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### "Religious Dimensions of Kurdish Environmentalism."

Hugh Schmidt  
*University of Puget Sound*

#### ABSTRACT

This article examines the religious function of environmental ideology in Kurdish liberation movements in Kurdistan. Using four characteristics of dark green religion derived from Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion*, this paper analyzes the language used by Abdullah Öcalan of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) and Chya The Green Association, a Kurdish environmental NGO in Iran, and outlines the way that environmentalism occupies religious space. Despite claims to secularism or outright rejection of religion, the rhetoric of Kurdish nationalist and environmental groups reflects a belief in the earth as a divine entity. The religious role of environmentalism in these groups ties in to nationalist struggle through appeals to stewardship and solidarity. Further, this paper argues that western models for studying green religion fail to accurately capture non-western environmental movements. Islamic environmental thought is discussed to provide an alternative lens through which to analyze the language of Kurdish environmentalism and their claims to secularism.

**Keywords:** Environmentalism, Green Religion, Kurdistan, Chya, Kurdish Nationalism, Abdullah Öcalan.

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### “Religious Dimensions of Kurdish Environmentalism.”

Hugh Schmidt<sup>1</sup>  
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#### INTRODUCTION

In the context of ethnic struggles for independence or political struggles in general, environmental avenues for achieving self-determination are often pushed to the wayside. Despite a strong correlation between the outbreak of civil war/violence and environmental degradation, the idea of revolutionary struggle rooted strongly in environmental protection is relatively uncommon.<sup>2</sup> Consciousness regarding climate change, deforestation, and environmental issues is largely seen as the prerogative of white, wealthy progressives in America and Europe, where caring about the environment is seen as a privilege.<sup>3</sup> In stark contrast to this idea, environmental consciousness has increased in prominence within the Kurdish struggle for autonomy in the Middle East, in some cases playing a central role in its revolutionary ideology. The Kurds are an ethnic group of roughly 35 million people, dispersed primarily across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, in a roughly continuous area of land known as Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup> While primarily Sunni Muslim, the religious makeup of the Kurdish people includes Christians, Alevis, and Jews among other

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Schmidt graduated from University of Puget Sound in 2021 with a bachelor's degree in religious studies. Their research focuses primarily on the role of religion in left-wing social movements. They plan to continue that work through a commitment to eco-socialist organizing.

<sup>2</sup> Mehmet Gurses. "Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey." *Civil Wars* 14:2 (2012). 254

<sup>3</sup> Amanda Baugh. "Nepantla Environmentalism: Challenging Dominant Frameworks for Green Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 20:20 (2020): 3

<sup>4</sup> Gurses. "Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey." 258

groups.<sup>5</sup> In response to persecution and assimilation efforts by the governments of all four nations, various Kurdish nationalist groups have engaged in both violent and non-violent struggle to establish autonomous regions for their people throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.<sup>6</sup> Environmental consciousness plays a significant role in the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan, founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a militant socialist party which began advocating for Kurdish independence in 1974. Inspired by the PKK, various militias and political parties across Kurdistan have adopted this environmentalist program into their revolutionary struggle, placing great importance on the protection of nature.<sup>7</sup> Further, in the absence of legal political parties, environmental struggle in Kurdish regions of Iran has been taken up by various NGOs which aim to foster Kurdish identity alongside their eco-activist programs. While these Kurdish activist groups are constantly referred to as secular or identify as such, the language used in their publications has a uniquely religious character, with references to nature as a sentient entity and the moral imperative to protect it. Kurdish environmental movements function as religion in the way they advocate for united environmental struggle as an imperative resulting from a belief in the interconnectedness of all beings with the earth. Further, this belief contains within it a reverence for the earth as a spiritual entity.

### **DARK GREEN RELIGION**

In order to establish whether these environmental movements function religiously, I will be using four characteristics of spiritual environmental thought adapted from the introduction to Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion*. Any one of these characteristics alone would not make

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Foltz. "The "Original" Kurdish Religion? Kurdish Nationalism and the False Conflation of the Yezidi and Zoroastrian Traditions." *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10 (2017) 91.

<sup>6</sup> Gurses. "Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey." 258

<sup>7</sup> These include militias, like the YPG and YPJ (primarily in Syria) and non-militant organizations like the Mesopotamian Ecology Movement. For more information, see Lau, et al.(2016) "A Kurdish response to climate change."

