



At the basis of Islamic and Catholic ecology: legal and doctrinal differences and similarities

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Abstract

This study aims at analyzing the bases of Islamic and Catholic environmental doctrines, so as to find out differences and possible similarities between the two, and understand to what extent the two eco-theologies could be compatible. The analysis carried out has proven that there are some similarities which could be fruitfully used to develop a constructive interreligious dialogue and provide a strong combined contribution by the two majority religions of the world to “to convince Governments to do more, in the perspective of the necessary regulation of [environmental] sustainability” (De Oto, 2019: 77-78).

Keywords: Religion; Islam; Catholicism; Environmental ethics; Environmentalism

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyse and compare the main principles at the basis of the ecological thought of Islam³ and Roman Catholicism, in order to find out and evaluate any possible similarities, as well as inevitable differences. These two religions have been chosen for a precise reason. Roman Catholicism is the traditional majority religion of Italy (the homeland of the two authors), while Islam has only recently taken root on Italian soil (Consorti, 2020; Pin, 2020). This new religious presence is causing fierce political debate and animosity. In this context, the analysis and the comparison of the main religious tenets of Islam and Catholicism, even though just in reference to their respective views of the environment and its protection, could be of help in understanding how different (or similar) these two religions are. Indeed, mutual knowledge is the first prerequisite to intercultural dialogue. Hence, this work could make its small and humble contribution in paving the way to an honest and constructive interreligious dialogue which could then provide a strong contribution in understanding how to share life in our common country.

³The authors are aware that Islam is not a monolithic entity, but it is parted into several different branches – e.g., Sunni Islam, Shia Islam, etc. – and that these different branches lack internal homogeneity and compactness, but are subdivided into additional sub-branches (Bausani, 1999: 173; Immenkamp, 2016). However, it has been deemed appropriate not to address the complex issue of partition of Islam in this paper, but to leave its analysis to works dedicated to this precise aspect.

As for the focus of this article, the topicality of ecology and environmentalism need not be stated⁴. Actions to preserve and restore the natural environment have indeed become central topics not only in political agendas, but also in peoples' daily lives, because of the environmental crisis the world is facing (Gottlieb, 2006a). And religions have decided to make their voice heard in this worldwide environmentalist wave⁵ (De Oto, 2019). If one considers the revival that religious sentiment has been enjoying in the last decades⁶ (Ellingsen, 2005), it is clear that religions could play a central role in spreading awareness of ecological problems among the faithful, as well as in fostering the diffusion of good environmental practices. And it seems that it is already happening: many religious activists have indeed decided to take up the challenge (Gottlieb, 2006a: 7).

As for the structure of this paper, it is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief introduction on the role and possible contribution of religions to the management of the environmental issue. Then, in the second section, which is divided into two paragraphs, the main tenets of Islamic and Roman Catholic environmental thoughts are described. In the third part, these precepts are compared, in order to find out possible similarities in the two views of ecology. A summary of possible findings, together with final remarks and possible suggestions for further investigation on the issue, is given in the conclusion.

2. Religious environmentalism: what is it?

Religions usually have clear views on the origin of life on Earth and on what should be of ultimate value to us; thus, they should also be able to clearly conceive what role humankind has in protecting the environment (Gottlieb, 2006a: 13). As pointed out by Bauman and Bohannon (2011: 4-5), environmental degradation is not confined to the physical sphere, but it involves also moral and spiritual issues. The spiritual and moral level is precisely the field of action of religion, which, being based on systems of values, aims at clearly identifying which behaviors and attitudes have intrinsic moral value and deserve to be followed and replicated (Sarvestani and Mansoor, 2008, in Gada, 2014: 131). Hence, they could provide a substantial contribution to the development of an "environmental ethics" (Gada, 2014: 130), where ethics, as it is clear from its Greek root-word "ethos", refers to "[a set of] rules for behavior in accordance with a system of values" (Al-Damkhi, in Gada, 2014: 130). The conceptualization of a proper environmental ethics is a necessary prerequisite to structure a coherent environmental theory that can, in its turn, help define practices and patterns of behaviours that respect the environment. For this reason, before moving to the discussion on the main principles of Islamic and Catholic ecology theories, it is worth spending a few words better to explain what the expression environmental ethics refers to and, then, what religious environmentalism is.

Although environmental ethics has long been the topic of many writings and works by Western scholars, it became a structured philosophical discipline only in the 1970s, when it became evident that phenomena such as industrialization, demographic growth and technological development (with

⁴ From the beginning of the third millennium, the doctrine is putting increasingly more stress on the fact that sooner than expected the damage human activities are causing to the environment will no longer be reversible (De Sadeleer, 201; in De Oto, 2019).

⁵ Among the numerous initiatives that favoured the involvement and the commitment of religions to the defence of the environment, it is worth listing the Alliance of Religions and Conservation. It was an international organisation headquartered in the UK, which was founded by Prince Philip in 1995. Originally, it gathered representatives of the five major world religions (namely, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism) which met to discuss their respective relations and approaches to ecology. Over the years, the number of religions relating to each other through the ARC panel increased up to twelve, after Baha'ism, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism joined the original group. ARC was closed in 2019 because it had practically accomplished its purpose: it had been able to reunite representatives of the most followed religions of the world and to "[broker] links between the world's major faiths and organisations working on environment programmes" (ARC, 2020 o.l.). As for initiatives undertaken by the major world religions, see Gottlieb (2006b).

