Transcendence in the Small Gestures of Life

Attention and Care for Nature and Humans in Religious Traditions

Fondazione Giorgio Cini

Sunrise over Lake Laanemaa at Orkjärve Nature Reserve, Estonia [Public domain, Wikimedia Commons]

Abstracts

2 — 3 October 2025

The conference is organized jointly by the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities (Fondazione Giorgio Cini), the Muslim Worlds Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), and the Centro di Ricerche Etnografiche e Antropologia applicata "Francesca Cappelletto" (CREAa) of the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona.

Abstracts

"Pilgrimage as Ecological Awakening: Islamic Ethics of Care during and after the Hajj," Kholoud Al-Ajarma (University of Edinburgh)

This paper examines how Muslim pilgrims cultivate practices of attentiveness, care, and environmental stewardship during the Hajj, and how these ethical qualities extend into their post-pilgrimage lives. Within the ritual and ethical framework of Hajj, Islamic teachings emphasize acts of care for fellow pilgrims, animals, and the environment—ranging from prohibitions against harming living beings and plants to ritual practices that reinforce humility, restraint, and compassion. These guidelines, often enacted through seemingly minor gestures such as stepping carefully to avoid harming insects or refraining from cutting plants, foster profound states of attentiveness to the interconnectedness of all creation. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research with Moroccan and Palestinian pilgrims as well as my book, *Mecca in Morocco: Articulations of Muslim Pilgrimage in Moroccan Everyday Life*, this study aims to highlight how the intense sensory and spiritual experiences of the Hajj influence pilgrims' ethical engagements and interactions with the natural and social worlds after they return. Pilgrims may express a renewed sense of ethical responsibility— a different understanding and awareness of human entanglement with the environment and sensitivity to acts of care and harm – through personal narratives, sensory recollections, and embodied practices. Thus, the Hajj becomes a profound training in Islamic environmental ethics as well as a fulfilment of religious obligation. By foregrounding the lived, often understated transformations engendered by pilgrimage, this paper reflects on how religious traditions cultivate spiritual growth and ecologically awareness. In situating these practices within broader debates on religion, Islamic ecology, and the anthropology of everyday life, the paper offers insight into how ordinary, embodied gestures of care and ecological responsibility are sought and sustained after the Hajj. It further argues that such forms of religiously inflected ecological consciousness are essential resources in addressing contemporary environmental degradation, suggesting that even small, ritualised acts of kindness can inspire more sustainable ways of living outside of ritual spaces.

"The Afterlives of Catastrophe: The Everyday Rhythms of the Sacred in Post-Earthquake Antakya," Mahiye Seçil Dağtaş (University of Waterloo / Balsillie School of International Affairs)

What kinds of spiritual, ecological, and social attention emerge after catastrophe—when institutions falter, landscapes fracture, and the future becomes uncertain? In the wake of the 2023 earthquakes that devastated the multireligious city of Antakya in southern Turkey, this paper explores how small gestures of care—tending to plants, feeding stray animals, or lighting candles at ruined shrines—take on layered significance. Through ethnographic attention to these practices, I show how they reflect a quiet transcendence grounded in everyday relations between humans, nonhumans, and the divine.

More specifically, I consider how more-than-human temporalities are invoked in the figures of the Antiochian saint Habib-i Neccar, the mystical guide Hızır, and local Arab-Orthodox and Armenian tales of St. George, each offering alternative yet overlapping cosmologies of time, nature, and fate. The everyday presence of these figures infuses daily life with sacred potential and links care for the more-than-human world to longer rhythms of spiritual intercession and renewal. Far from being confined to story or symbol, these cosmologies emerge through the natural world itself (e.g., where olive trees, lilacs, and spring water come to embody spiritual endurance and seasonal return). Drawing on interviews, fieldnotes, and local idioms that liken hope to planting, the paper examines how nature figures both materially and metaphorically in religious imaginaries across Muslim and Christian communities. By attuning to these entanglements of the sacred and the natural, I argue that the aftermath of disaster opens not only a space of mourning but also of ethical improvisation and spiritual resilience. These forms of attention illuminate how people navigate loss by dwelling within it, keeping time with the seasons, the soil, and the sacred, even when the future remains radically unknowable.

