

## *Interview*

# **Environmental Protection: Faiths Matter**

Prof. Dr. Paul Ade Silva & Prof. Dr. İbrahim Özdemir  
Examine Environmental Protection from Inter-Faiths  
Perspective and Why Faiths Matter

**Interviewee: Prof. Dr. İbrahim Özdemir**



“İBRAHİM ÖZDEMİR is a professor of philosophy at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Head of Dept. of Philosophy at Üsküdar University, Istanbul, Turkey.

He holds a Doctorate degree in philosophy from the Middle East Technical University, Ankara and a bachelor’s degree in Islamic Theology and Islamic Philosophy from Ankara University, Turkey.

Dr. Özdemir’s major is environmental ethics and environmental philosophy. However, he is a generalist with a wide variety of scholarly and pedagogical interests, which include ethics, history of philosophy, modern philosophy, philosophy of education and philosophy of higher education.

His most recent publications include *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude Towards Nature*, 2nd edition, Insan Publications: Istanbul, 2008, 2. Jalaluddin Rumî and Confucius on Meaning of Life, Amazon KDP, 2020, and *Globalization, Ethics and Islam*, editors: Ian Markham and İbrahim Özdemir, Aldershot: Ashgate. 2005.

He has travelled widely in the Muslim world and the West. He was visiting professor of Islamic Studies at Hartford University (1998) and Hartford Seminary (2001-2003). He was a visiting professor at Abu Akadmi University (Turku-Finland) for two years (2018-2020). He gives many scholarly and public lectures in Turkey, Europe, the United States, and other countries.

After returning from the USA, he was appointed Director-General for International Relations, Ministry of National Education. He represented Turkey at EU, UNESCO, and OECD educational programs. (2003-2010).

Dr. Özdemir addresses different audiences about topics related to environmental philosophy, Muslim environmental thought, sustainable development, religion and the environment, interreligious and intercultural dialogue, Higher Education, and School Leadership.” (<https://uskudar.edu.tr/en/academic-staff>)

**Interviewer: Prof. Dr. Paul Ade Silva**



“I will work with others to make Education a qualitative and affordable right, not a privilege, for all and keep promoting multi-regional centres of excellence... Will continue to advocate as others do for a genuine New World Order based on self-worth of each and every individual and on trans-cultural understanding leading to each person residing at the global centre. Will keep imploring that those who have bound themselves to

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the consciousness of the ‘masses’ stop looking for leaders and those who profess the mantle of leadership do away with their crude self-serving framework of global leadership; grow up and understand that every single cell is vitally important even when the degree of its significance is yet to be fully understood or is not understood, at all.”

(<https://www.linkedin.com/in/paul-silva-15481918/>)

**PAS:** We begin the interview with questions relating to your paper, *A COMMON CARE FOR CREATION: SAID NURSI AND POPE FRANCIS ON ENVIRONMENT* (Özdemir, 2020) that was published in October last year. Given the inter-faith framework for your comparison between Said NURSI and Pope Francis, what would you consider to be your deeper sensibility when you were writing the article?

**İÖ:** Thank you very much for interviewing me on an important topic, well, I have been working on environmental thought for more than three decades. Earlier, I also attended a panel discussion on “Pope John Paul II’s Contribution to Interreligious Dialogue” at Parliament of the World’s Religions, Barcelona, Spain, July 10, 2004”. (Özdemir, 2012)

As you know, we are not living in a monolithic world anymore. Moreover, Jews, Christians, and Muslims together make up more than half of the world’s population today. Better understanding, communication, and peaceful relations between our communities are not only good but they are essential for our well-being and for the well-being of the world at large.

Moreover, environmental, social, and economic threats are aimed at everyone without discrimination, whether Christian, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and secular. Therefore, we must cooperate and join our energies for a better future. As the threat is common, the response must be common. This will empower the spirit of solidarity and cooperation in our respective societies.