⁶This is broad generalisation that would require deeper analysis, which is not possible to provide in this paper. Just to summarise the issue, it is sufficient to say that, although the importance attached to the religious factor varies in the different countries (or world areas), religions have practically never lost their role as identity factor, even in the "secularised" West (Ellingsen, 2005). For additional information on the issue, see Consorti (2020).

their related increase in pollution and exploitation of resources) have detrimental effects for life on Earth (Gada, 2014: 131).

As Brennan claims (2009; in Mian and Rahman, 2013: 28), environmental ethics is the philosophical discipline that studies the moral relations between human beings and the environment. Western philosophical debate has produced four main environmental ethics discourses, based on four different viewpoints on the relation between human beings and the natural world⁷ they live in, and on the duties of humankind towards the environment. These four different standpoints are known as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, animal liberation/rights theory and ecocentrism (Bourdeau, 2004; in Gada, 2014: 131). It is worth noting that Western theories focus purely, or mainly, on the “material” aspects of environmental issues, leaving out references to metaphysical aspects (Gada, 2014: 131; Salih, 2018: 60). Obviously, this fact represents the main difference between “secular” and “religious” environmental ethics. Indeed, religions bring into the environmentalist discourse their “theocentric” contribution⁸ – i.e., their theoretical approach to the environment is based on a theological perspective that derives from the assumption that God (Allah⁹) has created the universe for a specific purpose He only knows and understands in full. Consequently, a religious environmental ethics differs from a typical secular perspective because it considers God the true solution for world problems (Abedi-Sarvestani and Shahvali, 2008).

The theocentric ecological perspective of religions has important consequences (Chapra, 2014), even at the environmental level. Indeed, if it is supposed that there is a Supreme being who created life in the universe, people cannot be left accountable for their actions only to themselves (which in practice means leaving them completely unaccounted), because they will be judged by God himself in the Hereafter. Hence, individuals cannot (or at least, should not) focus just on mere maximization of personal profit and on maximum satisfaction of personal desires, regardless of the needs of other beings, even non-living ones (ibid.). From the point of view of environmentalism, this translates into the duty of considering the effects of our every action on the environment, because God will reward or punish us for our earthly doings and behaviors.

As a consequence of the difference in basic principles between conventional Western environmental ethics and its religious counterpart, a religious environmental ethics originates environmentalist movements that are necessarily different from those founded on secular and non-religious stances. Environmentalism is indeed a movement, whose activists try to concretely change for the better the environmental situation, by putting into practice new patterns of behaviors according to the philosophical thesis it refers to¹⁰ (Pepper, 2019). In other words, if environmental ethics is the theory, environmentalism represents its practical implementation – Gottlieb (2006a) labels this concrete acting “environmentalism in action”, an expression that makes this distinction even more evident. It is understood that environmentalism implicates political involvement; hence “religious environmentalism” can be defined as the set of political, liturgical and diplomatic instruments at a religion’s disposal to put into practice its environmental theory¹¹.

⁷ In this context, the expression “natural world” comprises both living (animals) and non-living beings (soil, water, air), as well as their combinations in whole ecosystems. Hence, it can practically be considered a synonym for the word Earth.

⁸ As Gada (2014: 131) suggests, many people believe that leaving out God from worldly affairs is “the main root of [current] environmental crises”. This idea is supported also in other scholars’ writings – see, for example, Abedi-Sarvestani and Shahvali, 2008.

⁹ Transliteration of Arabic words has been simplified as much as possible so as to facilitate the readability of the work, except for the cases of quotes, where the original spelling has been maintained.

¹⁰ As Pepper states in his book (2019), environmentalism is a broad concept that addresses several different issues and, thus, lacks scholarly consensus on its precise definition. For additional information on this definitory debate, see Pepper (2019). As far as this work is concerned, the simple and broad definitions of environmental ethics and environmentalism provided shall be sufficient.

¹¹ This aspect has aroused much criticism by secularists, who see in the ecological interest by religions an attempt at reconquering the political importance they have lost in most Western countries (Gottlieb, 2006a). In this respect, as Gottlieb (2006a) suggests, religious environmentalism should not aim to substitute its secular counterpart; on the contrary, the two approaches should work together to provide strong and coordinated answers to current environmental problems.

Religious environmentalism is a rather new phenomenon (Bauman and Bohannon, 2011: 4-5). Indeed, if it is true that religions have a clear view of how life in the universe has begun, it is also true that for many centuries they were not involved in the environmentalist discourse. As pointed out in De Oto (2019: 70), “for a long time, this pressing attention to the human being, this anthropocentric perspective distracted many religious denominations from the protection of what surrounded the human beings, the planet Earth, the container of humans’ life” (Italian in original, *my translation*)¹². On the contrary, religions have long been one of the causes of environmental degradation¹³: for example, traditional Western monotheisms long favored and supported the industrialization process. Even when new discoveries and technological progress caused doubts, they mostly concerned the effect of these novelties on people’s consciousness, rather than the environmental sustainability of the process. But this has recently changed, and now most institutionalized religions have strongly committed themselves to the environmental cause (Gottlieb, 2006a: 7-9).

Obviously, as the religious field is not a monolithic entity, each religion has developed its own environmentalist theory, or *Eco theology*, as Gottlieb calls them (2006a: 19). This work aims to analyze just the main theoretical foundations of Islamic ecology and Roman Catholic ecology. Let us start with the former.

