



Faith and the Land: Conversations about Spirituality and Wilderness

January 28, 2009
Members of the Turkish
and Muslim community
Multicultural Arch Foundation Center

Introduction

On January 28, 2009, members of the Turkish and Muslim community gathered together at the Multicultural Arch Foundation Center in Salt Lake City to share their perspectives about why Utah's wild places are important spiritually, and to talk about how the teachings and traditions of Islam call on us to care take the natural world.

This evening of dialogue was part of an exciting new effort sponsored by the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) to create an interfaith statement about the importance of wilderness preservation to Utahns of all faith traditions. As a first step in that process, SUWA is convening conversations between members of different faith communities. Later, SUWA will bring people together across faith traditions to craft a compelling statement that weaves together the reflections, perspectives and ideas captured in these conversations.

The "Faith and the Land" initiative is based on the belief that Utahns from all religious traditions, as well as Utahns from no particular faith tradition, value Utah's wild lands as places of spiritual inspiration, connection, renewal and solace. It is also based on the belief that coming together to share what is important to us individually and collectively will reveal collective wisdom that can help guide the wild lands we love.

Below are highlights of the conversation:

How are Utah's wild places important to you spiritually? How do the teachings and traditions of Islam call on us to care take the natural world, including wild lands?

> For Muslims, it could be considered quite difficult to separate Islam from their thoughts, so it makes sense for us to answer these two questions as one. This topic is so vast and so involved that our discussion tonight will only express a small part the answer.



> Innate human conscience does tell us what is right and what is wrong unless we let things affect us and choose to ignore that innate sense. There is a saying from Muhammad:

"Allah is beautiful and he loves beauty." This is the reality and entirety of creation. As keepers of that creation, humans have an utter responsibility to protect nature in the best way possible.

> Nature teaches us about the power and beauty of Allah. A river may seem small and gentle. But it is actually a big power; it carves big canyons.

> Nature also teaches us this lesson: all parts of creation are created for a reason; everything has a purpose. For example, there is a function for everything in our body. And every animal has a purpose, a duty. There is no exception to this. Nothing is useless in nature. Even



animals we may consider “bad” have a purpose. Think of flies; they eat dead animals to the bone and make them clean. This takes us to the point of our responsibility to protect nature; when we destroy a part of creation, we interfere with the ability of that part of creation to serve its purpose.

> Our tradition teaches us that every plant and animal has a right to live. It is not right to kill animals or to cut trees or grass for fun. We believe that whatever you need to take, take that much and then leave the rest.

> There are many reasons for creation, but one is to provide for human beings. But that does not give us the right to kill or waste. To survive, we may need to plant some plants and to cut grass. And some animals are taken in our practices. But we believe that you should take only what you need and not waste anything.

> I have a friend who likes to hunt. I asked him, why do you kill those animals? Is it for fun? He said, yes. I asked, do you take it home to eat? And he said, no. If you walk in two miles and then kill an animal, it is too heavy to carry out. He said hunting helped to balance the type of animals in Utah. But we believe that everything was created in balance, and if that balance is preserved, there would be no need to kill these animals. If the balance is broken, it is often we who have disturbed it in some way. On some islands, for example, people killed snakes because they feared them. And then, of course, the number of mice increased dramatically. And then they had to try to kill the mice.

> In traditional Islamic society, large portions of land were left undisturbed. It was forbidden to build or grow crops in these areas. They were left so that nature can have its own plan.

> Muslims believe that everything here is to be shared. We should not hog from a person, or from an animal. Or even take water from a tree.

> Traditional scholars have split the non-human world in two. One purpose is to provide for us. Another purpose is its spiritual value. Animals make milk; it can be used by us. Leaves create oxygen; this too is helpful to us. But these things also exist to give praise to their creator, their source. Creation is in constant praise of its creator.



> There is a story about a master who sent his disciple out to gather flowers. The disciple was gone a long time. When he returned, he brought back miserable looking flowers that were wilted and almost dead. The Master said, why did you bring me these miserable flowers? The disciple answered, I looked and looked for some flowers to cut and bring to you, but all the other ones were praising the glory of their Creator and I did not want to disturb them. So I could only find these wilted flowers to bring back to you.

> There are two sources that guide us as Muslims: the Qur'an and Muhammad, the Prophet. Muhammad teaches us proper ways of conduct, which is mercy for all things. Mercy is love, compassion and much more. Some of the names for Allah found in the Qur'an are: Ar-Rahman – the all beneficent; Ar-Rahim – the most merciful; and Al-Wadud – the most loving. Allah teaches us mercy for all things – all of nature and creation.

> Allah created us in different nations and tribes so that we can come to know one another. You will find communities and tribes within the animal as well as the human kingdom. There is much more going on within these kingdoms than we can see or know. But just because we don't see or understand something does not mean we should not respect it. It is our responsibility to show respect and know our limits.