Kurdish environmentalism a religion, and even when all four apply I would be hesitant to call it such. However, these are characteristics of environmental movements and thought that Taylor points to as occupying religious space, and as such I will be using them to determine whether Kurdish environmental movements function religiously in a significant way.<sup>8</sup> The first of these is horizontal connection, which I am using to refer to the (re)connective or unifying nature of environmentalist thought or action between its participants. This could be a connection that happens directly between people because of their love for environmental activism, or it could be the unifying aspect of these movements as they relate to a variety of different struggles. In the Kurdish context, national and religious autonomy, class conflict, and women's liberation are all struggles that can intersect with environmentalism.

The second characteristic is spiritual intelligence, which is adapted from Taylor's discourse to refer to the personification, agency, and quasi-divine nature of the earth. Within this concept of spiritual intelligence is the idea that the earth or nature as a whole is something that can be communicated with, that people can have relationships with.<sup>9</sup> The third is a rejection of anthropocentrism in favor of reverence for the earth, which is derived from Taylor's discussion of nature religion and Rousseau. Rousseau believed that human fulfillment and happiness could be drawn from "intimate contact with and open-hearted contemplation of nature, which was itself an epistemological principle; a belief that indigenous peoples lived closer to nature and were thus socially and ecologically superior to "civilized" peoples."<sup>10</sup> Essentially, I am identifying the belief that a nature-centric society is ultimately the solution to alienation. The fourth and final characteristic is that of interconnectedness, of oneness with the earth. This is tied up with all of

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). 2-3

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

the prior aspects I have mentioned, but deserves special attention because within this idea is a necessity of action and stewardship. If a person is one with the earth, and every day they see nature being destroyed, they might see those wounds upon the earth as wounds unto themselves. As such, humans have a moral imperative to stop the destruction of the earth. This is central to Taylor's definition of dark green religion, "in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care,"<sup>11</sup> This connective reverence is what turns concern into action. When that imperative to action is synthesized with spiritual intelligence, environmentalism becomes a divine obligation.

### **ABDULLAH ÖCALAN AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY**

While there are a number of different Kurdish groups which incorporate environmentalism into their struggle for liberation, I will be focusing on only two in this paper, the first of which is the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Abdullah Öcalan helped found the PKK as a secular Marxist party in Turkey, which has engaged in on and off militant insurgency against the government since 1984. He has been imprisoned since 1999, but continues to be the party's spiritual and ideological leader. In prison, he adopted the ideas of social ecologist Murray Bookchin, among a variety of other thinkers, into a left-wing political ideology called Democratic Confederalism, which emphasizes communalism, feminism, and environmental consciousness. In a piece titled "A Return to Social Ecology", Öcalan outlines the importance of eco-consciousness and protection within the context of a revolutionary, left-wing political party: "A social 'consciousness' that lacks ecological consciousness will inevitably corrupt and disintegrate, as was seen in real-socialism."<sup>12</sup><sup>13</sup> In this, we see evidence of Öcalan's appreciation

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>12</sup> Abdullah Öcalan. "Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology." in *Social Ecology and Democratic Confederalism*. Edited by Make Rojava Green Again and YKX/JKK. (2020) 6

<sup>13</sup> "Real-socialism" refers to socialism as a mode of production w/r/t the Soviet system.

for the integration of environmentalism into his revolutionary program, where, along with women's rights, he positions it as equally important to the national class struggle of the PKK. He argues that any kind of social revolution that takes place will fall apart if environmental consciousness is not prioritized, because it is the current social order which has made environmental degradation its mission. Thus, a socialist movement which does not seek to protect nature will eventually fall into the ways it should be opposed to. To base a socialist economy on resource extraction, for example, will eventually poison its populace and destroy a future in which total liberation is possible. However, Öcalan does not depict his ecological ideas as new ones, instead advocating for a return to a primitive, communal way of living, which he implies is the original one that all humans once lived under: "The natural religion is the religion of the communal primitive society. There is no contradiction to nature, no anomaly in the emergence of society. Philosophy itself defines the human being as 'nature becoming aware of itself.' The human being is basically the most developed part of nature. This proves the unnaturalness and anomaly of this social system, which puts the most developed part of nature in contradiction to it."<sup>14</sup> Öcalan attributes ecological destruction to a social order which positions humans above nature rather than as a part of it, and argues that that social order is in fact unnatural. This aligns particularly with Rousseau's thought on nature religion outlined by Taylor, that it is the solution "to the West's spiritual malaise, social violence, economic inequality, and callousness to nonhuman nature: a harmonious future characterized by fulfilling relationships among the earth's diverse forms of life."<sup>15</sup> To bring an end to the pain caused by a capitalist system reliant on alienation, Öcalan argues that once the interconnectedness of nature and human is recognized, only then will people be able to "feel true and with all their senses," whereas