3. Islamic ecology: mercy for all alamin

Even though worries for nature preservation and protection are “mightily planted in all levels of Islamic principles and civilization” (Ghernaout, 2017: 76), Islam does not provide a “formal” theory of ecology, but there are some principles that can be used as starting point to derive a sort of Islamic environmentalism (Ansari, 1994: 399-400). These principles are stated in the Sacred Texts of Islam: the Quran and the Sunnah, which are the two primary sources of Shariah, and the Islamic law¹⁴ (Roughton, 2007; Gada, 2014: 131). As Hope and Young highlight (1994; in Abu Bakar, 2012: 222), the Quran and the Sunnah are “rich in proverbs and precepts that speak of the Almighty’s design for creation and humanity’s responsibility for preserving it. For many Muslims, citing these [*proverbs and precepts*] is enough to prove that Islam has always embraced a complete environmental ethics”.

The reading of these sacred sources proves that nature has a central role in the Islamic perspective of the world. As Chapra (2014) points out, the Quran (21: 107) states that Islam aims to be a “mercy for all *alamin*”¹⁵. The word *alamin* is usually understood as “all human nations; all human

¹¹ Similar conclusions have been reached by Mizzoni (2014). However, this was the overwhelmingly predominant tendency. Indeed, apart from the fact that the Genesis provides several invitations to take care of the creation, even in the past there were few and sporadic exceptions to this general approach – e.g., St. Francis, who is now the patron saint of Catholic ecological theory (Gottlieb, 2006a: 8; De Oto, 2019: 70). What is worth noting is that, even after the Church started recognising St. Francis’ devotional approach, “the full implications of his attitude towards nature were generally ignored” (Gottlieb, 2006a: 8).

¹² In the keynote speech he gave at a symposium organised in 2008 by the University of Saint Thomas Journal of Law, H. J. Flynn (2008: 4), the late archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis in the USA, fended off these accusations by claiming that religion [Catholicism] is not by nature in opposition with environmental care. It is true that there may be some passages in the Bible that seem to favour environmental destruction (for example, when God commands humans to subdue the earth). However, in his opinion, these verses have been misunderstood. Hence, the negative relation that they seem to establish between humans and the Earth should be upturned into a positive stewardship relation, wherein humankind becomes the protector and guardian of the environment, because both humankind and environment are part of God’s creation.

¹⁴ The Quran and the Sunnah are considered to be the primary sources of Shariah because they collect “God’s infallible and immutable will” (Visser, 2013: 13). Both are revealed sources; however, while the revelation is direct for the Quran, it is indirect for the Sunnah. There are also two secondary sources of Shariah: *ijma*, or “consensus (among scholar)” and *qiyas*, or “(reasoning by) analogy”. When the four sources of Shariah are collectively considered, they represent the *usul al-fiqh*, namely “the source of Shariah” (Bausani, 1999; Ayub, 2007; Hallaq, 2013; Papa and Ascanio, 2014). [This classification of the sources of Shariah is the most widely accepted in the Muslim world; see Visser, 2013: 13].

¹⁵ This vision of blessing is restated in numerous Quranic verses (Chapra, 2014).

peoples”, even non-Muslims (Maulana Ali, 2002: 665). However, Abu Bakar (2012) and Chapra (2014) provide a wider interpretation for this Quranic verse: *alamin* should indeed be read as “all of God’s creation”, that is, the whole environment, animals and non-living elements included (literally, creation refers to the entire universe, that is, cosmos, world and realm; see Baalbaki 1996: 745, in Abu Bakar, 2012: 223). This ideal of “blessing” explains why, from a true Islamic perspective, economic growth and satisfaction of personal desires cannot come at the detriment of the environment (Davoor Norouzi, 2014: 8).

The importance of nature for Islam is showed by both quantitative and qualitative elements. First, it is made evident by the number of times nature is more or less directly referred to in the sacred sources of Islam. Indeed, fourteen Quranic *suwar* (plural form of *sura*, which means “chapter”) out of 114 are named after animals or natural events – e.g., “the Cow”, “the Thunder”, “the Bee”, or “the Daybreak”. Furthermore, more than 750 verses out of 6219 *ayat* (or “verses”; as it is the plural form of *ayah*, which means “verse”, as well as “sign”) composing the Quran expressly deal with nature¹⁶ (Shomali, 2008; Bausani, 1999; Hallaq, 2013; Papa and Ascanio, 2014). However, Quranic prescriptions are usually very fragmented and complex; thus, they need to be interpreted with the support of other sources: here comes the importance of the *Sunnah*, that is collection of *ahadith* (plural form of *hadith*, which means “tradition”), or the deeds (*fi'l*), utterances (*qawl*) and tacit approvals (*taqrir*) of Muhammad as considered in his human condition, not as Prophet (Hamaui and Mauri, 2009: 14).

In addition to the quantitative aspect just described, there is a fundamental qualitative factor that must be considered: natural phenomena (animal life comprised) are aware of the fact that Allah creates them and that they are the concrete, material signs of His wisdom, His knowledge and His power (Shomali, 2008). This is a logical consequence of the Islamic theocentric view of nature (Gada, 2014: 131). Nature is a sign of Allah and natural elements live to praise and bring glory to Him (see Quran 21:79; 38:18 and 17:44, in Shomali, 2008; Quran 51:20 and 33:72 in Gada 2014: 131-132). As a matter of fact, in several occasion the Holy Book invites humankind to think and reflect on Allah’s works (for example, Quran 21:30; 13:2; 6:73, see Gada 2014: 131-132), especially because, everything having been created by Allah to serve His ultimate purpose, every element and every being is sacred to Him, without any distinction. On this specific point, the Prophet says that “all creatures are God’s dependents and the most beloved to God among them is the one that does good to God’s dependents” (in Gada, 2014: 132). As a result of this specific standpoint on nature, there derives an obligation to take care and protect every natural element (*ibid.*) – this fact, as it will be soon illustrated, is explained in the stewardship concept.

