

Natural World Texts

Islam

It is God who causes the grain and the fruit stone to germinate. He brings forth life from that which is dead, and death from that which is living. Such is God! How then can you turn away from him?

It is God who kindles the light of dawn. He has made the night for rest, and the sun and moon for reckoning the time. This is what God has ordained; he is supremely powerful, and knows all.

It is God who has created the stars for you, so that they may guide you in the darkness, both on land and at sea. 'We have made plain our revelations to people of wisdom.'

It is God who created you from one being, and provided you with homes where you can rest. 'We have made plain our revelations to people of wisdom.'

It is God who sends rain from the sky, bringing forth buds and green leaves on every plant. The rain causes the grain to swell, the palm trees to yield clusters of dates, the vines to yield grapes, and the olive trees to bear olives; it brings forth all manner of pomegranates. Look at the fruit as it ripens! Surely, this is a sign for true believers...

--Qur'an 6:95-99, 102-103

Allah sends down water from the sky and it brings the dead earth back to life. There is certainly a Sign in that for people to hear. There is instruction for you in cattle. From the content of their bellies, from between dung and blood, We give you pure milk to drink, easy for drinkers to swallow. And from the fruit of the date palm and the grapevine you derive both intoxicants and wholesome provision. There is certainly a Sign in that for people who use their intellect. Your Lord revealed to the bees: 'Build dwellings in the mountains and the trees, and also in the structures which men erect. Then, eat from every kind of fruit and travel the paths of your Lord, which have been made easy for you to follow.' From inside them comes a drink of varying colours, containing healing for mankind. There is certainly a Sign in that for people to reflect.

--Quran: 16:65-69

Discussion prompt:

1. In the first text, what has God created? How do the wonders God has created interact with one another to ensure their growth and life?

2. In the first text, discuss the meaning of this statement: “We have made plain our revelations to people of wisdom.” Who is a person of wisdom? What do people without wisdom understand (or not understand) about God’s creation? About God’s power? Who is a true believer in the context of God and the nature he has created?
3. What messages does God (Allah) send to people through his creations? How does God (Allah) expect humanity to interact with and view what he has created in the natural world?

Judaism

And have dominion over the fish of the ocean, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on the earth. (Genesis 1:28).

Rabbi Hanina said: “Humanity will rule over them if they [humanity] deserve to; if they do not deserve to, then they will go under [and be ruled by the evil they have created].” (Genesis Rabbah, 8:12).

While the sage, Choni, was walking along a road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him: How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit? Seventy years, replied the man. Choni then asked: Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit? The man answered: I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise I am planting for my children.” (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a)

Discussion prompts:

1. What is meant by “dominion over” and “humanity will rule over them” in the first two texts? What do these quotes suggest about humanity’s relationship to the natural world?
2. What does the third text suggest about the past, present and future state of the natural world? How should humanity prepare for its longevity?

Buddhism

The grass, trees and the forest are also transient. Thus they are no other than Buddha-nature. People and things, body and mind are transient. Thus they are Buddha-nature. The land, mountains and rivers are transient. Therefore they are Buddha-nature.
--Shobogenzo, Buddha-Nature (Bussho)

Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Suchness is form, suchness is all nature.” Hence, blooming flowers and falling leaves are precisely what Shakyamuni meant by "suchness is all nature." Ignorant people, however, think that there are no blooming flowers or falling leaves in the world of Dharma nature.
--Shobogenzo, Dharma-Nature (Hossho)

Discussion prompts:

1. What do the texts reveal about the interconnection between humanity and nature?
2. What is “suchness” and how is it represented? If ignorant people do not understand the inclusiveness of “suchness,” what do they think “suchness” is? Or, what do they believe is in the world of nature (perhaps uniquely)?

Hinduism and Jainism

Earth, in which lie the sea, the river, and other waters, in which food and cornfields have come to be, in which live all that breathes and that moves, may she confer on us the finest of her yield....

Set me, O Earth, amidst what is thy center and thy navel, and vitalizing forces that emanate from thy body. Purify us from all sides. Earth is my Mother; her son am I; and Heaven my Father: may he fill us with plenty....

--Atharva Veda 12.1

Discussion prompt:

1. What do these texts suggest about the relationship between earth and humanity?
2. What does the earth do for humanity?

Christianity

From the New Testament Gospel of John:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him... (John 3:16–17)

From the New Testament Gospel of Matthew:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26)

Discussion prompts:

1. What do these texts suggest about humanity’s relationship to the natural world?
2. What does the second text suggest about how God treats all that he has created? How is value measured?
3. What does the second text suggest about humanity’s place in the divine realm and in the natural world?

Native American

The Great Spirit is in all things, he is in the air we breathe. The Great Spirit is our Father, but the Earth is our Mother. She nourishes us, that which we put into the ground she returns to us....

--Big Thunder (Bedagi) Wabanaki Algonquin

The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, pueblos, or mesas. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers, he belongs just as the buffalo belonged...

--Luther Standing Bear Oglala Sioux

Discussion prompts:

1. How does humanity fit in nature's scheme? What does this place suggest about humanity's role in the natural world?
2. In these texts, who or what has "dominion" over the natural world, and what does that entail?