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Introducing a Comparative Ecotheology: Islamic Concept of Basmalah and Luther's Commentary on the Ten Commandments

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq¹

Introducing a Comparative Ecotheology: Islamic Concept of Basmalah and Luther's Commentary on the Ten Commandments

In the time of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the question of God, His love and the machinations of nature are more pressing than ever. We are faced with critical questions about the relationship between God and Mother Earth. The concept of love is central to Christianity, but Islam encounters a twofold problem. With violent groups carrying out attacks in the name of Islam, many hope for the possibility of reform in Islam. This hope springs from an urgent need, combined with frustrating phenomena, and religious stereotypes. For example, many consider Christianity an orthodox faith and Islam as a religion of orthopraxy. This generalization ignores that around fifty times the Quran uses the phrase “who are faithful and conducting good deeds” (al-ladhin-a Amenu wa a'milu al-salihah) – namely the good actions follow the faith – implying that religious practice is ineffective without faith. In fact there were prominent theologians in Islam called “Murji'a” that did not consider practice as essential part of faith at all. The hope for reform also ignores the difference between Christianity and Islam's cultural backgrounds. However, this hope also suggests aspiration and wisdom. If faith does not relate to contemporary realities and mindsets it will not survive.

Faith serves humanity, and thus has to grasp people's demands, limits, ambitions, and values. Of course, that does not mean it must submit to the parameters of our state. The primary duty of faith is to inculcate spirituality, but this task cannot be fulfilled if faith ignores the values and views people already have. Faith has to negotiate rather than initiate. It builds a bridge between God and people without sacrificing humanity before divinity. It demands that the faithful contribute to the betterment of the community. Faith comes with responsibility, though responsibility can imply different relationships with the notion of the divine grace (in Christianity) and divine *lutf* (in Islam).

Humanity, modern insights, science, environment, self-development, pluralism, and the dynamics of contemporary life are at the core of any discussion of the contemporary moment, regardless of our faith. Religious traditions must demonstrate a deep concern for humanity and put all these fundamental elements into harmony to enrich human life. An individual lacking an internal harmony could not enjoy spirituality and contribute to the betterment of the community. It is impossible to care if we are selfish or unwilling to accept others as they are. It is not the responsibility of faith to fight against dominant ideologies; it

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is the business of faith to help people resist losing themselves to these ideologies and ignoring transcendental values.

In the modern era, the ancient wisdom “know thyself” has been replaced with a modern ethos, “choose thyself.” An action-oriented ideology fits the modern mindset, which loves open possibilities and an undetermined nature to be discovered through hard work. The faithful can be upset with capitalist globalization and can sound warnings about living in a consumer society; however, in the end as a faith, it has to link the modern emphasis on “choosing” with a modern understanding of “bondage of the will.” A contemporary theologian in Christianity has to bring Christ, the Cross, Christianity, the Law, and the Gospel into modern life to elaborate that care and harmony. The same is true for the Muslim theologian and the Islamic fundamental concepts of Allah, His attributes, His *lutf* (Grace), and His Sharia (religious/canon law).

This paper aims to address the urgent need to place the environmental crisis in an inter-religious context. Each faith is a part of culture and needs to work with other cultural aspects, as well as other faiths. To simultaneously acknowledge human agency and show care for mother earth, faith needs to reread its core precepts and reexamine its values.

I approach this question through two points of entry: the Islamic motto of Basmalah, and Luther’s commentary on the Ten Commandments in The Large Catechism. These are core to understanding the holy texts of Islam and Lutheran Christianity. I analyze these texts in relation to eco-friendly theology. I suggest a comparative study of Islam and Christianity through both textual and conceptual analysis to develop inter-faith cooperation and dialogue, bringing the faithful closer together.

Why the Quran’s Basmalah and Luther’s the Large Catechism?

The *basmalah* is an invocation at the beginning of the Quran. The Ten Commandments are the first and longest part of the Martin Luther’s Large Catechism, which was meant to help clergy teach their congregations. The Quran cannot be understood fully without comprehending the *basmalah*, and the catechism is essential to understanding and practicing Christian instruction. Islam is based on the *basmalah* and the Ten Commandments are a key part of the Lutheran catechism, which is a pedagogical guide for teaching Christianity. The *basmalah* originates from the Quran and the Catechism from the Holy Book, the sources of the two faiths. Though only one twelfth of the Quran deals with Sharia law, the Quran as a whole reminds people of Sharia law, which became synonymous to Islam in the media². The Large Catechism, on the other hand, elaborates on the Ten Commandments, which are comparable to Sharia. Both the *basmalah* and the Ten Commandments speak to the spirit of the faith, its divine attributes, and their connection to ordinary people. Every Muslim recites the *basmalah* several times a day, and Luther advises every Christian to read the Large Catechism regularly.

The *basmalah* and The Large Catechism are not merely theological texts for imams and priests/pastors to ponder. They guide the daily practices of ordinary people and inspire

² To learn more about the formation and the dynamic of Sharia see: Sayed Hassan Akhlaq, “A Hermeneutics of the Sacred and Secular in Shariah,” in *The Secular and The Sacred Complementary and/or Conflictual?*, ed. John P. Hogan and Sayed Hassan Akhlaq (Washington DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), 361-382.

and direct them. The *basmalah* and the Ten Commandments are not fixed concepts or dogmas. Rather, they are everlasting and refreshing resources which introduce new hope and fresh aspirations. They merit continuous revisiting and discovery. The Ten Commandments are God's will revealed, and the Quran, which starts with the *basmalah* and repeats it in many of its chapters, shows divine guidance. The *basmalah* leads us to the heart of divine instructions for the betterment of humanity and the Ten Commandment familiarizes us with divine will. The *basmalah* and the Ten Commandments connect people to the sacred world, and provide meaning for secular practices. They build a bridge between the earth and heaven. These characteristics make the two texts comparable and worthy of careful study. But how do they demonstrate these features? Let us start with the *basmalah*.