In this spirit, I have been working on the Qur’anic environmental ethics and also consult the Prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) teachings (*Sunnah*), and Islamic culture on positive attitudes and behaviours to the environment, climate change, and sustainable development. (Özdemir, 2003)

In the same spirit, I wanted to study and understand the major characteristics of Said Nursi’s philosophy on the environment and try to compare and contrast it with Pope Francis’ views on the environment. Nursi contemplated both the manifest and hidden wonders of nature, and linked nature’s secrets to the omnipotence and omnipresence of the Divine. (Özdemir, 2020) Recently, Pope Francis, as the leader of the world’s largest faith community, who is according to polls, one of the most trusted, popular, and retweeted people on the planet, laid out the argument for a new partnership between science and

religion to combat human-driven climate change. (ibid) Therefore, to compare and contrast Nursi and Pope Francis' views on the deep meaning of creation and its implication for the environment would be very relevant for us and for the rest of creation.

I do believe that it is time for true believers in God of Abraham to learn to come together as partners in peace and then we can move our societies and our world from “*combatibility* to compatibility; from intolerance to tolerance, seeking justice, mercy and compassion for all.” (Findley, 2000; Baker, 1998).

Today, we're facing some major challenges in our history at global level. Just to mention a few: COVID-19, poverty, illiteracy, racism, climate change, and environmental problems, chronic instability of the international economy, continent-wide pandemics of TB, AIDS, war, and terror.

Rev. Robert H. Schuller, founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral once has a call for us:

“True believers in God must learn to come together as partners in peace; we must move our society and our world from combatibility to compatibility; from intolerance to tolerance, seeking justice, mercy and compassion for all. For the sake of all the unborn generations to come, we, here and now, must begin the task of working together as partners for peace”. (ibid)

As a Muslim scholar, I join Rev. Robert H. Schuller, founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral dream that “Christians and Muslims once finding each other, caring for each other, and helping each other, can and will write a new history, a new legacy for the world: from collision to coalition”. (ibid)

Today, all concerned humans, - Jewish, Christians, Muslims, Buddhist, and humanists- have a responsibility to create *a common future for us and our unborn generations*.

**PAS:** After delineating the essentials of the philosophy of Said Nursi and Pope Francis on the environment in tandem with their environmental activism, what can we take away from your comparative analysis as to their great contributions to environmental protection or is the matter simply laying a theoretical framework for environmental protection?

**İÖ:** The great leaders pave the way for us and point their fingers to a brighter future of hope even in darkest times. Therefore, the vision of Nursi and Pope Francis is very important for us. As Pope Francis underlined, re-interpreting our Abrahamic tradition can allow us to propose and develop a new paradigm of understanding and sustainability, which includes all human fellows as well as all creation. (Pope Francis, 2015) Said Nursi also articulates an environmentally friendly understanding of human-nature relationship which was formed and

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shaped by the Qur'an. According to this understanding, the universe was created and sustained by God with a particular order, balance, measure, beauty, and aesthetic structure.

Nursi, while emphasizing the cosmological and metaphysical dimension of the Qur'an, also underlines the ecological messages of this teaching for us: the purpose of the universe's creation is not solely anthropocentric; before everything, the universe is a missive, a book, showing its Maker. It therefore has a dimension, which transcends human. (Özdemir, 2003)

Their shared vision that there are certain aims in the creation of all living beings; human's prime obligation is to understand these, and act in conformity with them. Since there is no wastefulness and prodigality in the universe, humans should not be wasteful in their life. The models of unlimited growth and unlimited consumption are opposed to the spirit of the Qur'an. (Özdemir, 2003). We have to discover and develop sustainable economic model and consumption. As the ecological balances and systems have been placed and sustained in the universe, it is up to us to respect and protect them. Their vision can be a wakeup call for us to understand the importance of the problem and then produce responses with a spirit of care and responsibility.