"Embodied Rituals and Transcendence in Women's Bathhouses," Roshan Iqbal (Agnes Scott College)

Women's public baths in Morocco, Turkey, and Japan—filled with soap, scrubbing, conversation, and laughter—serve as a site where glimpses of transcendence emerge through the collective act of routine bathing. This auto-ethnographic paper argues that public baths, through shared presence and care grounded in intergenerational bonds, offer moments of transcendence that provide solace—giving us strength and reshaping our engagement with our bodies, each other, and the world. It is organized in five sections, exploring how rituals of corporeal self-care in homosocial spaces—rooted in intergenerational connection and memory—subtly cultivate conditions for moments of transcendence. It begins by considering how, in the public bath, complete undress is neither vulgar nor vulnerable; instead, shedding sartorial coverings evokes a memory of a time before time—a return to birth, and sometimes the primordial, when we lacked clothing and the boundaries of the body itself, becoming one with something greater than ourselves. The second section examines water—particularly in the Japanese context— which cleanses the body and symbolically recalls embryonic fluid, evoking a sense of wholeness and safety that underpins transcendence. The third section explores how multiple generations in the public bath, with bodies of all forms, normalize bodily diversity and resist unattainable beauty ideals that fragment women's relationships with their bodies, creating space for deeper metaphysical connection. Next, the paper explores how age hierarchies emerge and dissolve in the bathhouse, as knowledge is passed through physical care, storytelling, and shared routines—forming a living archive that nurtures transcendence. Finally, it reflects on how scrubbing another's body carries latent spiritual meaning, echoing the pre-verbal care once offered by most mothers—unconditional, embodied love that gestures toward the timeless, all-encompassing divine. Taken together, the practices described in this paper reveal the bath as a quiet portal to the sacred, where care, memory, and touch momentarily dissolve the self into something greater.

"Circumambulating Exile: Beauty, Care and Adornment in Tibetan Refugee Daily Practices of Kora," Khando Langri (Stanford University)

In response to her provocation "What is beauty made of?" Christina Sharpe insists: "Attentiveness whenever possible to a kind of aesthetic that escaped violence whenever possible" (Sharpe 2019). In this paper, I engage with beauty within the context of the kora route: a pilgrimage path that encircles the Dalai Lama's Temple. Located in Dharamshala, India, the exiled capital of Tibetans, the kora path stretches 1.6 km and takes around 28 minutes to complete. Along the winding route are various structures – prayer wheels, prayer flags, cairns of sacred carved stones, a retirement home, the Dalai Lama archives, a memorial wall adorned with portraits of self-immolators, statues of martyrs. The kora path is site for everyday movement, a place in which Tibetans of all ages often begin their day. Kora involves revolutions around sacred structures both natural and man-made; movements that accumulate good merit which carries over into the next life (Dhompa 2013, 39). Integral to kora is a movement of reciprocal transformation: of both landscape and self. I venture that in engaging with the everyday movements and structures along the kora path, one gains insight into the attentiveness with which Tibetan refugees worked to impress themselves into exile landscapes in an effort to make them not only habitable but beautiful. I venture that while kora has been understood to be not only an act of pilgrimage and a meditative practice, it can further be conceived of as a form of daily care for homeland lost, a cultivation of a beauty that mirrors what Saidiya Hartman describes as "a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical act of subsistence [...] a will to adorn" (Hartman 2019). An engagement with kora moves us to consider how displaced Indigenous peoples continue to care for sacred landscapes, refiguring dispossessed places into landscapes of cosmological significance that leap across borders.

Works Cited:
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"Pilgrimage in stillness" Maria Louw (Aarhus University)

When our movement is restricted to very small spaces, and in particular when in solitude, something happens to our perception of space itself. Surfaces become porous. Such experiences

may be frightening and destructive of personhood, as studies of solitary confinement have demonstrated, but they may also open for new connections. Religious practitioners of different traditions have thus often isolated themselves from other human beings to cultivate openness to otherwise spectral dimensions of the world. In my paper, I will not focus on practitioners who deliberately seek out solitude, but on people who are involuntarily thrown in it. My paper takes an ethnographic point of departure in a project that focused on older Kyrgyz Muslims who live their old age in the absence of their younger relatives, and whose movement, due to illness or disability, was often restricted to their homes and immediate surroundings. Thinking with the Islamic concept of *al-qhayb* (or in Kyrgyz; the *qayip duino*, or hidden world) I will discuss how, also in such mundane spaces, my interlocutors experienced moving in and out of 'worlds' with transcendent qualities, as the visible shifted, and as the past and the possible surfaced in the present. While such experiences sometimes provoked fears and anxiety among my interlocutors, interestingly, they were also sometimes accompanied by a sense of seeing things more clearly, of gaining new insights into the workings of the world, or discovering a new, less tethered, sense of self.