The *basmalah* and spirituality

The *basmallah* is the first verse of the Quran and recurs at the beginning of every chapter (sura) of the Quran with the exception of chapter 9. Its full form is *Basmalah al-Rahman al-Rahim* meaning "In the name of God, the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate." The Prophet Muhammad received revelations as words, and it is said that the *basmalah* was the first revelation to the Prophet³. Though it is essentially an invocation, the *basmalah* constitutes an integral part of Islamic faith and practice because Muslims start their daily prayers with the *basmalah*, and use it to initiate most of their daily secular and non-religious practices like eating, commerce, study, and meetings. They begin with the *basmalah* in order to receive blessing from God. This includes both personal and communal affairs. They prepare Halal food reciting the *basmalah*. Often their mosques, offices, houses, and cars are laden with beautiful ornamental texts of the *basmalah*.

The *basmalah* marks the beginning of all licit actions consecrated by pious Muslims because they believe all things should be performed for the sake of God and in His Name. Pious Muslims would not think to undertake a major beginning without a prayer like the *basmallah*. The *basmalah* is everywhere. While reciting the *shahadah*, which declares belief in the oneness of God and the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad, initiates people into the camp of Muslim community, reciting the *basmallah* sets the Muslim heart on becoming pious and closer to God. Being a Muslim is a social value, but being pious is great spiritual value (Quran, 49:14). The *shahadah* is an entrance ticket, but the *basmalah* is a pass on the path, to get closer, and to look further.

According to the Quran and Sunnah (the second important source of Islamic faith), the *basmalah* connects the faithful to the core of Islamic faith. According to some exegesis of the Quran, if the faithful can fully grasp the meaning of the *basmallah*, s/he is touching the spirit of all faiths, including Judaism and Christianity. This is attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, who said, "All that is contained in the revealed books is to be found in the Quran and all that is contained in the Quran is summed up in the surat al-fatihah ("The opening one," the first chapter of the Quran) while this is in its turn contained in the formula *Basmalah al-Rahman al-Rahim*⁴." The Quran speaks of reciting the *basmalah* as a common practice among the prophets. It says Noah asked his chosen people to embark the arc by

³³ Abu-al-Hassan ali bin Ahmad al-Wahidi al-Nishaburi, "Asbab al-Nozul," in *Tafsir wa Bayan Kalimat al-Quran al-Karim*, ed. Hasanayn Muhammad Makhluḥ (Beirut: Dar al-Fajr al-Islami, 1998), 7 & 13.

⁴ Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, (World Wisdom: Indiana, 2008), 36.

saying the *basmalah* (11:41). *Basmalah al-Rahman al-Rahim* also prefaces a letter from Solomon to Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba (27:30). The full formulation of *basmalah* is repeated in the story of Solomon in the Quran. Muslims note that the number of recitations of the *basmalah* in the Quran is as many as the numbers of Quranic chapters (suras); highlighting the significance of the *basmalah*. Outside the Quran, a Hadith says the Prophet claimed Jesus was teaching the meaning of the *basmalah* to his teacher while he was a child. Jesus, indeed, explained the true meaning of the *basmalah*. The hadith follows:

The Messenger of Allah said that Jesus was handed by his mother Mary over to a school in order that he might be taught. [The teacher] said to him: 'Write "Bism (In the name of)".' And Jesus said to him: 'What is "Bism"?' The teacher said: 'I do not know.' Jesus said: 'The "Ba" is Baha'u'llah (the glory of God), the "Sin" is His Sana' (radiance), and the "Mim" is His Mamlakah (sovereignty)⁵.

An Aramaic version of the Gospels says Jesus used a similar expression to the *basmalah* when he described praying "in my name" (b'sheme), which can also mean "with my sound and atmosphere."⁶ This shows the ultimate importance of the invocation. The *basmalah* guides and connects people to divine glory, radiance, and sovereignty. Every little thing is a blessing and merciful as long as its connection to God is seen. In a popular hadith among both Sunni and Shia Muslims, the prophet stated, "any important matter not begun with the Name of God (*basmalah*) shall be cut off⁷." Given this significance, it needs to be examined in meticulous detail.

The Basmalah, God, and His Names

The invocation *basmalah* consists of two parts: the first part refers to God's name, the last part mentions two attributes of God to clarify which God is called in this invocation. Let us explain each part separately. Three Arabic words form the first part which gives us the name *basmalah*: the Arabic letter "b," the word "ism" meaning name, and "Allah." In Arabic, the proposition in "b" implies a verb at the beginning of the sentence, such as "I begin" or "I seek help." Then it says *in the Name of God*; this b can be a noun, such as "The beginning of the discussion is *in the Name of God*⁸." (SQ. p). Therefore, the first part of the *basmalah* is a prayer, meaning "beginning + [in the] name + [of] God". Like most prayers it shows respect for God and asks for divine blessing and approval. Muslims believe it is also a way to strengthen their standing in God's eyes. They repeat it to commit His name to memory. God in Islam possesses 99 names, such as *al-alim* (all-knowing), *al-qadir* (all-powerful), *al-ghafoor* (merciful), *as-salam* (peace), and *al-noor* (light). These names represent attributes and qualities of God and God's creation. They inspire Muslims toward reflection, meditation, and faithful practices.

Muslim scholars developed the ethos of practicing divine attributes in their ethical and theological works. For example, in his commentary on the Quran, the exegete Haysayn

⁵ Al-Tabari, *Tafsir Jame al-Bayan*, Al-Quran by the ETC at King Saud University, <https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura1-aya1.html>. Accessed 21 April 2020.

⁶ Neil Douglas-Klotz, *The Sufi Book of Life* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 2.

⁷ *The Study Quran; a new translation and commentary*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr editor-in-chief, (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 5.

⁸ Ibid.

Va'iz Kashifi (1370-1507) quoted the Prophet's command, "the people must adopt attributes of Allah," suggesting the faithful must actualize the divine qualities in themselves by reciting His names. Otherwise they are no different from the animals who hear those names, and non-believers who understand their meanings. The faithful must transcend the verbal recitation and the literal meaning. There are three stages in this process: (1) intuitive knowledge of God's attributes; (2) honoring His names to establish an intent to develop those attributes in themselves; (3) enhancing the divine qualities in themselves⁹. It recalls Rumi's wisdom when he said:

"From attribute and name what comes to birth? Phantasy; and that phantasy shows the way to union with Him.
 [...] "Thou hast pronounced the name; go, seek the thing named. Know that the moon is on high, not in the water of the stream.
 If thou wouldst pass beyond name and letter, oh, make thyself wholly purged of self¹⁰."