I do believe that it is possible to find a table of universal and shared values among religions. As you know, religious traditions develop unique narratives, symbols, and rituals to express their relationships with the cosmos as well as with various local landscapes. Therefore, we have been working on common values among different religions and faith traditions for a while as environmentalism teaches us that we are on the same boat, which is the Planet Earth. To our surprise, we find out that we have more in common than we initially think. In the past, I attended several meetings of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (1997), Cape Town (1999), and Barcelona (2004). Nelson Mandela also joined us in Cape Town and delivered an unforgettable speech to us.

We also revised the document *Towards a Global Ethic (An Initial Declaration)* in 2019 which has been officially expanded to include a language calling for commitment to a culture of sustainability and care for the Earth. The common values that most of the world's religions hold in relation to the natural world might be summarized as *reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, and responsibility*. (Tucker, 2020)

While there are clearly variations of interpretation within and between religions regarding these five reference cosmological orientations and ethical obligations, these principles have been previously understood primarily with regard to relations toward other humans, (Tucker and Grim, 2001) the challenge now is to extend them to the natural world. As this shift occurs -and there are signs it is already happening- religions can advocate reverence for the earth and its profound cosmological processes, respect for the earth's myriad species, an extension of ethics to include all life forms, restraint in the use of natural resources

combined with support for effective alternative technologies, equitable redistribution of wealth, and the acknowledgement of human responsibility in regard to the continuity of life and the ecosystems that support life. (ibid)

**PAS:** Discuss your own environmental protection activism, especially any milestones that have been currently reached or that are about to come to fruition.

**İÖ:** As a background to answering this question, I want to share with you brief information about myself. I hope it may help you to put my answers and career in perspective. I was born in a village as 8th member of my family, 6 boys and two girls in 1960. My father, Mustafa, was a farmer and an illiterate. My mother Ayşe was a strong Kurdish woman, and an illiterate too. There was no school or mosque in our village. Therefore, I had to walk 2 miles to school at a nearby village, every day. Moreover, there was also no drinkable water in our village. We used to go with our donkeys to collect water every day. As a village boy, the awe and wonder of nature always attracted my curiosity. Since then, I have been a keen reader of the book of nature, trying to understand the human-nature relationship in the sense of what the Norwegian echo-philosopher Arne Naess calls “*deep ecology*”. (Naess, 1989)

My dissertation, *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude Towards Nature* (Published by Insan Publications: Istanbul, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2008) has been regarded as the first dissertation by a Muslim scholar on environmental philosophy and ethics. The main objective of my dissertation was to explore the “*philosophical and ethical dimensions of environmental problems*”.

I began to teach, disseminate, and share my findings with my fellow Muslim scholars as well as others. Therefore, I have been working closely with environmentalist groups and activists in the Muslim world as well as in the West and East. I lectured at summer schools, seminars, and workshops in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, Germany, the USA, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Maldives, and Turkey. During these lectures and panels, I met and talked in person with (HE) Mr. Nelson Mandela, (HE) Mr. Dalai Lama, (HE) Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev and many other leading figures.

I was a member of the drafting team of *the Islamic Declaration for Global Climate Change* in August 2015. Because of my dedication to environmental awareness and active engagement with environmental NGOs and groups, I was appointed as a consultant to UNEP (United Nation Environmental Program), 2015-2016. I attended UN Environment Assembly in Nairobi in March 2019. During the Assembly, ISESCO (*The Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, representing 57 Muslim countries*) asked me to prepare a Strategy Document for the Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers. With Dr. Fachruddin M. Mangunjaya from Universitas Nasional, Jakarta, Indonesia, we

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prepared the document "How to activate Cultural and Religious Factors to Protect the Environment and Achieve Sustainable Development in the Islamic World". It means, our strategy document will be used as a blueprint for sustainable development and climate change in Muslim countries in the future.

A new book *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues* by Carool Kersten (Routledge Press, 2019) presented me as "the most prominent Islamic environmentalist in Turkey for many years."