3.1. Islam and the protection of the environment

Stewardship of property and the respect of the balance Allah established in the universe:

The two main theological precepts to consider as the basis of the Islamic environmental thinking are the principle of the *stewardship* of property¹⁷ and the moral obligation to respect the balance that Allah Himself established when He created the universe (Ansari, 1994: 400; Atzori, 2010; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014; Obaidullah, 2018). To explain the principle of stewardship of properties, it is necessary to consider that, from the point of view of the Islamic doctrine, Allah is the ultimate owner of everything in the universe (because He created it). Hence, human beings do not actually own anything, but they have the natural bounties of Earth only in trust, given that they are Allah’s *Khalifa*

¹⁶ In order to better understand how much space nature has in the Islamic Holy Book, it is worth mentioning that, for example, legal *ayat* (that is, verses containing precepts with a judiciary weight) are between 500 and 600 (Papa and Ascanio, 2014: 29).

¹⁷ In Islamic theology, the fundamental of *stewardship* of property is directly derived from the concept of *tawheed*, that is, “the principle of oneness of Allah” (Roughton, 2007: 103-104; Ayub, 2007: 23). The concept of oneness has numerous applications in the Islamic theology; indeed, oneness refers not only to the fact that Allah is the “one and only” God, but it also means that He is “one and only” with His creation, and in turn, the creation is united in the adoration of the Creator. In addition, “their egalitarianism as consorts in matter of the proper well-mannered recollection of the life of all and the rightful respect of mutuality and interconnection between all” (Ghernaout, 2017: 76). This unitary view of the world makes Islam a potential source to develop a new holistic theory for the protection of the environment (Abedi-Sarvestani and Shahvali, 2008).

(or “viceregents”) on Earth (Humayun Murshed, 1994: 251; Ghernaout, 2017: 76). This particular relationship of *trust* between Allah and human beings is the basis of the concept of stewardship of property.

The principle of stewardship has far-reaching consequences for the Islamic approach to environmental protection, because “any action with a view to protecting the planet and environment is also a step towards achieving the objective (maqāṣid) of Shari‘ah”, given that “maintaining the balance of life on the planet is a supreme duty of humans and therefore, forms part of the divine objectives of the Shari‘ah” (Roughton, 2007: 103). The concept of Khalifa involves morality: human beings are “moral beings with an inbuilt and active conscience, which provides [*them with*] the ability to differentiate moral from immoral acts”. The status of viceregents of Allah on Earth conferred to humans involves the duty of protecting and taking care of the planet Allah created for the human beings. Protecting and taking care of the planet must be understood as the duty to provide for the well-being of the entire environment – i.e., animals, plants, water and air, and not only of the humans’ material well-being (Haq, 2001: 147; Roughton, 2007: 102-103; Atzori, 2010: 20; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 13-14; Obaidullah, 2018: 33). Indeed, there are numerous Quranic ayat and several ahadith that admonish humankind not to destroy the balance (mizan) and the measure (qard) that Allah established on Earth. The importance of preserving the divinely established balance and measure lays in the fact that Allah created the universe and everything in it for a precise purpose, and every living and non-living creature serves in His larger scheme (Haq, 2001: 147; Roughton, 2007: 105; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 13; Obaidullah, 2018: 34). Consequently, any damage to the environment or its inhabitants is perceived as a direct offence to Allah Himself, for two main reasons: first, it is a clear violation of the divine balance He set up; second, this act violates the relationship of trust between Allah and humankind that is at the basis of the concept of stewardship (Atzori, 2010: 31; Obaidullah, 2018: 33).

Lastly, the stewardship precept has an additional logical consequence which is of fundamental importance in the Islamic Eco theology: given that human beings are charged by Allah Himself with the duty of protecting and preserving the environment, they are also “the sole agents responsible for the damages to the universe”¹⁹ (Abu Bakar, 2012: 222).

Guidelines for humankind from Allah:

Given the inherently destructive nature of humankind (because human beings need to resort to Earth’s resources to survive and to satisfy their needs), Allah has given humans some guidelines to use natural resources without wasting them and without destroying the ecosystem (Abu Bakar, 2012: 222). The protection of the environment extends to moderation towards natural resources, that is, avoidance of wasteful behaviours (Roughton, 2007: 105). Hence, recycling is hugely encouraged (*ibid.*, 114), whilst wasting resources is considered as equivalent to *fasad*, that is, a “sin of vice and corruption” (Chapra, 1992: 207; in Atzori, 2010: 32; Abu Bakar, 2012: 225-226). This stance is reflected in the Islamic legislation that regulates the relationships with plants and animals, the usage of natural resources and the limitation of pollution (Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 14).