However, only two attributes from among all these 99 names are included in the invocation of *basmalah*. Those are *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*. These two direct us to the subject of this paper: ecotheology.

The most important of God's names and attributes

If the first part of the invocation *basmalah* connects the faithful to God, the second part indicates which God is being addressed. Two attributes are named: *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*. Both divine appellations are derived from the noun *rahmah*, which signifies 'mercy', "compassion", "loving tenderness" and, more comprehensively, "grace" and "loving mercy"¹¹. Their Arabic root is RHM which is the basis for many terms of sympathy, feeling, kindness, forgiveness, blessing, and favor. Moreover, *rahim* in Arabic refers to the womb, taking care, giving birth, nourishing and housing. It is a home, an origin, and a shelter which provides protection, refuge, peace, and sustenance. Relatives are called *zhu rahim* (sharing the same womb) in Arabic. There is a great ethical virtue in Islam called *silah al-rahim* meaning to visit the relevant based on the womb. The Hebrew word *rahm* is also believed to describe the function of the womb. It is derived from the old Middle Eastern Semitic root RHM, which indicates a raying forth (Ra) from a deep, dense interiority (HM¹².)

From the earliest days of Islam, Muslim exegetes have debated what differentiates *al-Rahman* from *al-Rahim*. Ibn Qayyim (1292-1350) believed the term *al-Rahman* highlighted the boundless grace inherent in, and inseparable from, the concept of God's being, while *al-Rahim* expresses the manifestation of that grace in, and its effect upon, His creation – in other words, an adverb¹³. It means God is all-merciful (*al-Rahman*) and all-compassionate (*al-*

⁹ Mollah Hosain Va'ez Kashefi Sabzavari, *Javaher al-Tafsir*, ed. Javad Abbasi (Tehran: Miras-e Maktob, 2000), 393-5; also see Sayed Hassan Akhlaq, Christian-Muslim Cooperation Demonstrating God's Image/Caliph in Ecotheology, in *The Ecumenical Review* (World Council of Churches, 2018, 70.4) 668.

¹⁰ Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalal ud-din Rumi*, trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, (Tehran: Booteh, 2002) 1:3452-57.

¹¹ *The Study Quran*, 5-7; *The Message of THE QURAN*, trans. Muhammad Asad (England: The Book Foundation), 5.

¹² Douglas-Klotz, *The Sufi Book of Life*, 8.

¹³ *The Message of THE QURAN*, 5.

Rahim) from different perspectives; a broader existential or more narrow, active way. The path from one to the other demonstrates the distinction between the two. I will elaborate on one popular method of explaining the difference.

Al-Raman is unconditional mercy befitting the majesty and glory of God. By contrast, *al-Rahim* is a conditional compassion as experienced by humanity. The Semitic root, *Ra*, in *al-Rahman* indicates a raying forth. So it describes the positive, active, giving, and solar side of the creative Loving-Mercy, while the ending *rim* in *al-Rahim* underlines the passive, reactive and receiving side of Loving-Mercy. It indicates that this raying-forth of warmth and creativity is received in an abundance of ways by an abundance of beings. As attributed to the Prophet, the *al-Rahman* expresses the divine love we see in the constant creation and re-creation of the universe. The *al-Rahim* expresses the promise that divine love will respond to each and every individual need in the future¹⁴. Therefore, *al-Rahman* is an initiative, opening, and beginning mood while *al-Rahim* is reciprocal, corresponding and complementary. With regards to the universality of *al-Rahman* and the particularity of *al-Rahim* on one hand, and being respectively initiative or responding, I would prefer to use the Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate translating *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*. Some use the metaphor of lights: *al-Rahman* is like the light of the sun that illuminates the whole sky, and *al-Rahim* is like the particular ray of sunlight that touches a creature¹⁵. To sum up, these two names refer to two aspects of divine mercy (*rahmah*): one essential and universal, the other attributive and particular. The first covers all creation and the second touches those who are faithful (33:43¹⁶.)

There is more to learn by reviewing the Quranic use of these attributes. *Al-Rahman* is an unconditional and inclusive Mercy considered to be more emphatic, embracing, and encompassing than the *al-Rahim*. The Quran draws a parallel between the names “Most Merciful” and “Allah.” Muslims can call Him *al-Rahman* instead of Allah (17:110) because it is most encompassing. The Most Merciful refers to divine Majesty and Sovereignty which is above all and can only be attached to Him (20:5; 25:59). It is a divine name that cannot be applied to anything other than God, either literally or figuratively because it connotes the Loving-Mercy by which God brings forth existence¹⁷. God is identical to *al-Rahman*. It is His nature. That God felt compelled to be merciful is clearly mentioned in 6:54. This quality is the objective of creation: to achieve divine mercy (11:119). All merciful acts are rooted in divine Mercy (30:21). The Most Merciful reaches all creatures: people, animals, all beings universally regardless of the time and space (7:156; 40:7). The *al-Rahman* is all-encompassing and nothing can block its way: faith, race, moral strength, financial situation, gender, education, sexual orientation, physical or mental issues. God reaches everyone and provides them with mercy. According to the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad was ordered by God to: “Say: As for him who remains in error, the Most Merciful God will surely prolong his length of day” (19:75). *Al-Rahman* also is the title of chapter 55 in the Quran. It is mentioned 57 times in the Quran. But its co-rooted word, *al-Rahim*, has a different story.

While the unconditional mercy, the Most Merciful *al-Rahman*, originates from an absolute Love-Mercy and makes no demands of those it blesses, the conditional mercy, the

¹⁴ Douglas-Klotz, 10-11.

¹⁵ *The Study Quran*, 7.