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<sup>14</sup> Öcalan. "Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology." 6

<sup>15</sup> Taylor. *Dark Green Religion*.9

otherwise, society produces "a disturbed social feeling."<sup>16</sup> Öcalan holds up an image of past communal societies as an order which will bring joy and fulfillment, which further agrees with Rousseau's assertion that non-Abrahamic, "primitive" societies have a more harmonious and sustainable relationship with nature. Öcalan is not a primitivist, he is not anti-technology, but he believes the structure of society must be returned to a communal way of living in order to achieve true liberation. This lines up with Taylor's examination of the etymology of the word religion to mean "to reconnect."<sup>17</sup> His ideology aims to reconnect society with a more harmonious, communal way of living which it has departed from.

Within his description of this past communal society, Öcalan describes the relationship between these societies and the earth as "like the bond between child and mother. Nature is understood as something alive. The golden rule of the religion of this time was not to do anything against it in order not to be punished by it. The natural religion is the religion of the communal primitive society."<sup>18</sup> In this excerpt, nature is revealed as a spiritual, possibly sentient (or at least reactive) entity which can be communicated with. The use of the word "punished" indicates at least some kind of agency on part of the earth, which combined with the idea of nature as a mother, brings to mind nature as a sort of divine entity. While Öcalan is not calling for worship of the earth, he is using the idea of natural religion to promote a return to a similar kind of consciousness applied to a socialist program. As such, he positions climate disaster as Earth's retaliation against humanity for the betrayal of what should be a reciprocal relationship. He finds a root for this natural relationship between humanity and nature in the word "Amargi" which in Sumerian means both freedom and "return to the mother-nature. Between human beings

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<sup>16</sup> Öcalan. "Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology." 7

<sup>17</sup> Taylor. *Dark Green Religion 2*

<sup>18</sup> Öcalan. "Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology." 6

and nature there is a quasi-love relationship. This is a great love story.”<sup>19</sup> Despite the PKK being a secular organization, they find great meaning within this idea of a loving relationship between humans and nature. The equation of freedom with a mother-child relationship is further evidence of how Öcalan’s environmental ideology uses the idea of spiritual intelligence to espouse sustainability within his revolutionary framework. Protection of the environment within this belief system is necessitated by the understanding that humans and nature are intrinsically linked, cut from the same cloth. Öcalan does, in a way, set up a hierarchy in claiming “The human being is basically the most developed part of nature.”<sup>20</sup> However, it does not mean that humans should take from nature unhindered. Because of their connection, he cites a moral imperative for humanity to take care of the earth: “Humans gain in value when they understand that animals and plants are only entrusted to them.”<sup>21</sup> This is the very first line of this pamphlet; and it serves to establish an idea of stewardship - that humans have a responsibility to protect all living creatures. To understand how this idea functions in a socialist, secular context, I find it helpful to examine the phrase “An injury to one is an injury to all” popularized as the slogan for the Industrial Workers of The World.<sup>22</sup> In this case, rather than just apply that idea of solidarity to fellow workers, it is applied to the entire earth. According to Öcalan, the earth is also engaged in the struggle against global capitalism, so any assault on it should be seen as an assault on humanity. This framework makes fighting for the environment a moral struggle just as fighting for your fellow humans would be: “The amorality of capitalism can only be overcome by an ecological approach.”<sup>23</sup> With this in mind, fighting for the earth becomes as necessary as class struggle,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>22</sup> International Workers of the World, an international radical labor union