As Ghernaout maintains (2017: 76) this emphasis on moderation is closely related to the importance that Islam attaches to guaranteeing the well-being of all community members (that is, to all members of the Muslim *ummah*, as well as, to all members of the entire human community). From an Islamic standpoint, misuse of wealth and greed are sins because these behaviours deprive some members of the community of what they need to survive. By transposing the reasoning to the level of environmental protection, and by looking at the effects of wasteful or predatory behaviours, it

¹⁸ The main purposes of Shariah (maqasid al-Shariah) are goals that Shariah aims to practically materialise in order to achieve *maslaha al-ummah*, that is, the “well-being, benefit” of both the entire Muslim society and each single Muslim context, benefit and well-being must be understood as the preservation of stability within the community and the achievement of salvation in the Hereafter (Bausani, 1999: 20; Papa and Ascanio, 2014: 20-21).

¹⁹ This responsibility towards the creation is stated in several Quranic ayat – see, for example, Quran 30:41 (Abu Bakar, 2012: 222).

becomes evident that current abundance will turn into a high price to pay for future generations. This result cannot be acceptable to a true Muslim believer because, it is worth noting, the communitarian justice advocated in the Sacred Sources applies not only at the intragenerational level, but also at the intergenerational one – i.e., over time, between different generations²⁰ (ibid.).

Having dealt with the fundamental part of the basis of Islamic ecology, it could be useful to look at some examples of precepts that concretely rule the management of vital resources, such as water, air, and land. The importance of these resources for life on the planet makes their regulation even more complex. They are considered common goods, that is, they belong to each and every member of the community. Hence, no one can be deprived of them, but, on the other hand, anyone is liable for any possible damage to these resources – e.g., water, air and soil pollution (Roughton, 2007: 111; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 15-18).

Considering the importance that Islam confers to the preservation of the environment and its inhabitants, it is logic that man-made pollution should be strictly prohibited, and the recourse to less pollutant alternative practices preferred and encouraged (Roughton, 2007: 114). What has been said about Islamic ecology has important implications on policies. Firstly, environmental costs in terms of repercussions on animals and plants must be considered before putting in place any action. Secondly, the principle to follow should be conservation, so as to maintain the divine balance established by Allah Himself (Roughton, 2007: 116).

To summarize, Islamic ecological thought is grounded in the theological dogma of the oneness of Allah (the Creator) with His whole creation (Gheraout, 2017: 76). From this fundamental precept, Islamic scholars derives the main tenets that concern the relation between humankind and environment. The first of these principles is that of the stewardship of property, according to which Allah, who is the true owner of anything there is in the universe, has granted the Earth on trust to human beings by declaring them His earthly viceregents. Stewardship involves the duty of administrating earthly resources and governing earthly life. This duty must be carried out respecting the precise balance established by Allah, because each and every single element has its own role in the whole creation, and Allah has created everything in the right proportion to realise His plan for life in the universe (Haq, 2001: 147; Roughton, 2007: 102-105; Atzori, 2010: 20; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 13-14; Obaidullah, 2018: 33-34). The third tenet to consider concerns community feeling. From the Islamic perspective, Muslims belong to one only community, wherein they all are brothers and sisters to each other. This concept of community can be widened to comprise the entire humankind because even non-believers are Allah's sons and daughters. As a matter of fact, Islamic teachings aim to provide for the better of the entire humankind, regardless of religious faith (Abu Bakar, 2012; Chapra, 2014).

From these theological bases, proper ecological norms can be derived. First of all, Islam favours moderation towards natural resources over unrestrained consumerism – it is also worth noting that this *moderated* attitude is (or at least, should be) applied in any sphere of life, for example, in economic matters and in one's own relation to money. As a logical consequence, Islam is harshly disapproving of the typically Western consumerist life style. Such criticism is not only due to the possible implications that such unrestrained exploitation of resources can have on the environment in general, but also to its intergenerational consequences (Abu Bakar, 2012: 222-226). The idea of ummah has a temporal component that requires present generation to consider and take care of needs of future generations when planning decisions and actions (Gheraout, 2017: 76).

This brief summary demonstrates that, albeit not formally articulated, Islamic ecological thought is actually very deep and structured, to the point that it is not left at the level of pure theoretical discourse, but it has been translated into concrete rules to follow in daily transactions. Particular attention has been given by Islamic scholars to common goods such as water, air and land. Islam law holds that no one can be deprived of them because Allah has created them to support life. The logical consequence of “shared” property of these assets is that anyone is liable for possible

²⁰ One of the five main purposes of Shariah (*maqasid al-Shariah*) is indeed the defence of the human life and physical integrity of the human being (*nafs*), which is coupled with the other aim of protection of the progeny (*nasab*). The other three maqasid are: the preservation of the Islamic religion (*din*); the defence of intellect (*aqal*) in order to preserve the devotees' rational capacity; and the defence of *mal*, or the private property (Ayub, 2007: 23; Chapra, 2008).

damages – e.g., pollution, which makes these resources unusable or even dangerous for life (Roughton, 2007: 111; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 15-18). Shariah states many other practical rules to follow – e.g., to regulate hunting, farming, breeding, etc. (Roughton, 2007). But these are practical norms derived from the aforementioned main precepts. It is now time to turn to the analysis of Catholic environmental thought and its bases.

4. Catholic ecology: peace with creation

Similarly, to Islam, the Catholic Church has not conceived a proper ecological theory in its system of teachings; simply, it takes old principles (many of which are derived from the Old Testament) and applies them to current environmental issues. What is actually new is the way these connections between old principles and new issues are made (Silecchia, 2015).