¹⁶ Also see *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

Most Compassionate *al-Rahim*, extends only to the faithful. The *al-Rahim* serves a different purpose. It serves to enhance faith and provides the faithful with a particular attribute, to fill their hearts with God. Instead of the all-embracing Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate is exclusive to the faithful who choose to build this connection. There are reciprocal, mutual concessions. When the faithful prays and makes a promise to God, God does His turn. The Quran states, “It is He who forgives you and His angels pray for you so that He will take you out of darkness into light. God is All-Compassionate to the faithful (33:43).” The *al-Rahim* is mentioned 115 times in the Quran. Although *al-Rahim* is a name and attribute of God, it is not exclusive to God. *Al-Rahim* may apply to creatures, and the adjective *rahim* is in fact used to describe the Prophet in 9:128. Regarding some scholars, in Arabic, from the linguistic point of view, some scholars call the *al-Rahman Sigha al-Mubaligha* (a hyperbolic form) which has the connotation of temporary abundance. *Al-Rahim*, on the other hand, is called *Sifat al-Mushabbaha* (an assimilative/resembling term), which conveys a sense of continuity. Thus the divine attribute the *al-Rahman* is worldly and inclusive while His *al-Rahim* is exclusive but here and hereafter¹⁸.

The 14th century exegete Abd al-Razzaq al-Khashani (d. 1336) explained the ordering of the three divine names in the *basmalah* is an allusion to the levels of Divinity in relation to the created order: God (Allah) refers to the Divine Essence, Principle, or Self; the Compassionate (al-Rahman) refers to the unity of God’s attributes; and the Merciful (al-Rahim) to the unity of God’s acts¹⁹. This explanation connects all these names to our lives. Here, we discuss neither the metaphysical nature of the God called Allah, nor His connection to and cultivation of the faithful by the name *Al-Rahim*. Rather, we are concerned with mother nature, the earth, and the ecosystem. This is the place to acknowledge and practice the name and quality *al-Rahman*.

The *al-Rahman* and ecotheology

Like Christianity, Islam suggests a Creator-Creature model of the relationship between God and the world, including humanity. There are varied interpretations of this relationship in Islam, from very strict theological Lord-Servant, to Neoplatonic emanation, to the Sufi concept of Love. None of these interpretations can ignore that God is the Most Merciful *al-Rahman* because God states in the Quran: “and My mercy embraces all things.” (7:156). Note that this encompasses “all things,” not merely the faithful, or even humans and animals. Muslims are required to repeat at least 10 times a day the prayer, “All Praise be to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds. The Most Merciful and the Most Compassionate.” (1:1-2) Every practicing Muslim memorizes this prayer. It is, indeed, the beginning of the first chapter of the Quran, which follows the *basmalah*. To clarify how divine mercy is linked to and enacted upon the earth, and so requires us to change our attitude toward the earth, there are two significant terms in this core prayer: *al-Rabb* meaning “Sustainer” and *al-amin* meaning “Worlds”. These come together some forty-two times in the Quran. The Arabic word “*rabb*” is used to describe the connection God has with the world, including the earth and environment. God is *rabb*, but what does *rabb* mean? Some English translators translate the Arabic *rabb* into the “Sustainer,” some as the “Lord,” and others as the “Cherisher.” The Quranic term *rabb* embraces a wide range of meanings, including having a

¹⁸ (see Makarem.ir and Vaez Kashefi Sabzavari, *Javaher al-Tafsir*, 377-393.

¹⁹ The Study Quran, 6.

just claim to the possession of anything and, consequently, authority over it; rearing, sustaining and fostering anything from its inception to its final completion. Here are some examples: the head of a family is called *rabb ad-dar* (master of the house) because he has authority over it and is responsible for its maintenance; similarly, his wife is called *rabbat ad-dar* (mistress of the house); the master (lord) is called *rabb* because s/he is the one that puts matters in their proper order and is obeyed; the cultivation process is called *tarbiyyah*; and the trainer and educator is called *murabbi*. All these meanings apply to God according to the Quran since He is the Master without peer, who arranges the affairs of all His creatures and to whom all of creation belongs. Moreover, He is the Trainer and the Caretaker of all things²⁰. The definite article *al* before *rabb* applies this status exclusively to God as the sole fosterer, lord, possessor, sustainer, and caretaker of all creation. People care for the earth as trustees to honor the glory of God. People are God's chosen creatures from among the heavens and earth because they can be held accountable before God (33:72²¹). Another verse of the Quran warns, "betray not your trusts knowingly" (8:27). Therefore, people relate to nature according to the responsibilities of divine care and fostering²².

The second term is *al-alam*, plural of *al-alam* (world), meaning the worlds. God is not merely the sustainer and the lord of the faithful or current generation; He is the lord and sustainer of all humanity, animals, vegetables, mountains, oceans etc. The *alam* in the quranic terminology refers to all existing things other than God. Thus, "the worlds" refers to various levels of cosmic existence and the communities of beings within each level, both actual and potential. God is the only lord of all that can be seen or imagined and of all that cannot be seen or imagined by humanity²³. Additionally, several times the Quran goes further claiming that all existing things offer divine praise (17:44; 24:41; 59:1&24; 61:1; 62:1; 64:1). Rumi (1207-1273) the great Sufi translated this vision into verse, saying,

"(They all say), 'We have hearing and sight and are happy, (although) with you, the uninitiated, we are mute.'

Forasmuch as ye are going towards (are inclined to) inanimateness (worldliness), how shall ye become familiar with the spiritual life of inanimate beings?

Go (forth) from inanimateness into the world of spirits, hearken to the loud noise of the particles of the world.

The glorification of God by inanimate beings will become evident to thee; the doubts suggested by (false) interpretations will not carry thee away (from the truth).

Since thy soul hath not the lamps (the lights necessary) for seeing, thou hast made interpretations²⁴."

Thus, harming the environment and the earth violates divine glory and assaults His hymnal choir, mother nature. A follower who is supposed to worship God and imitate His attributes cannot debase the glory of the earth. The Quran stresses the *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* attributes of God as a reminder of the core qualities of the Lord/Sustainer.