<sup>23</sup> Öcalan. “Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology.” 7



national struggle, women's liberation, etc.<sup>24</sup> Öcalan uses this sentiment to appeal to the Kurdish nationalism the PKK was founded on, stating "Great patriotism means reforestation and planting trees. This is a valuable slogan."<sup>25</sup> The idea of taking care of the land as patriotism makes sense as a position for Öcalan to adopt, considering how important Kurdistan as a homeland is to a sense of national and ethnic identity.<sup>26</sup> The destruction of the environment has also been a common war tactic used by occupying governments against the Kurds, so it's not entirely difficult to see how an appeal to land preservation would connect with the larger Kurdish nationalist movement.<sup>27</sup> This is another example of the connective nature of the PKK's ideology, which aims to bring people together under the common thread of environmental preservation. Outlined in "A Return to Social Ecology" is the idea of environmental consciousness and action as a connective framework which functions through appeals to interconnectedness, spirituality, and related liberation movements.

### CHYA AND THE PEOPLE OF ZAGROS

The second subject of this article are NGOs in Iran, which have had to pick up the mantle of Kurdish environmental action, as all major Kurdish political parties have been banned in the country. Kurdish environmentalist NGOs also face extreme political repression due to the state's belief that they are fronts for nationalist militant groups. While they appear not to be, the IRGC<sup>28</sup> concerns are not entirely unfounded, as these groups are committed to advancing the causes of their people at the expense of Iran's interests.<sup>29</sup> Kurdish identity is essential to these groups; in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>26</sup> Taspinar, Omer. *Kurdish Nationalism and Political Islam in Turkey: Kemalist Identity in Transition*. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 78

<sup>27</sup> Gurses. "Environmental Consequences of Civil War: Evidence from the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey." 255

<sup>28</sup> Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Islamic Republic of Iran's military intelligence service.

<sup>29</sup> Allan Hassaniyan. "Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: causes and conditions for its securitisation." *Conflict, Security & Development*, 20:3, (2020) 2

addition to promoting environmental causes, they are also involved in Kurdish language programs, education reform, and efforts to stop Iranian state violence against kolbars (Kurdish mountain porters).<sup>30</sup> Environmental NGOs are able to encapsulate a number of Kurdish issues within their publications under the unifying force of environmental protection of their land. In particular, the forests of the Zagros mountains in Iranian Kurdistan serve as a symbol of an independent Kurdish identity from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Speaking on Kurdish student activist publications, Allan Hassaniyan writes: "Referring to the Kurds as "the people of Zagros," a terrain with different geographical, cultural and social characteristics to southern, central and eastern Iran, this self-identification proclaims the historical difference between Kurdish and Persian identity."<sup>31</sup> This language speaks to a strong association between the identity of Kurdish activists and the land they reside on, so it will come as no surprise that they seek to protect that land from environmental degradation and destruction. Chya the Green Association, based in the city of Marivan, is one NGO that has been particularly outspoken and the subject of media attention, in large part due to its reforestation and fire-fighting efforts. In an article titled "The Land is Beautiful With Zagros," the organization decries the destruction of the forests and calls for immediate action to protect them. Similar to Öcalan's framing of the relationship between primitive humans and the environment, Zagros is presented as a nurturing mother, with whom the Kurds have traditionally shared a reciprocal relationship: "Zagros is not happy these days and is on its way to turn into a desert owing to the activities of the people whom it has brought up in its bosom for thousands of years".<sup>32</sup> Zagros is given agency here, as if it has fulfilled its end in supporting its people, who in turn have exploited it. It is the "kind

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>31</sup> Allan Hassaniyan. "The Gains and Risks of Kurdish Civil Activism in Iran." *Middle East Research and Information Project* 295 (2020).

<sup>32</sup> "This Land is Beautiful with Zagros" *Chya The Green Association*. November 30, 2018.