Now, we have been working with the cooperation and guidance of UNEP on *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth* for a while. AL-MIZAN ('Balance' in English) is based on Surah Ar-Rahman (The Merciful) in which Allah Almighty describes the creation in its perfect balance: (Quran 55:1-9)

*Al-Mizan* presents an Islamic outlook of the environment in a bid to strengthen local, regional, and international actions that combat climate change and other threats to the planet. It is a global endeavour to engage Islamic scholars and Muslim institutions in the development and adoption of this Call. It examines the ethics behind the social patterning of human existence and enquires into how they could be brought to life today working in harmony with the heartbeat of the natural world.

These principles grew out of the foundations established by Prophet Muhammad into a range of rules and institutions that manifested an expression of life that was truly holistic. It was based on the Qur'an, and it could be distilled into three categories namely encouraging public good, forbidding wrong action, and acting in moderation at all times:

*Let there be a community among you that calls for what is good, urges what is right and forbids what is wrong, they are the ones who have success" (3: 104).*

I attended hundreds of meetings, in-service education programs for teachers, devised a syllabus on Religion and the Environment for Department of Theology at Ankara University, which is used by almost all Theology Departments, in Turkey. I also write regular stories on environment and climate change for Turkish newspapers.

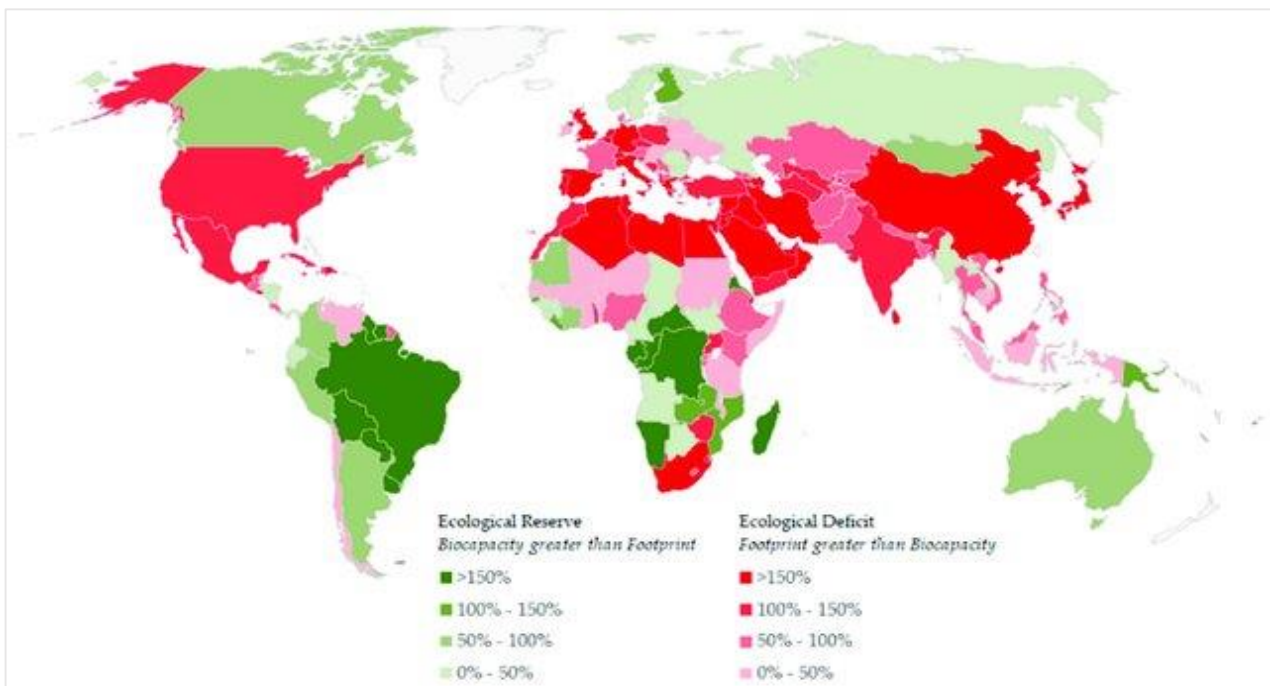
**PAS:** Why is climate change and the seriousness of the danger that it poses to life, as we know it, not a hoax as some fundamentalist climate deniers claim?