²⁰ *The Message of THE QURAN*, 5; *The Study Quran*, 6.

²¹ Also see, *The Study Quran*, 1040.

²² See Akhlaq, Christian-Muslim Cooperation Demonstrating God's Image/Caliph in Ecotheology.

²³ *The Study Quran*, 6.

²⁴ Rumi, 3: 1018-1022.

The *al-Rahman* encompasses all aspects of nature. Nature is a divine creation, which implies two things: first, there is not a gap between God and nature. The Quran states, “To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God” (2:115); “He is the First, and the Last, and the Outward, and the Inward; and He is Knower of all things” (57:3). God is not distant. Rather, He is everywhere with and within each part of nature. When God mentions, “My Mercy encompasses all things” it implies that treating any single portion of nature without mercifulness violates divinity. Aside from dishonoring God, violating nature brings consequences, because our treatment of anything, including nature, good or evil, will return to us (17:7; 41:46; 45:15). That is an inviolable law (33:62; 48:23). Second, nature is a divine call and sign. The Quran calls all parts of nature the *ayah*, meaning the sign. There are 750 references to natural phenomena in the Quran. As many as 328 times they are called the signs of God. Nature is parallel to the Quran; both are called *kitab* (book/scripture). Nature is the created book and the Quran is a written one. As all parts of nature are divine signs, all verses of the Quran are also named *ayah*²⁵. The Torah and Gospel are called books too, as Jews and Christians are people of the book. Signs belong to their makers. Also, the value and price of a sign reflects the value and the price of the subject. One would not use a cheap sign for a valued product. Nature is not cheap. It is a divine sign. Natural phenomena reflect divine mercy. They deserve honor and respect. They are sources of inspiration not only for artwork, but life, generosity, creativity, diversity, self-development, and re-birth. They are the signs of *rahmah*.

Respecting nature means not exploiting it. There are multiple verses in the Quran implying that God has made all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth “subservient unto humanity” but humans should be grateful or thankful or wise, and glorify God (14:32&33; 16:12&14&81; 22:36&37&65; 31:20; 45:12&13). If the faithful is not finding harmony between benefiting from the earth and honoring it, s/he is a hypocrite. The Quran states, “Hypocrite runs about in the land to create chaos and lawlessness in it, and to destroy the tillage and the stock” (2:25); meaning they do not see the *al-Rahman* in nature, they only see themselves. In other words, invoking the name of God to begin work and new endeavors is not enough to be a faithful Muslim. The true recitation of the *basmalah* requires changing one’s perspective, looking after and seeing divine signs, presence, and mercy everywhere. It also requires putting into practice the divine name’s meaning, mercifulness, in nature.

According to the Quran, the *al-Rahman* is not merely the object of worship. It offers welcome relief from psychological, social and political pressure. The Quran tells stories of the *al-Rahman* providing ease to the faithful (19:18), relieving sufferings (11:58; 7:72), and fighting against oppression (10:86;11:66). If the quality of the *al-Rahman* teaches these virtues with regards to psychological and social issues, there is, to be sure, a potent lesson about eco-friendly theology from to be taken from the concept of *al-Rahman*. First, the faithful must avoid transgressing against the earth, the environment and ecosystem. Then, s/he has to contribute to the faith by spreading the word *rahmah*. By acknowledging the *al-Rahman*, a devotee gets the chance to meet the *al-Rahim*. According to the Quran and its repeating *basmalah*, humanity has the power to move from the Most Merciful to the Most Compassionate. If the faithful cannot enjoy the *al-Rahman* which is universal, inclusive, temporary, and everywhere, they cannot enjoy the *al-Rahim* which is particular, exclusive, permanent and specific. There is no way to attain the *al-Rahim* while ignoring the *al-Rahman*.

²⁵ Akhlaq, Christian-Muslim Cooperation Demonstrating God’s Image/Caliph in Ecotheology, 669.

Discounting the dignity and glory of the earth puts the faithful farther from God. The worlds, here and hereafter, are connected. Jumping over the gap is impossible. Embracing nature as a blessing and *rahma* is a way of embracing divinity. Muslims must look for the best here and hereafter. God teaches the faithful to pray in this way: “Our Lord, give us good in this world and good in the Hereafter.” (2:201) Christians ask for similar blessings. Asking for daily bread is understandable only while honoring the source of bread: mother nature, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us, and do not subject us to the final test” (Luke, 11:2-5).

Luther’s The Large Catechism

From the first centuries after Christ’s life, Christians explained and elaborated the biblical faith in order to identify the church’s public message through statements of belief, purpose, and mission. It is said that the Greek word *katecho*, “to sound again or from above,” was used by Paul to describe Christian instructions. Augustine first used the noun *catechismus* to denote basic Christian mandates. In the Middle Ages the term was used more narrowly to describe the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. Martin Luther used catechism in the same way throughout his life²⁶. Luther left two catechisms: the Small and the Large Catechism, both derived from his sermons. The Small Catechism first appeared in the form of Luther’s *Personal Prayer Book* in 1522. Luther used it as a critical reference. He changed it into the Small Catechism in late 1528 or early 1529, and made his final revision in 1531²⁷. The Large Catechism was first titled the *German Catechism*. It was published in 1529 as a training text for clergy. Luther also developed the Large Catechism to suggest a compromise, addressing contemporary controversy over whether true repentance arose from fear of punishment or from love of God. It passed through several editions, the last one in 1538. Both catechisms are used to impart the fundamental concepts of Christianity to congregations. The difference is not just the length, but also the register: The Large Catechism is more polemical and targets the clergy as a manual for pastors and teachers. The Small Catechism, conversely, was written for use in households of common people and is free of polemics²⁸.

Here, I use the version of the Large Catechism included in the Book of Concord based mainly on Luther’s words. Luther himself stressed the significance of the book. He encouraged the faithful to read one or two pages regularly, saying “Let all Christians drill themselves in the catechism daily” (Concord, LC, 383:19 also see, 380:3²⁹). If the Large Catechism is addressed to the clergy, it is not because of its sophisticated content, but because every single Christian must know and live it. Like Muslims teaching children how to recite and memorize the *basmalah*, Luther refers to the Greek meaning of Catechism, namely

²⁶ *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Roberto Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand ... (et al.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 345.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 345-6.