"Women's Sense of their Hak, Divine Justice, and Economies of Divorce in Istanbul," Burcu Kalpaklıoğlu (University of Amsterdam)

Hak (haqq, ق ح, right) has been playing a pivotal role for Muslims in structuring relationships among individuals, God, and the material world across a wide geography, from Turkey to Arabic-speaking countries, the Balkans, Iran, Pakistan and India. Referring to right, justice, law, truth, reality, share, dues and remuneration, connotations of this polysemic notion cut across different realms, from the divine to everyday life, being used in diverse registers in people's intimate lives, social interactions, and legal and political struggles. Building on life story interviews with Muslim women—divorced and living in Istanbul—this presentation traces women's evocations of hak in their narratives about financial arrangements during divorce processes, and examines the powerful role of women's intimate relationship with God in shaping their understanding of *hak*.

I suggest that my interlocutors' sense of their *hak* and justice are relationally and affectively configured not only through normative orders, legal entitlements, and the idea of sound moral conduct, but also through their imaginary of divine justice, which they understand to be meted out by God, whether in this world or in the afterlife. Reconstructing their story through the notion of *hak* and divine justice, my interlocutors endeavored to give meaning to the injustices they had faced, endure the present and turn their face to the future without entirely leaving the past behind. I argue that endurance here does not imply a conservative sense of sticking with the present in a way that passively accepts one's condition. Instead, it denotes a particular form of labour or form of agency by which women maintain their lives, and adjust to unexpected situations, navigating gendered relationships and the precarity of their conditions. By putting the scholarship on rights in conversation with the recent discussions in anthropology of Islam that has drawn attention to Muslims' intimate relationship with God, this article shifts the focus of discussions about rights away from the human-centred realm, the state, law, and social movements to the affective worlds as well as moral and religious vocabularies.

"Historicising The Religion of the Inarticulate: The Spirituality of Labour in Socialist Uzbekistan," Paolo Sartori (Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna)

Ranging from ingenious readings of Muslim atheistic literature to explorations of Islamic ecomythology, an emerging body of scholarship is now aggregating a galaxy of stories that shed light on the many meanings of being Muslim in a Soviet environment in the Cold-War era (see contributions to the SICE blog). These recent studies have furthermore shown that an interpretive engagement with 20 th -century Islam should and indeed can expand beyond the examination of global modernist trends and processes of forced secularizations and their attendant vocabularies. In fact, one could make a further interpretive move and suggest that Muslimness could be historicised also by looking at the multiple intersections between apophatic theology and the religion of the inarticulate, which itself ranges from the recluse's silence to the wordless (but conscious) faith of the uneducated to the social role of the village idiot and beyond; the reality that "religion" can encompass, and speak to, the inarticulate is in itself noteworthy (and not merely as a corrective, when we demand that "religious" people formulate and articulate their beliefs or even sentiments). While anthropologists have recently taken stock of the silent features of spirituality in post-Soviet environments (theme issue of *HAU* 14/1, 2024), historians of religion in the USSR haven't so far found a way to engage with or conceptualize the religion of the inarticulate. In

this paper, I set out to address this desideratum by examining manifestations of religiosity in Uzbekistan after WWII as recorded in unpublished Soviet ethnography, mainly in the region of Khorezm. I contend that a socially significant, yet overlooked dimension of Muslimness in Socialist Uzbekistan was represented by the spiritual embodiments of agricultural labour.

