse market dynamics and the effect of supply and demand on prices. In the Ottoman empire, market transactions were regulated by Islamic scholars through the institution of the *hisba*. Beyond small-scale questions of price regulations, ibn Khaldūn’s well-known analysis of the rise and fall of empires considered the development of the economy as a major factor in the growth and decline of societies. The practices of *zakāt* and *waqf* are also major mechanisms of wealth redistribution in Islamic societies, but they are not equivalent to taxation in a general sense, which is not usually discussed in religious terms. Although the Islamic banking industry has expanded

considerably in recent decades, Islamic banking and Islamic approaches to monetary policy are still being developed.