mother," which, through the current political order, is being destroyed. This reflects a spiritual intelligence in conjunction with the idea that the traditional, Kurdish way of life is one of harmony and care for the environment. This article blames not "humanity" as a whole, but the current system that exploits it, which is central to the idea of social ecology (as espoused by the PKK). Chya places blame on laws that make the destruction of the environment profitable, laws which place private ownership of land above public ownership. Further, for Chya, fault can also be found at the consumer level, where they criticize people who engage in activities that benefit from the forest's destruction, specifically listing "charcoal kabob, hookahs and charcoal tea" consumption.<sup>33</sup> They go as far as to place fault on everyone who is not actively committed to stopping deforestation and degradation in Zagros: "The current trend is not acceptable by no means, and all those who take part in this obvious plunder and irreparable treason, whether knowingly, as the dealers and merchants and with their axes and saws, or unknowingly, through irresponsibility and indifference, are committing an unforgivable crime."<sup>34</sup> This sets up the moral imperative, characteristic of dark green religion, as playing a central role in Chya's ideology. Here, not only are the directly destructive people and organizations at fault, but anyone who is not actively fighting against those systems are as well in their complicity. Indifference is labeled as a crime, and considering their framing of the destruction of Zagros as the betrayal of a nurturing mother, it is not unreasonable that they would arrive at this conclusion. They frame this destructive behavior as "inhuman", which implies that humanity is predisposed to an original, harmonious relationship with the earth. As such, the current system that destroys the entity that birthed them ("the people of Zagros") is committing a horrible sin by denying that relationship. In Chya's view, the Kurds are intrinsically bound to the land and have a duty to protect it,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.,

making any destruction of it an affront towards both human nature and Kurdish identity.<sup>35</sup> In connection with the increased securitization of Kurdistan, Chya calls for the protection of the environment to preserve "natural autonomy." This could be interpreted as a call for independence through the preservation of what is ostensibly Kurdish land, thus also a call to protect Kurdish identity. With this in mind, it is not altogether surprising that the Iranian government has so heavily surveilled Kurdistan's environmental movements, considering this is a direct appeal to Kurdish nationalism and a challenge to the system of exploitation in Iran. It could also be perceived as a call for connection among the Kurdish people in pursuing preservation of the land, because it links environmentalism to Kurdish identity specifically, connecting people for the sake of that greater struggle. This fits nicely with Taylor's most basic definition of religion: "religion has to do with that which connects and binds people to that which they most value, depend on, and consider sacred."<sup>36</sup>

In August 2018, two activists who worked with CHYA, Sharif Bajour and Omid Kohnepoushi, died along with two others while fighting forest fires outside of Marivan. Within the week, four political prisoners in Iran, three of them Kurdish, published a letter in solidarity and in memoriam of the activists who died. The letter had a specific focus on Sharif Bajour, who was a high profile activist for a number of non-environmental causes as well. They begin the letter with verse:

*It is not my lot to die a natural death;  
Better for the holy grail than in blissful sleep,  
And on truth's command, I welcome that death  
which releases freedom from chains of darkness<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>35</sup> Hassaniyan. "Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: causes and conditions for its securitisation." 5

<sup>36</sup> Taylor. *Dark Green Religion 2*

<sup>37</sup> "Political Prisoners Pen Condolences in Wake of Deadly Forest Fire" *Human Rights Activists News Agency*. August 31, 2018.

This verse alone serves as evidence of the central nature of martyrdom in Kurdish environmentalism; it is the glorification of dying for the sake of a higher, divine cause. The use of the phrase "and on truth's command" indicates that the cause Sharif and other activists died for is itself a higher truth, one not necessarily dictated by human laws. Considering that this truth he died for is protection of the environment, which is regarded as having agency and housing divinity in both this letter and in the previous Chya piece, it is appropriate to call him and other activists martyrs. The large turnout at their memorial and the subsequent imagery of the pair appearing at various CHYA actions since their deaths bolsters the assertion that these activists are martyrs.<sup>38</sup> Bajour is positioned in this letter as "a true friend to the mountains, plains, and forests of Kurdistan," which is language that establishes the kind of personal relationship that one can have with nature.<sup>39</sup> This, combined with the opening verse of the letter, firmly establishes an acknowledgement of the spiritual intelligence of nature that Bajour is said to have felt. The prisoners who wrote this letter, while not all Kurdish, and none of them necessarily environmentalists, still felt the need to express solidarity with Sharif because he too was engaged in a struggle against the government of Iran. Environmental struggle is part of a larger struggle against political repression, and thus encourages solidarity among Kurds and non-Kurds alike: "We extend our deep sympathy to his friends and comrades from the Chya Green Association, to all those who care about the environment, and to the people of Kurdistan. They have lost some of the most honorable men of their time. Much like the fire that took their lives, the loss of these beloved souls has burned our spirit."<sup>40</sup> Here they position the loss of Bajour as one that should be felt by all of Kurdistan and by the entire environmental movement