²⁸ *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959) 337-8.

²⁹ All the following in-text citations refer to *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Roberto Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand ... (et al.) (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

instruction for children, saying Christians must teach catechism to their children (LC, 383:2) and their parents to develop a deeper understanding of it (LC, 383:6). Beyond learning and repeating the Large Catechism, the faithful must transcend beyond “verbatim” interpretations (LC, 386:26) and put it into practice.

The Large Catechism consists of five parts: the Ten Commandments, the Creed; the Lord’s Prayer; Concerning Baptism; the Sacrament of the Altar. I focus on the first part, the Ten Commandments which is the largest. The spirit and the true message of the Large Catechism is detailed in the Ten Commandments. Luther wrote in the Creed: “If we were able by our own strength to keep the Ten Commandments as they ought to be kept, we would need nothing else, neither the Creed nor the Lord’s Prayer” (LC, 431:3)

This resonates with the Muslim idea of the *basmalah* as the spirit of all the religion and revelations. In Luther’s view, the First Commandment exemplifies the whole Psalter (LC, 382:18) the Ten Commandments illustrates the entire Scriptures: “This much is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters (LC, 382: 17 also see LC, 385:19)

“The Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God.” (LC, 428:311)

The Ten Commandments portion of the text suggests more wisdom shared with Islamic faith, and invites interreligious studies to introduce eco-friendly theology. It also deals with the peripheral aspects of faith, referring to dealings with nature and worldly affairs, while the rest of the Large Catechism discusses personal faith and inner spirituality. The Ten Commandments and the *basmalah* are described as practice, but their true substances are beyond human capacity. Luther offers a richly detailed account of the Ten Commandments, then says, “they are beyond human power to fulfill,” and “The one who does fulfill them is a heavenly, angelic, person, far above all holiness on earth” (LC, 429:318) like a true Muslim whose mercy mission in life is treating the world with the most compassion. I examine Luther’s text from this starting point, pondering his description of each of those Ten Commandments separately to shed light on eco-friendly theology.

The First Commandment:

In his account of the First Commandment, “You are to have no other gods,” Luther touches the heart of being faithful. If a true Christian must avoid idolatry, s/he needs to understand what idolatry is. The greatest and the most dominant idolatry that afflicts all religious orders consists of two elements: first, egocentric faith in one’s own works. It is not corrupting because we are doing nothing, but because we should not fail to acknowledge the gifts we have been given. In Luther’s words, it means being “unwilling to receive anything as a gift of God” (LC, 389: 22). Second, associated with the first concept, means considering nature as self-sufficient and purposeless. Believing divinity is limited to God means humanity is dependent and needy, while God is divine and rich. Nature is God’s gift, meaning it is not self-sufficient either. Nature is a blessing given by God. It is not a means or tool of humanity to exploit and satisfy his greed. It is the tool and means of God to spread His blessing: “Creatures are only hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings” (LC, 389:26). Self-awareness is another side of God-awareness, thus demanding a different stance toward nature. A utilitarian and opportunist perspective thus transforms into a welcoming and sharing approach toward mother nature.

Luther goes on to explain the latter part of the First Commandment, which describes a jealous God punishing his haters to the third and fourth generation, and showing mercy to his worshippers for many thousands of generations. Two attributes of God are mentioned: anger and mercy. Later on, in his explanation of the Creed, Luther explains the third attribute of God which is love. Let us elaborate the issue by dividing it into three categories.

God does not tolerate idolatry, when people's egocentrism causes them to violate nature and suffer. It leads to huge self-destruction and human-made misery. From a religious perspective it is the anger and punishment of God, though non-religious people might prefer to call it nature's revenge. This reaction lasts three or four generations "until they are utterly exterminated. Therefore, He wants to be feared and not despised" (LC, 390:34). The second category is divine universal mercifulness. It touches people who acknowledge the unity of God and reject idolism. They are not selfish or self-centered because "anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God" (LC, 386:3). They love Him beyond all and keep his commandments. In contrast to those wrathful threats, believers receive sheer goodness and blessings, not only for themselves but also many thousands of generations (LC, 391:31-39 and see 429:322).

However, the oneness of God is not merely a Christian concept. It is a question of the laws of nature and civic righteousness. In *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), Luther considers laws such as honoring parents, not killing, not committing adultery and serving God as part of the natural law³⁰. This universal concept of divine mercy refers to God as creator and sustainer who is merciful out of pure love and goodness, without our merit (LC, 433:17). While this God of the First Commandments refers to the single entity of the Godhead, Luther sees the temporal significance (LC, 434:26). He continues, "The Ten Commandments, moreover, are written in the hearts of all people, but no human wisdom is able to comprehend the Creed; it must be taught by the Holy Spirit alone. Therefore, the Ten Commandments do not succeed in making us Christians" (LC, 440:68).

To make this claim consistent with what he has said about the significance of the Ten Commandments, we have to understand it through a Christian perspective. This perspective leads to the third category, which is God's special love, or, in Luther's words, his "pure grace" (LC, 440:68) to explore how "God gives himself completely to us" (ibid); "the Father has given to us Himself with all creation" (LC, 433:24); "It is so rich and broad that we can never learn it fully" (LC, 435:33).

To sum up, people who approach God through Jesus experience His particular mercy. All three categories are applicable to the three divine names mentioned in the *basmalah*. Allah is *al-Muntaqim*, "taker of retribution" and "avenger." He uses the force needed to sweep and clean those who defy Him strongly and irresistibly (Douglas-Klotz, 224). The second category is compatible with the Most Merciful (*al-Rahman*) and the third with the Most Compassionate (*al-Rahim*). The Quranic verse on the universal and inclusive mercy of God begins by mentioning divine punishment briefly, and concludes saying He passes His Mercy to people who are observing the signs of God. We learned that nature is one of the signs of God. This is laid out in the verse:

³⁰ *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 397, footnote 68, 440, footnote 163.