**İÖ:** As a Muslim scholar I do believe that environmental problems in general and climate change, in particular, are frightening all humanity and the very existence of life on earth. Moreover, environmental problems are the root cause of deforestation erosion, floods, drought, hunger, racism, migration, international and domestic terror, human rights

violations, human trafficking, and even nihilism. Considerable research findings by many scientists across the disciplines demonstrate that climate change is a reality and ‘very likely’ human-induced event.

According to recent reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), leading climate scientists now feel confident that human activity is heating up the planet since the Industrial Revolution. (<https://www.ipcc.ch/>) Therefore, environmental problems and climate change mitigates adaptation and requires not only technical solutions, but also better insights in the understanding of relevant belief and identity systems, in which religion and culture play an important role. Human attitudes, convictions, and ultimately our consumption patterns will play an important role in our environment and climate adaptation and mitigation. Religion and culture, therefore, are the key determinant of individual convictions and a central marker of behaviour and community belonging.

Ecological resources, on the other hand, are at the core of every country’s long-term wealth. Today, the majority of countries in the world are running ecological deficits, using more resources than the ecosystems within their borders can regenerate. In some areas of the world, the implications of ecological deficits can be devastating, leading to resource loss, ecosystem collapse, debt, poverty, famine, and war.



Source: Figure 4. Map of countries with biocapacity deficits (red) and reserves (green) in 2014 [18].  
(This figure was uploaded by İbrahim Özdemir. Content may be subject to copyright.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327703842\\_Ecological\\_Footprint\\_Accounting\\_for\\_Countries\\_Updates\\_and\\_Results\\_of\\_the\\_National\\_Footprint\\_Accounts\\_2012-2018](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327703842_Ecological_Footprint_Accounting_for_Countries_Updates_and_Results_of_the_National_Footprint_Accounts_2012-2018))



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Critical action is needed by the Muslims and others over the globe to address urgent, pending, and increasing environmental degradation, and related challenges of social and economic unsustainability in their respective countries. Thus, we can envisage a world in which every human-being enjoys sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. It will also secure the future of the Muslim world, which by 2050 will be more than 2 billion by regulating consumption and production patterns and use of all - natural resources - from air to land, from deserts to forests, from rivers, lakes, and aquifers to oceans and seas and from frozen tundra to expanding towns and cities - with a spirit of sustainability.

**PAS:** How does the Qur'an define the environment and how does it describe what constitute environmental protection and are there parallels with Catholicism or other faiths that you wish to share?

**İÖ:** In fact, when we look at the first chapters and the verses of the Qur'an, which were revealed in the Meccan period, we see that its main purpose was "to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and universe." Thus, by awaking in man a higher and deeper consciousness, firstly it changes his overall world view, then it constructs his image of himself; and consequently, his attitudes, feelings, sentiments, and the patterns of his relationships with reality begin to change accordingly. All these should be considered as a result of *Qur'anic Weltanschauung*.

The Qur'an, thus, with its emphasis on the metaphysical dimension of nature, replaced the pagan Arabs' conception of nature with a new and vivid concept. Today, the Qur'an once more is ready to challenge the modern materialistic conception of nature, which is also dominant in Muslim societies through educational curriculum, and to suggest and provide a more comprehensive and holistic approach to developing an environmental ethical theory.

It is my firm conviction that once the metaphysical foundation for an environmental ethic is discovered within the Qur'anic value system, it will not be difficult to develop an environmental ethic on this basis. Furthermore, understanding the metaphysical dimension of the Qur'anic message will give us the opportunity of understanding and appreciating the development of sensitive ideas and attitudes concerning environment in the course of Islamic history, the first example of this, I think, is the behaviour and attitude of the Prophet to the environment.

