

ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS & ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

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Rhodes, Greece

*First workshop of the Abrahamic Programs
in the Middle East/North Africa Region*

CO-ORGANIZED BY:



*The Forum on Religion
& Ecology at Yale*

INTRODUCTION

Al-Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco (AUI), the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CT, USA (UConn) and The Forum on Religion & Ecology at Yale University in New Haven, CT USA share the common objective of seeking to develop academic cooperation among countries of the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, as well as between these countries and the rest of the world. To further this goal, these institutions have partnered with one another to offer a workshop on *Abrahamic Traditions and Environmental Change*. Given the importance of today's intertwined dimensions of spirituality, global conflicts, and environmental change, these institutions have agreed to convene a meeting of prominent scholars, practitioners, and thinkers from countries where the three "Religions of the Book" (the Abrahamic religions) prevail, to debate on current environmental change issues.

AUI (www.aui.ma) is an independent, public, not-for-profit, coeducational, Moroccan university committed to educating the future citizen-leaders of Morocco and the world through a globally oriented, English-medium, liberal arts curriculum based on the American system. AUI enhances Moroccan society and engages the world through cutting-edge educational and research programs, including continuing and executive education. It upholds the highest academic and ethical standards, while promoting equity and social responsibility. Based on the principles of diversity and an international outlook, the University's mission is driven by values of human solidarity and tolerance. With a strong emphasis on interfaith and intercultural dialogue, mandated in its founding charter, the University has already developed a national and international reputation for its unique identity and potential.

UConn is a global university (www.global.uconn.edu). People from all over the world come to UConn to deepen their knowledge and identify solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges. At UConn, faculty, scholars, students, practitioners and community members from diverse backgrounds interact with a spirit of inquiry, curiosity and global citizenship. Based on this tradition, UConn Global Affairs is developing a new initiative named *Abrahamic Programs in the Middle East/North Africa Region* (www.abrahamicprograms.uconn.edu). This initiative builds on the long-standing Connecticut tradition of innovative thinking and scientific discovery to serve as an academic umbrella that fosters cross-border research, intercultural communication and regional scientific interaction in the MENA region. It also builds on the intellectual foundations and common epistemological heritage of the three Abrahamic, monotheistic faiths to emphasize the value of critical, rational, and wise thinking.

The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale is an international multireligious project. With its conferences, publications, and website (<http://fore.yale.edu/>), it is engaged in exploring religious worldviews, texts, and ethics in order to broaden understanding of the complex nature of current environmental concerns. The Forum recognizes that religions need to be in dialogue with other disciplines (e.g., science, economics, policy, gender studies) in seeking comprehensive solutions to both global and local environmental problems.

While this initiative is non-denominational, we recognize that the birth of all three faiths with Abrahamic foundations in common were initiated in the Middle East—an effective Abrahamic culture spreading east and west. We also acknowledge that religion can significantly shape cultural traditions, beliefs and inclinations. By focusing on the commonalities between the

three major cultural traditions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism—which all call on their people to use knowledge and reason for constructive purposes—this joint AUI-UConn workshop aims to support scholarly relationships, with the ultimate hope of also contributing to regional economic and social development. Indeed, the core goal of the workshop is promotion of academic interaction and scholarly research in the MENA region, on the principles of integrity, social justice and peace. The initiative is predicated on the assumption that it has the potential to contribute towards peace-building through people to people interaction and, with this respect, it unequivocally supports a fair, internationally acknowledged solution for the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the region.

In order to achieve its purpose, the workshop will facilitate discussions and interactive activities that give participants the opportunity to exchange views and learn from a diverse group of peers. A small workshop format will allow participants to actively engage with the research and each other, allowing them to contribute their unique perspectives and experiences—in contrast to a conference model in which participants are often passive listeners. The emphasis will be on substantive, in-depth interactions that foster meaningful, lasting relationships and new research opportunities. Coming from diverse professional, cultural, and social backgrounds, participants will be able to explore emerging trends and issues of critical importance while advancing regional knowledge production and contributing to higher education capacity building.

ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS, NATURE AND SOCIETY

Taken together, the three Abrahamic traditions include nearly half of the world's population. These religions, beyond their particular claims to 'truth,' which have led to past conflicts, share many common foundations and cosmologies, exhibit a comparable sense of global awareness and responsibility, and provide many similar teachings in their respective sacred texts. They also have developed a world system of values and meanings of life, to a large extent with comparable doctrinal, normative teachings: a belief in one God beyond the known and the observable, and a sense of wonderment towards the universe, among others. Another important element that distinguishes the Abrahamic traditions from other religious ones: all three originate from a similar ecological setting—the dry lands of southwestern Asia—a fact that functionally contributed, at least in the early times, to shaping the human-environment relationship and patterns of interaction.

In another vein, throughout history, Abrahamic religions have worked as inspired catalysts for social change; the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam indicate clearly that these traditions have consistently represented a real moral force, while exhibiting strong spiritual energy. Despite secularization and the one-sided criticism of their supposed outdated, ineffective ideologies, Abrahamic religions remain foundational to how people of these faiths think, feel and act to this day.

Current environmental challenges suggest the urgent need for multifaceted debate on the causes and consequences of environmental change as a prelude to successful mitigation and adaptation. Thus, one of the main tasks of this workshop is to explore how Abrahamic traditions impact how humans perceive and interact with nature and the potential to translate the perceptions and interactions into positive direct action. More than twenty years ago the

Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions initiated multiple conferences on issues pertaining to religion and ecology that resulted in the publication of 10 seminal books between 1996 and 1998. Today, the *Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale* continues this work and is "the largest international multi-religious project of its kind" aiming at broadening understanding of the relationships between religious world views and environmental issues, in part by promoting scientific dialogue between the fields related to religion studies and other academic disciplines. The joint AUI-UConn workshop *Abrahamic Traditions and Environmental Change* builds on these past and present academic activities with the aim of looking for a means through which the three Abrahamic faiths can counteract the negative impacts of these environmental trends in the MENA region—with the intention of achieving a sustainable and scalable cooperative program between scholars and practitioners from this region.

WORKSHOP RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

Human-induced environmental change has been a consistent process for several millennia. Humans have adapted the elements of the environment to their concomitant, progressive increase in technological power for expansion of their needs and wants. The environmental changes of the present time, however, have reached unprecedented magnitude, as they are literally creating new environments, in which every element is changing: the carbon cycle, ocean productivity, land cover dynamics, temperature and precipitation distribution through time and space, extreme hazard events, depleted soils, among others. The magnitude of these changes and the subsequent threats they lead to are such that they have inspired intense and careful reflection on actions from natural as well as social science research. The urgency of contemporary environmental change calls for policies and practices that reverse the accelerating degradational trends to ensure social and ecological sustainability.

The issues involving the intertwined relationships between religion and ecology and the search for spirituality as a leverage to address environmental degradation have already a long standing tradition in academia. In the recent "Overview of World Religion and Ecology" at Yale University in 2009, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim formulated in a clear manner the need for a more holistic ethical change:

"Emerging biocentric, zoocentric, and ecocentric ethics are attentive to life forms, animal species, and ecosystems within a planetary context. A new 'systems ethics' of part and whole, local and global, will assist the religions in articulating a more comprehensive form of environmental ethics from within their traditions. This is a major part of the development of religions into a dialogue with the sustainability movement. Humans are seeking an ethics to respond not only to suicide and homicide but also to biocide and ecocide... Thus religions are gradually moving from exclusively anthropocentric ethics to ecocentric ethics."

Spirituality can and must contribute to sustainability. Abrahamic religions, with their moral authority and grounding in ethics can instill new directions in nature-society theory and practice.

This workshop will take place with the assumption that ethical, moral and spiritual dimensions of Abrahamic religions help shape cultural and value systems that impact the environment

and the subsequent observed change. Furthermore, these religions—viewed by some as part of the causation of human induced environmental change—have the potential to move society towards ecocentric ethics. Abrahamic traditions on nature-society can contribute in many ways towards material struggles for environmental sustainability and support workable solutions. The workshop has three core goals, namely:

- 1) Contextualize contemporary environmental change through the lens of the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam;
- 2) Learn about each other's research; and
- 3) Establish new research clusters and teams from the group, and beyond, to strengthen MENA research networks, build more capacity in participants' home institutions and support long-term academic cooperation.

This workshop will include approximately 35 scholars whose main task will be to identify the state of the field, open new comparative research horizons, and explore ways by which Abrahamic traditions could—and should—contribute to understanding and mitigating contemporary environmental change.