For many centuries, the anthropocentric stance of the Church diverted the attention of ecclesiastics from the protection of the environment. Actually, there were some isolate, sporadic religious figures that contested the fact that nature was supposedly less important than humans in the eyes of God. One of these exceptions was represented by St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226), the author of the religious song *Laudes Creaturarum* (also known as the *Canticle of the Sun*)²¹ – indeed, he is now the patron saint of modern Christian ecology (Gottlieb, 2006a: 8). As Mizzoni suggests (2014: 405), “[p]erhaps, since Catholic social teaching and the Catholic social justice tradition focuses most of its energies on human social problems, even if there is a Catholic environmental ethic, it gets overshadowed [...] So maybe the Christian-Catholic tradition can support a strong environmental ethic, but the faithful have had trouble getting the message”.

The ecological topic has gained a central position in Catholic social thought only in recent years. Indeed, it was only in 1971 that the word “ecology” appeared for the first time in the official vocabulary of the Catholic Church²², when Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) used it in his apostolic letter *Octagesima Adveniens* (De Oto, 2019: 70). The care of the “natural environment” was considered a social problem – indeed, it was addressed in a dedicated paragraph in the chapter dedicated to New Social Problems. In this document, Pope Paul VI highlighted the risks from environmental degradation due to both destruction of nature and pollution, which, in turn, make new diseases emerge. In this respect, the Pope introduced the concept of *irresponsible exploitation* of natural resources. He also added that the true Christian believer must care for the planet and save it from degradation (*ibid.*; Silecchia, 2015; Orioli, 2016: 934).

This attention to environmental issues has then been restated by later Popes. With the two encyclical letters *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) and *Centesimus annus* (1991), Pope St. John Paul II (1978–2005) expressed his concern for mid- and long-term consequences of environmental degradation. In the former document, the Pope focused on the risks that derive from overexploitation of non-renewable resources, especially because no resource is inexhaustible. If the *Sollicitudo* is significant because it discusses issues such as global warming and climate change “even before [*they would become*] commonly used in everyday life”, the encyclical letter of 1991 is more important from a doctrinal point of view, because it practically ascribes the ecological question to a misinterpretation of the role of humans, who have thought to have the right to limitlessly exploit Earth (Orioli, 2016: 934).

In the encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009), Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013; the successor of Pope St. John Paul II), underlines the divine nature of the creation and, consequently, the duty that is charged upon every agent (including the Church) to protect and preserve God’s gifts (De Oto, 2019: 70). Pope Benedict XVI had already addressed the ecological subject in 2007, on the occasion

²² Given the content of this article, it could be worth mentioning that the Encyclical letter of Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato si'* takes its name from the first two words of the refrain of the *Laudes Creaturarum*. The link between Pope Francis I and St. Francis of Assisi is not limited to this quote; indeed, when Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope in 2013, he chose Francis as Papal name in honour of the saint (Pope Francis, 2013).

²³ With a certain degree of criticism, Orioli (2016: 933) asserts that the Church has recognised the urgency to address environmental problems very late.

of the World Days of Peace, when he restated that there is a “tragic link between the ecology of nature and the social ecology of the poorest people living in underdeveloped countries” (Orioli, 2016: 935).

The last document to mention is the *Laudato si'*, written by the current Pope, Francis I, in 2015. In terms of contents, this encyclical letter was an “absolute novelty”, not only because it is the first time that an official document of the Catholic Church discusses only social and environmental questions²³ (Orioli, 2016: 933; De Oto, 2019: 71), but also because it clearly affirms that the Catholic Pontiff has the duty to protect the entire creation²⁴. What emerges from this brief introduction is that after the example given by Pope John Paul II, Catholic Pontiffs have tried to “illustrate how an environmental ethic naturally fits within the Church’s ethical teachings” (Mizzoni, 2014).

4.1. The concept of Catholic environmentalism

The concept of Catholic environmentalism is structured around three main doctrinal precepts: the centrality of human life and human dignity, the stewardship of creation, and the focus on justice within the society, between different generations and towards the poor (Silecchia, 2015; Mizzoni, 2014).

As for the centrality of human life and human dignity, these are central points in all questions the Church deals with (hence, they must be the main points of reference in environmental issues as well). In brief, it is believed that humans have been created in the image of God; thus, they possess “inviolable dignity” (Mizzoni, 2014: 407). The logical consequence of the centrality of human dignity and human life in Catholic teachings is that the environmental ethics and the eco-doctrine of the Church cannot but have an anthropocentric stance. In other words, Catholic environmental ethics and doctrine “concern about the natural environment as founded in concerns about human well-being”. Indeed, in the Catholic concept of the universe, non-living elements and living beings other than humans do not have the same level of dignity that human beings have, because only humans were created in the image of God Himself (Mizzoni, 2014: 407). Pope John Paul II claimed that “one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate—animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes, according to one’s own economic needs” (1987, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, section 34). To summarise, from a Catholic environmental perspective, nature must be respected, but its elements have different levels of value (because they have different level of inherent dignity). Hence, “it seems that nature in itself is not regarded as intrinsically valuable, only instrumentally valuable” (Mizzoni, 2014: 412).

As for stewardship of creation, it is considered to be the appropriate model of reference to foster environmental responsibility in humans. This principle derives from the biblical verse “God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman” (Genesis 1:28). In practice, God is the sole owner of Earth’s resources because it is Him who created everything (this is an explication made by Pope St. John Paul II). Therefore, human beings do not properly own the resources they are exploiting, as they have obtained them only in trust by the Creator. In 1981, St. John Paul explained that “man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation” (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* “On Human Work,” 1981; in Mizzoni, 2014: 410). Hence, human beings are not only stewards, but also co-creators (with their inherent due limits in comparison to God) of the environment²⁵.