The Prophet Muhammad, for example, both in his practices and in many of his *Hadiths*, attached great importance to planting trees, protecting existing ones, planting forests, as well as conserving them. A'isha, one of his wives, said: "His character was the Qur'an." His practices and conduct related to conservation of the environment should therefore be considered from the Qur'anic standpoint. (Özdemir, 2003). For us, his actions are

sources of inspiration constituting his *Sunna* or practices, which we are obliged to follow. To put it another way, as in all matters, the exemplar of Islamic conduct related to the environment and the person who displayed it in the most perfect fashion was God's Messenger.

I attended many meetings on the subject but the most important one was the Abrahamic Traditions and Environmental Change Workshop, Rhodes, Greece, 23-26 June 2019, sponsored by the Abrahamic Programs for Academic Collaboration in the MENA Region. Using eight common principles identified in prior research on the environmental views of the world religions, we volunteered to indicate the extent to which our traditions -Judaic, Christian, or Islamic- agree with each principle and to provide a citation to a valued source that supports the principle. (Abrahamic Principles, 2019).

The outcome of this compilation provides concise theological grounding for motivating members of their respective communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to address ongoing problems of water availability, biological diversity loss, ecosystem degradation, and human-induced climate change. We decided to inform and urge our communities to return to the sources of their traditions and to reflect on them for meaningful motivation for their actions, including their efforts to collaborate with one another in addressing shared concerns.

**PAS:** Why and how do faiths matter when it comes to taking care of our environment?

**İÖ:** The role of religion to shape society and nature is evident everywhere. Although, the enlightenment project, materialistic and positivistic philosophical currents had tried to undermine the role of religion in modern society and human life, religion is still with us. Peter Berger, who declared himself a humanistic sociologist throughout much of his career, confessed that what he and "most other sociologists of religion wrote in the 1960s about secularization was a mistake". (Berger, 1997)

Berger underlines in his seminal book *The Sacred Canopy* that "every human society is an enterprise of world-building" and "religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise" (Berger, 1967).

Therefore, "religions might be influential enough to help shift whole societies in more environmentally benign and sustainable directions". (ibid). Providing people with a sense of meaning and purpose is arguably one of the most powerful but least appreciated assets of religion. A sense of purpose can unify entire societies around national goals. Ritual communication has a special place in the movement to create sustainable societies because it has long had the effect of protecting the natural environment.

Therefore, religious and spiritual traditions have a great deal to offer in creating cultures of sustainability:

*Educate about the environment by including ecological instruction in religious education.*

*Educate about consumption. In an increasingly “full world” in which human numbers and appetites press against natural limits, introducing an ethic of limited consumption is an urgent task for religions.*

*Educate about investments. Many religious institutions avoid investments in weapons, cigarettes. Religions may also steer funds toward sustainability initiatives, such as solar power and microfinance. [...]*

*Express the sacredness of the natural world. The most important assets of a faith tradition are arguably the intangible ones. Rituals, customs, and liturgical expressions speak to the heart in a profound way that cognitive knowledge cannot.*

*Reclaim forgotten assets. Religious traditions have a long list of little-emphasized economic teachings that could be helpful for building sustainable economies.*

*These include prohibitions against the overuse of farmland and pursuit of wealth as an end in itself, advocacy of broad risk-sharing, critiques of consumption, and economies designed to serve the common good. (Gardner, 2003)*

In short, there is “the urgent need to promote a flourishing, sustainable future, the world’s religious communities have much to offer because the attitudes and beliefs that shape most people’s concept of nature are greatly influenced by their religious worldviews and ethical practices”. (Tucker, 2013)

Moreover, “the moral imperatives and value systems of religions have the potential to mobilize the sensibilities of people toward the goals of Earth Stewardship, here defined as shaping the trajectories of social-ecological change to enhance ecosystem resilience and human well-being”. (ibid)

**PAS:** In retrospect, has how the industrial revolution been managed a curse or a blessing vis-a-vis climate change and global warming?