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<sup>38</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/chya\\_ngo/](https://www.instagram.com/chya_ngo/)

<sup>39</sup> "Political Prisoners Pen Condolences in Wake of Deadly Forest Fire" *Human Rights Activists News Agency*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*,

because of the role that Kurdish environmentalism has as part of both a larger environmental struggle and a larger Kurdish struggle. This appeal to all Kurds and eco-activists of all backgrounds on the basis of a kind of martyrdom and shared struggle is characteristic of the connective potential of religion. With this in mind, when the authors of the letter write: "His new and creative path of resistance is his legacy," it is reasonable to perceive this as a call for "the Chya Green Association, to all those who care about the environment, and to the people of Kurdistan," to honor that legacy through resistance.<sup>41</sup>

### SECULARISM AND ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTALISM

Despite calls to action based in martyrdom and the near deification of nature, representatives of various student organizations in Iran, including Chya, still staunchly maintain that they are secular: "Esmailnazard argues that in the Iranian regime's interpretation of Islam, human beings are viewed as superior to any other beings and therefore allowed to exploit anything in their advantage. However, Kurdish environmentalists promote a secular approach, and the need for the coexistence of man and nature."<sup>42</sup> While much of this paper is about how that coexistence of man and nature can in fact be seen as deeply religious, it makes sense that in establishing Kurdish identity separate from the Islamic Republic, they would want to reject Islam, especially the form espoused by the state. A pair of Kurdish Sunni Imams in Turkey, who are passionate about both Kurdish nationalism and Marxism, acknowledge that Islam has not traditionally been a liberatory vehicle for many Kurds:

After converting to Islam, Kurds have always prioritized their religious identity. Although they have had an ethnic consciousness, it has always been a secondary issue... Yet our Prophet says, "Whoever is killed while he/she is seeking his/her rights (against injustices), he/she is a martyr." I mean, our Prophet never ever said "always seek the hereafter!". In fact, God says, "thou shalt not forget this

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>42</sup> Hassaniyan. "Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: causes and conditions for its securitisation." 10

world." But Kurds have forgotten the world! On the other hand, our (Islamic) brothers – Turks, Arabs, and Iranians – have never shown us mercy.<sup>43</sup>

While these Imams are able to find a basis for the Kurdish national struggle within Islam, they acknowledge that this is not the role that Islam has played for Kurdish people. They seem to argue that perhaps the focus on Islam and Islamic brotherhood among Kurds has taken away energy that could be spent on the national struggle. If Iranian Islam is seen as an oppressive and destructive force, it makes sense that the Kurdish NGOs in Iran would not want to embrace it. Some Kurds have even gone as far as to adopt Yazidi religion or Zoroastrianism (often conflating the two) as a way to distance themselves from Islam with regards to their national identity.<sup>44</sup> The same unnamed Imam quoted above even claims that the reason the Kurds have not received mercy from other Islamic groups is "because only Kurds remained in Allah's hands! All others gave up the religion except Kurds."<sup>45</sup> While obviously these Imams are Muslim, some feel the need to distance themselves from the Islam of other nations because of the way it has factored into Kurdish persecution and erasure.<sup>46</sup> Despite this, these Kurdish Imams believe that those who died fighting for the PKK are in fact martyrs according to the word of Allah. Considering Sharif Bajour is also a sort of martyr for a higher cause connected to Kurdish nationalism, the religiosity of the response to his death can be compared to the martyrdom of PKK soldiers. While I am not arguing that the Chya is taking direct influence from this kind of thought, it reflects a similar, religious way of thinking.

Esmailnazard in his analysis of Kurdish NGOs in Iran positions the Islam of the

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<sup>43</sup> Gürbüz, Mustafa. *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016) 117

<sup>44</sup> Foltz. "The "Original" Kurdish Religion? Kurdish Nationalism and the False Conflation of the Yezidi and Zoroastrian Traditions." 90

<sup>45</sup> Gürbüz.. *Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey: Transforming Ethnic Conflict*. 116-117