In 1990, in his message for the celebration of the world day of peace, Pope St. John Paul II had already remarked the fact that humankind was not respecting its duty of stewardship of creation because it was disrespectfully exploiting the natural environment. Almost two decades later, in 2009,

²⁴ “The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction” (Pope Francis, 2015).

²⁵ In relation to this theory on the status of humans as co-creators, Pope Benedict XVI would add that co-creation means the work of perfecting nature. This activity is part of the duty of stewardship (Mizzoni, 2014: 411). Obviously, this is an anthropocentric perspective that assumes that nature needs value added to be perfected. Non-anthropocentric theories cannot agree with this view, because their fundamental tenet is that nature has its intrinsic value (Mizzoni, 2014: 411).

in the encyclical letter *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that the stewardship of property must be exercised in a responsible manner, that is, by avoiding depleting future generations of the necessary resources for survival (Mizzoni, 2014: 409). These two declarations paved the way for reflections on the concept of social justice as understood in the Catholic social thinking.

The Catholic concept of social justice has a manifold dimension. The three most important levels at which social justice applies are: the commitment to the common good, the preferential option for the poor and intergenerational responsibility and solidarity (Flynn, 2008; Mizzoni, 2014). According to the definition provided by St. John Paul II, the expression “common good” refers to the entire humankind, that is, the common good of the whole human family. In this perspective, social justice is achieved if social burdens and social benefits are evenly distributed among the entire world population, as well as between different generations (Mizzoni, 2014: 408-409). When applied at the environmental level, social justice concerns “how environmental benefits and burdens are distributed”. On one hand there are environmental benefits – e.g., access to clean air and clean water, and the possibility of eating healthy food – on the other hand there are environmental burdens, which comprises, for example, living in an area where there are polluting industries or toxic dumps (ibid.). These environmental burdens are much more likely to be loaded on poor peoples and on the poorest elements of society. Therefore, Catholic social thinking requires to act in order to redress such injustice and relieve these peoples from such heavy burdens²⁶ (ibid.). Recently, some voices have started calling for an additional evolution of this concept of “preferential option for the poor”. For example, the Dominican Sister Miriam MacGillis has suggested to apply the concept of poor not only to poor people, but to our planet itself, which should indeed be considered as a sort of new poor, when the adjective “poor” is to be understood as “vulnerable” (Mizzoni, 2014: 409).

All that has been said so far should be considered and implemented thinking not only of present necessities and consequences: the impact of our actions on future generations must also be considered in the environmental decision-making process. As quoted in Flynn (2008: 4), the Pope St. John Paul II, in the occasion of the 1990 World Peace Day, expressly held that “we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference[s] in other areas and [always] to the well-being of future generations”.

To summarize what has been said about Catholic social thinking on environmental issues, it is to note that in recent decades Popes have used encyclical letters to introduce significant changes in the Catholic doctrine. If with Pope St. John Paul II it was based on a “stewardship ethics”, with Pope Benedict XVI the Catholic approach evolved into a sort of “ecojustice doctrine”. Eventually, with the encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis has moved even further, introducing the ethics of “creation spirituality”, which sees human beings and nature as inseparable and unavoidable mutually linked elements of God’s creations (Szrot, 2020). This brief summary of the evolution of the Catholic environmental doctrine proves that it has become far greener than in the past.

5. Comparison between the theological foundations of the ecological thought in Islam and in Catholicism

The first element that Islam and Catholicism have in common is that neither of the two provides a proper ecological theory in conventional terms (Ansari, 1994: 399-400; Silecchia, 2015). There are also other similarities between the ecological thoughts of these two religions, as is evident from a quick look at the following table that summarises the main findings from paragraph three and four.

²⁶ Recently, Pope Francis has expressed his disagreement towards the privatisation of water resources for mere profit, because it means that a few people make money exploiting a primary commodity (which is also exhaustible) at the disadvantage of many poor people who do not have access to this basic common good that is fundamental for life (De Oto, 2019: 72).

Islam

Doctrinal precept of reference: *oneness of Allah with His all creation*, from which Islamic scholars derive:

1. The concept of *stewardship* of property;
2. The duty of respecting the balance and *measure* established by Allah;
3. The community (*ummah*) feeling;

Norms derived from these doctrinal precepts:

- a. *Moderation* in the usage of natural resources;
 - b. Concerns for the good of *future generations*;
 - c. *Common goods*: shared property, no one can be deprived of them, but anyone is liable for damages;
 - d. Shariah also provides *practical rules* for hunting, breeding, farming, etc. to help humans in their stewardship duty.
-

Catholicism

Doctrinal precept of reference: *God is the Creator of the universe*, from which catholic scholars derive:

1. the principle of the *centrality of human life and human dignity* → anthropocentric doctrine;
2. the principle of *stewardship* of creation;
3. the principle of *justice* within the society, between different generations and towards the poor.