**İÖ:** This is a very important question. As you know many terms, even the terms, “ecology” and “environment”, “sustainability” are new inventions. Therefore, it is an irony of history that during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the predominant view held by the positivists and scientifically-minded philosophers was that science and technology could satisfy humanity and solve its problems totally, without creating new problems. (Özdemir, 2008)

Further, such people tried to convince us that not only religions but also all metaphysical propositions and speculations were meaningless, and therefore should be eliminated from the concerns of the modern man. As a result of this view, modern man lost his awareness of the sacred dimension of nature and alienated himself from it.

The Cartesian perception and metaphor of nature is a machine, that it has no value and expresses no sense of purpose was criticized by all environmentalist as this view robs nature of all its inherent qualities.

John Locke's theory of primary and secondary qualities also should be remembered in this context. Locke argues that only primary qualities exist in nature; there is no place for secondary qualities. Rather, the latter are products of the human mind which are imposed on nature, which in itself is devoid of soul and intelligence and has no inherent or intrinsic values at all. (Whitehead 1926). In short, "nature is a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless: merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly." A tree, for example, has no intrinsic value of its own being as such. According to the modern materialistic concept of nature, a tree gains its value through human intervention, such as when it becomes a chair, a table or whatever. (Özdemir, 2008) The only value that nature can have is instrumental value. Such an understanding of nature has provided justification for the exploitative use of nature and natural resources.

Therefore, the instrumental view of nature which characterizes modern thought has been very severely criticized by environmentalists in recent decades. Environmentalists claim that there is a strong and direct relationship between environmental problems and our modern understanding of nature. (ibid) To put it more concretely, the value systems that we hold and which, in turn, shape and mould our behaviour and attitudes towards society and nature, are the result of our overall beliefs and metaphysical views concerning all reality. Consequently, any alternative theories of environmental ethics can be expected to challenge the basic propositions of the dominant modern understanding of nature.

**PAS:** Do you think the Paris Accord is workable and can it help humanity stave off climate catastrophe?

**İÖ:** Yes, I do, but it is dependent on our readiness to make sacrifices for future generations. But as the late Arnold Toynbee once said if we could not overcome our selfish and hedonistic lives who will care for future generations. Then, he underlined the importance of religious consciousness to respond to these challenges as religions teach a spirit of altruism, care, and sharing. Toynbee argued that religion can be a key to achieving the purposes of life and solve some major challenges. For him man's greatest need is for "a spiritual improvement in ourselves and in our relations with our fellow human beings." The great religions (what Toynbee calls the "higher religions" -Judaism, Zoroastrianism,

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity) teach that self-centeredness and egocentricity “can be conquered by love.” (Kennedy, 1957; Sempa, 2018).

## CONCLUSION:

**PAS:** I would like to thank you, on behalf of JAMMO’s management and readers, for the openness with which you have answered all the questions put to you and for the thoroughness and sincerity that you have brought to bear on the issues of our deliberation. I hope we will continue to Interview part 2 later to contemplate other issues such as the Garden of Eden narratives; the fall of Eve and Adam amongst other fascinating subjects which include sexism, patriarchy and the concepts of paradise and hell, judgement, and end times; all which may extend our understanding of both the human responsibility and the divine providence in relation to the ecologic balance on Earth.

Whereas it might have seemed to many that religions are habitually in contemplation of morality and ethics endlessly for their own sakes, it is my view that Professor Özdemir has successfully demonstrated in this interview that this is not the case. That FAITHS matter when they cooperate to reduce global warming, deforestation, and the damage to the ozone layers. That all faiths and no faith can work to counter-balance our current destructive economics of production. We must retrace our footsteps and digital footprints. We must achieve equilibrium in our eco systems as a matter of transformative urgency.

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