<sup>46</sup> Mehmet Gurses. "Is Islam a Cure for Ethnic Conflict? Evidence from Turkey." *Politics & Religion* 8, no. 1 (03, 2015): 137

government as being clearly hierarchical and thus exploitative because of the framing of humans as superior to nature. While this is certainly not incorrect, it does not reflect the varied positions of different Islamic scholars on this issue. Instead, some frame this hierarchy as one necessitating stewardship, not exploitation: "contemporary Islamic environmentalists have defined environmentalism as a facet of the Qur'anic concept of stewardship, expressed by the Arabic term *khalifa*. The following verses are cited: "I am setting on the earth a vice-regent" (Qur'an 2:30), and "It is He who has made you his vice-regent on earth" (Qur'an 6:165).<sup>47</sup> In this interpretation, humans are still positioned as superior to other creatures on earth, but are responsible for taking care of it, not exploiting it. This parallels Öcalan's interpretation of humans as being the most developed part of nature, to whom the rest of nature is entrusted.<sup>48</sup> Öcalan and the PKK are secular, yet the idea of stewardship being entrusted to humans (he doesn't say by who) is similar to the idea of Allah entrusting care of the earth to humanity. Ideas of interconnectedness of all beings, something which Taylor outlines as central to his conception of nature religion, appear throughout the scriptural basis for Islamic environmentalism. Specifically, the concepts of *ayat* and *tawhid*, as defined by Richard Foltz, align startlingly well with those which Taylor labels as precursors to nature religion and deep ecology:

According to the writings of Islamic environmentalists, all aspects of creation are miraculous signs of God (*ayat*), and must be respected. The Arabic (and Persian) term for the natural environment is *muhit*, which in the Qur'an means "all-encompassing": "And He it is who encompasseth all things" (Qur'an 4:126). The Qur'anic concept of *tawhid* (unity) has historically been interpreted by Muslim writers mainly in terms of the oneness of God (in contradistinction to polytheism), but Islamic environmentalists have preferred to see *tawhid* as meaning all-inclusive. They suggest that the idea of *wahdat al-wujud*, or "unity of being," associated with the medieval philosopher Ibn 'Arabi, can be understood in environmentalist terms. Ibn 'Arabi, however, has always been a

<sup>47</sup> Richard Foltz. "Is There An Islamic Environmentalism?" *Environmental Ethics* 22 no.1 (2002): 64

<sup>48</sup> Öcalan. "Abdullah Öcalan on the return to social ecology." 8



highly controversial figure for Muslims, since many have accused him of holding pantheist or monist views incompatible with Islam's radical monotheism.<sup>49</sup>

While these interpretations are not necessarily popular within Islam as a whole, these concepts remain useful in comparing an explicitly religious environmentalism with both Kurdish movements and Taylor's framework. The all-encompassing nature of the earth is a feature of nature religion which Taylor sees as central to understanding how environmental movements can function religiously. Spinoza, someone to whom Taylor attributes much of the base for contemporary nature religion, was controversial for some of the same reasons Foltz claims Ibn 'Arabi was; both were accused of pantheism or monism for outlining ideas focused on the universality of God-being.<sup>50</sup> Compare the interconnectedness and universality of nature Foltz references in the above excerpt with a line from Taylor on Spinoza: "for if every being and object is a manifestation of God or God's activity, then everything has value, which presents a fundamental challenge to the prevailing anthropocentrism."<sup>51</sup> Despite Islam containing a hierarchy between humans and the rest of nature, these ideas of unity of being and interconnectedness serve to soften that hierarchy into something that is not necessarily exploitative.<sup>52</sup>

Identifying green Islamic thought allows for a better understanding of the avowed secularism of Kurdish environmentalism. In discussing a version of Islam with similar goals of rejecting environmental exploitation and oppression, the Islam they are fighting against can be separated from Islam as a whole. Secularism in this context is rejecting the authority of Islam as it relates to the hierarchical nation states they are fighting against. The PKK and Chya are

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<sup>49</sup> Foltz. "Is There An Islamic Environmentalism?" 65

<sup>50</sup> Taylor. *Dark Green Religion* 8

<sup>51</sup> Taylor. *Dark Green Religion* 8

<sup>52</sup> Foltz. "Is There An Islamic Environmentalism?" 65

opposed to Islam in Turkey and Iran because they have functioned as tools of oppression. With this in mind, the seeming contradiction between their secularism and the deeply spiritual, pre-Islamic language they use is eased, as both ultimately challenge the state. In describing Kurdish environmental movements as functioning religiously, we are able to see how those movements fight those nation-states on a spiritual front. Their mere existence challenges the social order, and thus the religious basis of the state's authority.<sup>53</sup>