Concepts derived from later doctrinal developments:

- a. Pondered usage of natural resources;
 - b. Concern for the good of the poor and needy and for the good of future generations;
 - c. Common goods: condemnation of their exploitation for economic reason because it is detrimental for poorest peoples
-

Both Islam and Catholicism obviously have a theocentric perspective, which sees God/Allah as the creator of life in the universe. However, this dogma is interpreted in two different ways. Islamic scholars couple the dogma of creation with that of oneness of Allah. This oneness is then interpreted not only as oneness meaning that Allah is “one and only”, but also as oneness of Allah with His whole creation. Hence, He is present in all that exists and all that exists is a sign of His existence (Ghernaout, 2017: 76). This theorization confers to nature and non-human beings a status that is far different from the one they have had in the Catholic doctrine for millennia (however, recent doctrinal developments seem to have changed the Catholic perspective on nature – see the creation spirituality introduced by Pope Francis with the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* of 2015). In brief, in the Islamic tradition nature is granted a in Islam nature is granted a certain degree of importance and is recognized a qualitative status that is higher in comparison to that the Catholic Church has traditionally attributed to natural phenomena.

Both religions see humans as created in the image of God/Allah, and both confer to humankind the duty of stewardship of the creation. The concept of stewardship is, however, interpreted in two slightly different ways. From the Islamic point of view, stewardship is a specific relation of trust between humankind and Allah, who has given humans the status of His viceregent on Earth (Humayun Murshed, 1994: 251). Stewardship involves the duty to protect and take care of the whole planet, that is, the duty to provide for the well-being of the entire environment – i.e., animals, plants, water and air, not only of the humans’ material well-being (Roughton, 2007: 103).

The obligation to respect the balance and the measure that Allah has established must be read in the context of respect for the divine plans for life in the universe. Obviously, humankind has no right to spoil these schemes; on the contrary, it must follow Allah’s rules to lead this process to success. The Catholic stance on stewardship is slightly different, as it starts from the assumption that, in the Genesis, God authorized human beings to subdue the Earth. To summarize, it could be said that whilst Islam establishes a positive stewardship relation between humans and nature, Catholicism has supported a negative stewardship relation between the two. However, the Catholic thought has begun to change in recent decades, since the declaration of Pope Paul VI in 1971. Now, *Laudato si'*,

the 2015 encyclical letter by Pope Francis, has set up a new doctrine of the creation spirituality which seems to open to a more positive relationship between humans and the environment.

Another similarity between Islam and Catholicism is represented by the importance that both bestow on intragenerational and intergenerational justice. In Islam, the concept of justice is derived from the idea of community (*ummah*), that is, from the status of brotherhood that all Muslim believers share by virtue of their common faith. This ideal of brotherhood conveys the obligation not to gain at the disadvantage of the brother/sister Muslim (Gheraout, 2017: 76). This ideal is also at the basis of what should be the correct administration of common goods (water, air, land), because Islam prohibits to hoard those commodities and deprive Muslim brothers and sisters of them (Roughton, 2007: 111; Moghul and Safar-Aly, 2014: 15-18). From the Catholic standpoint, justice is the central element in the social doctrine of the Church because it is at the basis of the Church commitment to the common good, its preferential option for the poor and its theories on intergenerational responsibility and solidarity (Flynn, 2008; Mizzoni, 2014). In practice, justice concerns the right distribution of benefits and burdens, and, at the environmental level, it also deals with how to readdress this distribution so as to relieve the most unfortunate ones (Mizzoni, 2014: 408-409). As for the differences, the chief one concerns the status that the natural environment and the non-human beings are granted in the two systems. As said at the beginning of the analysis of the Islamic ecological thought, nature has enjoyed an important status since the very beginning, and the numerous references it has in the Quran and the Sunnah are proof of its importance for Allah (Shomali, 2008).

As a consequence of the principle of *tawheed*, Allah is one and only with His creation. This means that natural elements and natural phenomena enjoy equal status in front of Allah²⁷ (Gheraout, 2017: 76). This is not at all the status they are granted in the Catholic ecological thought, which confers to humans a privileged position in comparison to other natural elements because humans are created in the image of God. Consequently, humans are the only beings that enjoy an inviolable dignity and are intrinsically valuable, whilst other natural phenomena have a less degree of dignity and are only instrumentally valuable (Mizzoni, 2014).

6. Conclusion

It often happens to read in the newspapers whether Islam and Catholicism may or not be considered compatible, may or not coexist. This is too complex a question to be dealt with in here. What, however, can be said as a final remark is that, with regard to the doctrinal precepts that deal with ecology and the approach to environmental issues, Islam and Roman Catholicism have some undeniable differences, but also share some commonalities. One of these commonalities pertains to the concept of care of the planet for good of future generations. This ecological morality is of paramount importance because it means that the two majority religions in the world share some assumptions with the theory of *sustainable development*, as defined in the Brundtland Report²⁸. Therefore, there could be the possibility of starting a fruitful collaboration between science, which is continuously reminding us of concrete danger of irreparable damages to the ecosystem, and religions “to convince Governments to do more, in the perspective of the necessary regulation of sustainability” because, otherwise, the future of our planet would be not rosy, or there could even be no future at all (De Oto, 2019: 77-78; Italian in original, *my translation*).

²⁷Even though it is only humankind that has been granted the status of Khalifa of Allah on Earth because only human beings are moral beings, that is, they are the only living beings on Earth capable to distinguish between what is good and what is bad (Shaikh, 2018).

²⁸The Brundtland Report (OCF, 1987) – i.e., the “Our Common Future” report of 1987 by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who was at the time Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development – defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This is perfectly in line with the Islamic precept that orders not to compromise the balance established by Allah on Earth because “in order for economic development to be in harmony with the divine will, it must not happen at disadvantage of future generations” (Atzori, 2010: 31; Italian in original, *my translation*). Indeed, as Iqbal maintains (in Atzori, 2010: 31), the *ummah* has both a territorial and a temporal dimension.

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