> There are two major texts in the Muslim faith. The Qur'an contains things that were revealed to the prophet Muhammad. The Hadith contains things that Muhammad would speak on his own and things that others remembered were said by Muhammad. It includes explanations of revelations and Muhammad's understanding of revelations. It contains examples of how to live and how to treat nature. For example, the Hadith says that when dooms-day comes you should plant a seed if you have it in your hand, even though you know you are going to die. It says destroying the forest is like killing a child. It tells the story of how the prophet was leading an army into war and when he saw birds nesting in the field he changed their route so not to disturb the birds. It calls on people to bend a tree rather than to cut it if it is in their way.



> Nature – everything! -- keeps praising Allah all the time. One verse in the Qur'an says that the seven heavens and the earth and everything in them keep praising Allah all the time. We may not understand how they do it, and they may not use language such as English or Arabic, but they are praising Allah and always will. A new spider has never seen a web before, but it spins a web. A wild dog buries a bone and knows how to find it. Birds wake up in the morning and sing. Or consider the wind; the wind takes pollen from a flower and carries it to another flower. This praising happens at all levels, even the atomic or subatomic or quanta. You can understand these things scientifically on one level but you can also understand them more deeply as praise of Allah.

> There are three sources that introduce Allah to us: the Qur'an, the Hadith, and nature, or the universe. We can read from the Qur'an and the Hadith, but we should read from nature or the universe as well. We should try to understand a flower because it praises Allah and because it was created by the One which is Allah.

> Whenever we look at animals, we can see the different names of Allah. For instance, there is the knowledgeable one -- the spider who knows how to make a web. There is the one who cleans everything -- we call them decomposers, the ones who turn inorganic substances into organic substances which are then used by the producers. So even when you look at the trash you can see the art of Allah! We should read the whole universe to know Allah.



> The earth has been created as a mosque. Muslims consider the land clean, and so we can pray on land. Pure dirt is clean.

> Sometimes people look for miracles that provide evidence that God exists. They look for some extraordinary thing in nature, and say God did it -- like the name of Allah written on a tree or rock. But we believe that even a flower by itself is a miracle. If you study a flower deeply, you will know this. Nature -- wilderness -- is a place where we can see and know Allah.

> Some people say that nature, or the desert, is the best place to make tefekur -- that is, to reflect, or think deeply.

> From Islamic tradition, the real life is our life after death. In this world, the real owner of the world is Allah, and people are simply the guests of Allah. We do not own this world. So if you visit family or friends, how do you behave as a guest in their house? As their guest, you would keep the house clean. Allah created human beings in a perfect state, the same as nature. As his guest, we must keep nature in the perfect condition that He created it.



> Allah gives us everything and says use what you need, but also protect creation for the next generation. Today people use the earth as if they own it. They fail to protect it for their children.

> Allah's blessings are specifically for us, but also for people of all time. So we have a responsibility to pass on blessings, whether in the form of a helping hand, a kind word, or protecting nature. Nature provides for us; we must provide for it.

> Allah is mercy and within that is love. But also within that is perfect justice. Justice from Allah does no injustice. Who are we to be unjust to his creation? So if we have failed in some way, we need to recognize that and turn back to make things right..

> The Hadith tells us that there is a need to clean ourselves before prayer. But even if we are cleaning in a river or by the sea, we are not to waste the water we use, for it is precious. This was the message 1400 years ago! Now we are hearing the same message from scientists.

> Muslims believe that there are limits. A Muslim tries to read those limits before we make mistakes. This is reflected in the Sharia, our rules of conduct. How to share water, how inheritance should be handled -- these are codified in detail. We seek to show respect for creation by respecting the natural limits.

> We are talking mostly about the present, but we believe that after we die there will be eternal life. If we do not show mercy for plants and animals, we will be asked about it after we die. If we tortured animals, they will come and say: Why did you make me hungry and thirsty? Human beings go to court if they hurt their neighbor. But what about animals? And minerals? We believe that if we did not treat these things well during life, they will come to us after death and ask: Why did you abuse me?



> Today we can change DNA and make a different plant. But we can not create a seed. Allah said, I am the one who splits the date seed and grows the strong tree. I create life from death and death from life. So we must be respectful.

> There is a long history of preservation within Islam. There are documents from the 1500s that regulate how to take care of fruit, forbid the cutting of certain trees or allow hunting only with guns issued by the states. For a long time, there have been organizations that work to protect different species of animals: birds, cats, dogs, wolves and other creatures.

A word or phrase that reflects what you are taking away from this evening

I feel more informed. Thank you for bringing us these questions.
This was useful to me; talking about things helps you to learn new things.
It was very beneficial.

I look forward to meeting with other faiths.
We will find similar teachings in other faiths.

Nature is a gift.
Creation is in constant praise of the Creator.
Give mercy so you can receive mercy.