“I cause My Punishment to smite whomsoever I will, though My Mercy encompasses all things. I shall prescribe it for those who are reverent, and give alms, and those who believe in Our signs” (Quran, 7:156)

The Second Commandment

Luther explains that the Second Commandment, “You are not to take the name of God in vain,” is different from the First Commandment because the first instructs the heart and guides inward experiences, while the Second leads our outward actions and directs the lips and tongue into a right relationship with God (LC, 392:50). It encourages the faithful to “put up a good front and justify yourself with his name” (LC, 393:54). This means they must not appear as violators and aggressors, including toward nature or the earth, since that disrespects God’s name. Luther emphasizes educating and uplifting children to honor God’s name, and to keep it constantly upon their lips as a “habit” against the devil (LC, 395:71 and also see LC, 393:73). Luther knows that daily life operates on habits; good or bad habits are much more effective than government, rods, and clubs. Indeed, developing the habit of reciting God’s name and looking for his blessings in all experiences and circumstances is more pious than participating in asceticism and life in a monastery (LC, 396:74).

However, God’s name can be misused “not only by how we speak but also by the way we act and live” (LC, 396:77). Greedy and rapacious ways of dealing with mother nature and the ecosystem that harm all creation, including humanity, abuses the divine name, regardless of verbal recitations. According to Luther, the divine name must be used to encourage the development of people “who may give joy and pleasure to an entire community” (LC, 396:76).

The Third Commandment

Regarding the Third Commandment “You are to hallow the day of rest” Luther imparts three lessons. First, not only work, but also rest is hallowed. Contrary to exploitative capitalism which equates humanity with working machines, Luther emphasizes “both human beings and animals might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor” (LC, 397:81). Rest is an enlivening and reflective time to think of God, of self, of the meaning of life, and purpose.

Second, we must make our own contribution to the holiness of life and nature. “We should sanctify the holy day or day of rest” (ibid), Luther explains. “The day itself does not need to be made holy, for it was created holy. But God wants it to be holy for you. So, it becomes holy or unholy on your account” (LC, 398:87). This insight distinguishes what is holy by nature from what is holy for us. The earth is holy by itself since it is God’s creation and sign, but the faithful need to make it holy for humanity and animals. How? By becoming holy. How? By changing our view and perspective from that of a working machine, to that of a contributor to God’s Word. God’s Word makes us all saints (LC, 399:92). God tells us to rest and not to lose ourselves in constant work; instead we should attend worship services and ponder God’s Word. This makes “everyday such a holy day,” a day of rest and only essential work. Luther calls on us to think of “holy words, holy works, and holy living” (LC, 398:87).

Third, holiness comes not from the “force of habits” but from “knowledge” of (LC, 399:96) and “serious concern” (LC, 399:97) for the divine word. Habits set us on the path to face holiness, but to become holy requires us to seriously ponder, which “awakens new understanding, pleasure, and devotion” (LC, 400:101). By switching the focus from external

work, or even religious singing and prayers – “so-called spiritual walks of God (LC, 399:93)” – to the Word, Luther encourages the faithful to welcome new understandings of faith in terms of God’s creation, mother earth and its varied inhabitants.

The Fourth to the Tenth Commandment

In his discussion of the Fourth Commandment, “You are to honor your father and mother,” Luther touches upon the education and upbringing of our children. God asks the faithful to love their neighbors, but also to honor their parents. According to Luther, the core value is teaching them these virtues as “God’s command or as a holy, divine word and teaching” (LC, 401: 112). Recalling the First Commandment, children must learn that the holiness comes from God, not because we see something as or make it holy. That is idolatry: that children “simply gaped in astonishment at all the things we devised without ever asking God’s approval” (LC, 402:114). Even prayers, fasting, and almsgiving provide only smug satisfaction if the command of God is not considered. They are just “False holiness” (LC, 403:120&126). Honoring one’s parents is key to showing them that the true authority is God, not people.

Luther points toward the lovely promise attached to this Commandment: “that you may have long life in the land where you dwell”. It means “good days, happiness, and prosperity” are considered a reward, while the “penalty” for the disobedient is that “they will die earlier and will not be happy in life.” Therefore, both quality and quantity of life matter. In the Scriptures, long life is associated with health, family, sustenance, good government, etc. (LC, 404:131-4). If quality and quantity of life in this world are divine rewards, it means that God honors the earth and values living on it. God indeed sees it as sufficiently important to motivate the faithful to follow His commandments.

Second, Luther explains that honoring parents as commanded by the divine leads to a “joyful conscience.” This means holding up daily responsibilities associated with God’s commands. It is the opposite of a “bad conscience,” which includes performing religious rituals and living in monasteries while being self-centered (LC, 406:144-148). Further, the category of “fatherhood” as a walk of life includes civil rulers, as through them “God gives us food, house, and home, protection and security, and he preserves us through them” (LC, 407:150). This discussion leads Luther to elaborate four categories of fathers in this Commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, fathers of the nation, and spiritual fathers. Through them, God exercises His authority (LC, 408:158). This viewpoint, applied to developments in civil society and the scientific community, implies that if civil authorities warn us about nature and the earth, their scientific warnings have the same importance as religious issues. Luther concludes that rearing our children to be “capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms” is most desirable “to serve God and the world” (LC, 410:172). Luther’s clear emphasis on bringing up children to “be credit to the nation and its people” and “be useful and godly” drives home the importance of teaching them to honor the earth, worldly life, and nature in the name of God.

Luther develops a valuable examination of the fifth Commandment, “You are not to kill.” Avoiding doing harm also implies that if “we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbor and to prevent, protect, and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury, but fail to do so” indeed “you have killed him” (LC, 412:189). Luther expands the idea that we contribute to killing someone by “withhold[ing] your love from them” (LC, 412:190). Good deeds must particularly address enemies, because doing good for friends is “an ordinary

virtue of pagans” (LC, 412:194). There is a powerful warning that the faithful cannot ignore the quality of life of humanity and future generations when thinking about nature and the ecosystem. Destroying nature and corrupting the environment contributes to killing future people, regardless of their faith.