"Clapping Toward Clarity: How Nuns Use Tibetan Buddhist Debate as a Practice of Care," Paige Scanlon (Harvard Divinity School)

A sharp clap of the hands cracks through the courtyard. A Buddhist nun stands over her seated opponent with a smile that is both playful and pointed. Around them, dozens of pairs engage in similar rhythms—questions fly, laughter erupts, arguments rise and fall. This is not combative sparring wrought with animosity, but a kinetic choreography of inquiry: it is the traditional form of Tibetan Buddhist debate as practiced by the nuns of Jamyang Choling Institute (JCI) in Dharamsala, India.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2024, this paper explores Tibetan Buddhist debate as a form of care—for the mind, community, and world. While debate has often been characterized as a cerebral and logical discipline—and has been almost exclusively studied among monks—I argue that at JCI, debate becomes a distinctly embodied and relational pedagogy. Drawing on bell hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy, I frame the debate curriculum as a liberatory practice that integrates critical inquiry with ethical commitment and self-transformation. Through detailed accounts of paired, group, and exam debates, I show how debate functions not only as intellectual training, but also as a meditative and affective discipline. In conversation with Buddhist scholar Hsiao-Lan Hu's feminist ethic, I present debate as a practice of self-care, in which nuns confront delusions of the mind and cultivate inner clarity.

These practices unfold within a lived understanding of interdependence, a central Buddhist tenet that is not merely doctrinal but experientially reinforced through communal learning. The ethic of debate extends beyond the yard—into care for animals, the environment, and one another—forming a broader "culture of care" within the nunnery. By attending to the embodied and interdependent dimensions of knowledge-making, this paper challenges gendered and dualistic assumptions about religious education and highlights debate as a subtle, daily form of transcendence.

"From Being in Nature to Being Nature: The Sensory Dimension of Eco-Spiritual Political Ontologies," Alba Siguero Lizano (Complutense University of Madrid)

This paper explores how everyday sensory experiences of contact with non-human beings become key sites of transcendence and care within contemporary eco-spiritual practices. In movements such as Forest Bathing and The Work That Reconnects, the body is not only a medium of presence but also a site of transformation—where the modern, bounded self dissolves into an ecological self. Here, the senses are not merely channels of perception but active agents in reconfiguring our ontological and ethical relationship with the more-than-human world.

These practices foreground a form of attention—gentle, sustained, and embodied—that challenges anthropocentric modes of knowing and invites a biocentric gaze rooted in interdependence. The intersection of the sensory and the spiritual in these traditions forms what Arturo Escobar describes as part of the broader "discourses of transition": responses to the ecological crisis that seek not only new values but new ways of being and knowing.

This presentation draws on findings from an ongoing doctoral ethnographic study conducted in Spain, focusing on spiritual-ecological gatherings centered on Forest Bathing and The Work That Reconnects. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, the research reveals how small, embodied gestures—breathing with trees, listening to silence, walking barefoot—become acts of both ecological and spiritual significance. These micro-practices illuminate a political ontology where care for nature and care for the self are inseparable, and where attention itself becomes a sacred and transformative gesture.

"Food Encounters: The 'Throwntogetherness' of Food, Faith, and Care in London," Stefan Williamson Fa (University of Cambridge)

How do Islamic ethics of care and giving manifest in a pluralistic metropolis like London? What does it mean to feed people of other, and no, faiths in such contexts, and what kinds of encounters does this afford?

The recent surge in food insecurity across the UK has led increasing numbers to seek support

from food banks, soup and community kitchens. This crisis has disproportionately affected ethnic minorities, including Muslims, who often face cultural and social barriers to accessing mainstream aid (Power 2023, *Hunger, Whiteness and Religion in Neoliberal Britain*). While much research highlights the Christian roots of food aid in Britain—most notably the UK's largest food bank network, which is "based on, shaped, and guided by Christian principles"—less attention has been paid to emerging Muslim responses to hunger and poverty.

This paper draws on recent fieldwork conducted across Muslim-run food aid initiatives in London. It explores the distinctive characteristics of these practices, particularly how they seek to embody Islamic principles of care in the context of rising Islamophobia. Central to the inquiry are the dynamics between volunteers and guests, and the ways in which food becomes a medium for inter- religious encounter, ethical attentiveness, and everyday spiritual cultivation.

Bringing together perspectives from material religion, the anthropology of Islam (Mittermaier 2019, *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*), and the anthropology of the good (Robbins 2013, "Beyond the Suffering Subject: Toward an Anthropology of the Good"), the paper frames these initiatives as spaces of what Massey (2005, *For Space*) calls *throwntogetherness*—where unchosen proximity fosters sensorial, ethical, and spiritual engagements, and where small acts of feeding offer quiet glimpses of transcendence in urban life.