### CHALLENGING WESTERN MODELS OF GREEN RELIGION

Examining Islamic environmentalism is further necessary so as to avoid using exclusively western models for studying religious environmental movements. Kurdish environmentalism cannot be entirely understood using models based on white, progressive thinkers because its roots are clearly deeper than that. This is not to then claim that its roots are in Islam, but to simply provide another lens for analysis. For example, attempting to understand Öcalan's work as based purely on the ideas of American left thinker Murray Bookchin would be a mistake. Bookchin, who developed in large part the theory of social ecology which Öcalan writes about, perpetuated colonial ideas surrounding environmentalist movements:

In social ecology a truly natural spirituality, free of mystical regressions, would center on the ability of an emancipated humanity to function as ethical agents for diminishing needless suffering, engaging in ecological restoration, and fostering an aesthetic appreciation of natural evolution in all its fecundity and diversity.<sup>54</sup>

Bookchin centers a new spirituality which would center science, rather than "supernaturalistic or pantheistic areas of speculation."<sup>55</sup> By referring to past sustainable religious practices as "mystical regressions", Bookchin dismisses indigenous knowledge and ways of life as

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<sup>53</sup> Hassaniyan. "Environmentalism in Iranian Kurdistan: causes and conditions for its securitisation." 10

<sup>54</sup> Murray Bookchin. "What is Social Ecology?" in *Social Ecology and Democratic Confederalism*. Edited by Make Rojava Green Again and YKX/JXK. (2020) 8.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,10

something to be left behind in favor of western science. Bookchin's thinking reflects western ideals of progress and linear time, in which the old (and non-western) ideas are left behind as society moves forward. Öcalan's use of the word *Amargi* and his calls for a return to primitive, communal society, while reminiscent of Bookchin's ideas somewhat, are not reflective of Bookchin's dismissive attitude toward indigenous, pantheistic religion. As such, to define his environmentalism entirely within the confines of Bookchin or western environmentalism would be to misrepresent the nature of Öcalan's environmental program and erase its unique cultural identity.

The idea of green religion being a merger of spirituality with science-based environmental thought is something Amanda Baugh criticizes Bron Taylor for perpetuating almost exclusively, at the cost of erasing indigenous and non-western narratives of environmentally conscious religion.<sup>56</sup> Further, certain aspects of Kurdish environmentalism, specifically the references to the Kurds as "the people of Zagros" and to ties between the land and Kurdish identity, are not explained away by either Islamic or western environmentalism. To determine that link between Kurdish ethnic identity and environmentalism is beyond the scope of this essay, but deserves further research in order to understand the motivations for some of the language used and actions taken by activists. Baugh further argues that scholarship (including Taylor's) on green religion has focused on "explicit environmentalism", which "maintains a classed moral valence requiring environmental actions to be explicitly motivated by concerns for the planet. Recycling for the good of the earth is easily identified as environmentalism within an explicit environmental framework, whereas recycling motivated by monetary reward is not."<sup>57</sup> This scholarship thus is not able to fully account for the varied

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<sup>56</sup> Baugh "Nepantla Environmentalism: Challenging Dominant Frameworks for Green Religion." 8

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 6

motivations for environmentalism in Kurdistan, which as we have seen, is pursued also as part of a larger ethno-nationalist struggle for autonomy. If environmental action that is not directly motivated by a love for nature is not environmentalism as practiced by western eco-activist groups, then using theories based on those groups might prove problematic. Even with that consideration however, it is without question that despite (or perhaps in spite of) nationalistic motivations, the PKK's environmental ideology and Kurdish activists within Iran do have a deep love for nature. This love manifests in recognizing the urgency of environmental struggle, that their fight extends beyond their people to the entire earth. Even if these groups succeed in this lifetime, their movements must ensure a future in which all can be free from exploitation, including the earth. It's this moral imperative that drives Kurdish environmentalists, spurred by the centrality of a nurturing, maternal role of the earth in their ecological worldview. This reverence for the earth is a unifying force among people and the earth, allowing Kurdish environmentalism to function as a religion alongside claims to secularism.

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