In Luther’s account of the sixth Commandment, “You are not to commit adultery” two comments relate our subject. He believed adultery is explicitly mentioned here because the commandment addresses the Jewish people of the era. It targets common Jewish customs and traditions of the age (LC, 413:200-201). Luther teaches us to seek a universal idea beyond that particular people and time. The true spirit of this commandment is avoiding any form of unchastity and building a good community. There is a clear emphasis on marriage as a holy institution, serving the world, and aiding one’s neighbors “to retain their honor.” Failing this is a contribution to adultery (LC, 414:203-205). Accordingly, one can expand honoring the neighbor’s family to honor the neighbor’s rights, and unchastity to violating mother earth. We are now in a global village in which destroying any corner harms the farthest corner. If the social features of the Jewish community of that time is considered, the faithful must consider their social concerns and new civil life to contribute to environmental awareness in order to avoid being “just as guilty as the culprit who commits the act” (LC, 414:202).

As explained by Luther, the Seventh Commandment “You are not to steal” warns against those who would “steal under the cloak of legality” (LC, 417:229). The “free public market” allows greedy individuals and companies to pursue their desires with legal permission. As we think of policies and strategies that violate the environment and take rapacious attitudes toward nature, let us mind Luther’s conclusion: “if we look at the whole world in all its situations, it is nothing but a big, wide stable full of great thieves” (LC, 417:228). Stealing includes not only damaging, withholding, or interfering with people’s possessions and property but also consenting to and permitting such a thing to be done to our neighbors or the poor “in any way imaginable” (LC, 419:250).

Accordingly, the eighth commandment, “You are not to bear false witness against your neighbor,” teaches us that “all people should help their neighbors maintain their legal rights” (LC, 421:260). The environmental rights of the next generations matter. Luther attempts to expand the Ninth and the Tenth Commandments, “You are not to covet your neighbor’s house” and “You are not to covet his wife, manservant, maidservant, cattle, or anything that is his,” beyond the context of the Jewish community of the era and make it applicable to us and our time (LC, 425:293). He believes the final commandment in particular addresses many broad concepts of our times, such as the concept of putting one’s own interests first appearing in lawsuits by people who appear honest and virtuous (LC, 426:300-304). The true substance of the commandment prohibits depriving “your neighbors of anything that is theirs, so that they suffer loss while you satisfy your greed, even though before the world you can retain the property with honor” (LC, 927:307). It encompasses both encroaching on the environments of underdeveloped regions, and the rights of future generations.

Conclusion

Examining the Islamic concept of the *basmalah* and Luther’s explanation of the Ten Commandments in The Large Catechism introduces a new entry point for study and contemplation that develops inter-religious dialogue and promotes ecotheology. The

basmalah and the Ten Commandments are core to Islamic and Christian holy texts respectively. They reveal God's will and guidance. They underline the fact that both religions shared a belief in the inclusive Mercy of God, and they emphasize the exclusive love of God. The established theologies of both religions elaborate on the uniqueness of their path for many reasons, including the evangelical nature of Christianity and the universalist dream of Islam. However, the proverbial shrinking of the current world with the rise of informatics technology, democratic systems, international travel and immigration require that religions focus on common humanity and share concerns, demands and values. Christianity and Islam then might promote their particular values and visions on a broad basis and established platform. Without establishing that common ground, dialogue and cooperation are not possible.

The Islamic concept of the *basmalah* and Luther's commentary on the Ten Commandments provide such common ground. There is a common, urgent message; God, not our ideas/beliefs on God, is at the core of faith, and His Mercy is inclusive, reaching out to both humanity and nature. If I am not breathing, I certainly cannot speak. If I'm not embracing the universal mercy of God, I am certainly not embracing his special love. If I am not a good human, I cannot be a good Muslim or Christian. Christianity and Islam developed much theology to prove they are unique and exclusive. In the era of democratic systems and an environmental crisis, no one is immune and everyone is responsible. More than ever, individuals need to return to their common roots. Faith is needed to cure the ill of egoism and warn people about future generations, their neighborhoods, and their global community. New voices of faith must concentrate on the inclusive mercy of God and spread the word that the world is His sign/gift. We are merely trustees and must acknowledge our limits. The evolutionary development in technology teaches us about our both strengths and weaknesses.

Luther believed that the Ten Commandments echoed universal values, but at the same time they link us to the core of Christianity. The Islamic concept of *al-Rahman* illustrates the capacious mercy of God, and at the same time considers nature as a sign and Scripture of God. It means Christian and Muslim theologians have new directions to pursue and new challenges to meet.

Among those challenges, new theologies must ponder that both humanity and the ecosystem are at the mercy of God, and how they can act as independent entities, e.g. how humanity as the image of God in Christianity and the representative of God in Islam should interact with nature and mother earth in the boundaries of their limited authorities, and how God's mercy helps us negotiate between an independent and responsible mind while simultaneously honoring the earth and humanity. The modern theological study of free will has to address the issue of the ecosystem and divine universal mercy. Contemporary theology cannot neglect to strike a healthy balance of work in the secular world and divine command to rest and attend the worship service and serve one's neighbors. A Muslim theologian must find ways to convince the faithful to approach nature and the ecosystem in keeping with reciting the divine name. This requires practicing His Care and Mercy and Compassion. The same is true with Christians, who must expand the love of their neighbors to include their right to a healthy environment. Also, they must show how the holiness of nature offers new subjects of meditation for the faithful. If the earth is a gift or sign from God, and we are granted them so we may enjoy our worldly life, what does it imply about the responsibility towards that received gift? Christian love in light of the Ten Commandments,

and Islamic Sharia in light of the *basmalah* appeal to new generations because both are applicable to nature and the ecosystem. It is the duty of theologians to spread the Word with the requirement of the time and the target audiences. Finally, it is urgent that theologians encourage the faithful to revisit their approach mother earth in the light of divine mercy on two levels: in general, that nature is the sign/gift of God and so must be honored; in particular, the faithful must build a specific relationship with God through nature. Through love, the Earth opens its divine aspect to the faithful, while hate forecloses our understanding.