



RESEARCH PROGRAMME IN THE STUDY
OF MUSLIM COMMUNITIES OF SUCCESS

Commentary Series

Islam, the Environment, and the Future of Humanity

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Introduction

Islam teaches us important lessons about stewardship of the environment. But are these lessons only for Muslims or for people of all faiths, and even those of no faith at all? In my new book *Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of the Modern World*,² I argue that we can draw our shared moral, spiritual, and family values to address global problems, such as stewardship of the environment. My starting point is our shared moral, religious, and tribal psychology.

Universal morality

Our research has shown that seven cooperative principles found across the natural world also underlie human patterns of moral reasoning: Be loyal to your group; help your family; return favours; be brave; defer to superiors; divide resources fairly; respect others' property.

My colleagues and I undertook a huge survey of the writings of anthropologists relating to a sample of sixty societies selected to represent the diversity of all human cultures worldwide. We analyzed thousands of paragraphs of text describing moral judgements and we found that in 99.9% of all cases described, these seven rules were judged morally good³ rather than bad.

Universal religious institutions

Another universal feature of human thinking and behavior is the idea of supernatural physics - ghosts that can pass through walls, witches that can fly, or gods and spirits that can appear out of thin air. Anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists have shown that such ideas are universal and ancient. And psychological research shows that these ideas appeal to us from a very early age. For example, my colleagues and I have demonstrated that even preverbal infants expect agents capable of defying our intuitive physics to occupy positions of social dominance. In other words, the idea that agents with supernatural powers should be in positions of authority, is present even before we can speak.

¹ This is a revised version of an article that was first published in The Straits Times under the title "A Recipe for Singapore: A dash of religion and concern for the planet" (19 July 2025): <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/a-recipe-for-singapore-a-dash-of-religion-and-concern-for-the-planet>

² See *Inheritance: The Evolutionary Origins of The Modern World*.

³ See Curry, et. al. (2019).

Universal tribalism

Another feature of human nature that is fundamentally the same everywhere is loyalty to our families – rooted in the belief that we are made from the same physical substance inherited from our parents but also that we surmount ordeals together through thick and thin. Shared biology and shared experience⁴ are the bedrock of the most powerful forms of social glue known to humankind.

Human nature past and present

In the second part of my book, I show how human nature has been harnessed and extended over the course of world history. For example, the rise of the world religions provided new ways of unifying multi-ethnic empires around particular elements of the universal moral repertoire and kin psychology was extended to enable powerful new beliefs in common ancestry and shared experience to bind together nations and transnational religions.

In the final part of my book, however, I argue that our ability to cooperate is breaking down. I show that our religious intuitions are being hijacked by ad agencies and tech platforms, and that our willingness to be loyal to groups is being exploited by divisive leaders and the mass media. The corrosive effects of this on trust in leaders and institutions, evident in many previously stable democracies around the world today, is increasingly detectable even in Singapore. Cohesion doesn't come for free – it has to be worked at.

Many public intellectuals today would say we need to eliminate the harmful effects of moral dogmatism, religiosity, and tribalism. But my research suggests that this is mistaken. We can't shake off our evolved psychology, because it will simply reemerge with each new generation. Our only hope is to learn to harness human nature more wisely. But how? And to what ends? A compelling answer lies in the pressing need to take better care of the planet.

⁴ See [Whitehouse and Lanman \(2014\)](#).

Stewardship of mother earth

The overwhelming majority of people in the world today are aligned with a religious tradition. And deep within all those religions it is possible to find doctrinal support for stewardship of the planet. We know that religious beliefs influence people's diets and lifestyles and yet efforts to persuade people to act on the climate crisis fall almost entirely to secular sources of authority – e.g., political leaders, legislative bodies, scientists, and economists. There is clearly huge untapped potential here to engage more fully with people's religious beliefs as well. Our research – measuring the effects of politician's speeches on their audiences⁴ – suggests that tapping into our universal moral, religious, and tribal intuitions can have far more promising effects on environmental action than relying solely on the arguments from science.

Meeting with the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore

In June 2025, I was invited to the Bencoolen Campus of the Singapore College of Islamic Studies, to participate in a roundtable discussion with colleagues who shared my interest in learning from the wisdom of religious traditions to address environmental issues. In an extended discussion with Nanyang technological University Associate Professor Dr. Md Saidul Islam, moderated by Associate Research Fellow Shaik Nabil with contributions from more than forty attendees, we explored the Islamic Ecological Paradigm.⁵ It transpired that all the universal moral rules I listed above lay at the heart of Muslim doctrines of stewardship, justice and accountability, trust, responsibility, respect, and resource management. Our universal moral intuitions were clearly present also in Muslim ideas about supernatural authority, and the legitimacy of leaders and scriptures. Our universal kin psychology was to be found at the heart of the Muslim doctrine that the earth is our mother and that environmentalism begins at home. We explored also the role of shared experiences and collective rituals such as the haj, and fasting, and other transcendental experiences that bring us together into a common family.

⁵ See [Reinhardt and Whitehouse \(2025\)](#).

⁶ See [Islam \(2012\)](#), on Old Philosophy, New Movement: The Rise of the Islamic Ecological Paradigm in the Discourse of Environmentalism for more information on Islamic Ecological Paradigm.

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Perhaps the most profound discovery coming out of our discussions was that by focusing on the universal ideas in the Islamic ecological paradigm we can connect to other ecological paradigms in other faiths across Singapore's diverse religious landscape. And from that it would be a short step to creating a truly universal ecological paradigm that is meaningful and motivating for people of all religions.

This seems to me the most effective way in which Singaporeans could weave together their diverse cultural and religious identities to create a single cloth. The challenge is to discover how our universal psychology – the common threads of human nature – may be found beneath the widely varied colours of our historically distinct traditions. This is the kind of material we need to protect us from the winds of polarization and populism as we enter a darker and colder phase of human history.

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