



PRESS RELEASE

41st Cairo Climate Talks

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"Religion and Climate Change: the relationship between God and the Environment"

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In his opening remarks that preceded the 41st Cairo Climate Talks' panel discussion on the relationship between religion and the environment, H.E. Julius Georg Luy, German Ambassador to Egypt, quoted Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa who declared that it is a religious duty to safeguard our environment and to advocate the importance of preserving it.

“Pollution and global warming pose an even greater threat than war,” he said, “and the fight to preserve the environment could be the most positive way of bringing humanity together. Environment-related issues ought to be a significant component of educational curricula. It is the duty of all religious scholars to acquaint themselves with the environmental crisis we are facing,” he added.

In his speech, Ambassador Luy expressed his deep conviction that religion is an important vector to raise awareness on environmental issues, since religion is embedded in all aspects of Egyptians' daily life. “There is a moral obligation vis-à-vis future generations to save our planet, and environment could even be a common denominator for inter-religious discourse,” he added.

Practically, he could see environmental considerations incorporated into school curricula and religious sermons to efficiently change behaviors and ultimately safeguard our ecosystems. He draws an example from Germany, where the Protestant Church was actively involved in the German anti-nuclear movement.

Panelist Stefan Karsheh, Pastor of the German Evangelical Community in Cairo, was involved in those anti-nuclear demonstrations that rocked Germany in the late 70s and early 80s. Recalling this experience, he explains that the ecological movement at the time was firmly rooted to the peace movement, and was not started solely by anti-nuclear sentiments but linked to larger poverty movements.

“We were determined to do something for the environment as part of this global issue,” he said. “When the German government announced its plan to dump nuclear waste on a small village in Northwestern Germany, the Church became involved in the movement,” Karsheh explained. The German Pastor is originally from Lower Saxony, the state where the village of Gorleben is located. Since the 1970s, Gorleben has attracted frequent protest from environmentalists as it hosts the site of a controversial radioactive waste disposal facility.

While he frequently discusses issues of waste and human's mismanagement of Nature and its resources with his students at the German Evangelical School in Dokki, Karsheh believes that fundamentally changing the attitude of Egyptians to ultimately protect our surroundings is made difficult by poverty. He explains that it's unfair to expect a poor Egyptian farmer who sits on a few feddans of fertile Delta land with his family members to not sell his plot to the highest bidder, even if a building will be erected and the fertile soil lost to cultivation. “If you ask someone to be respectful of the environment, especially someone poor, you need to make it up for him or her,” Karsheh added.

Dr. Saleh Ed-din Nefeily is a professor of English literature at Al-Azhar University, with a deep knowledge of Islam. According to him, the Prophet's traditions are full of examples of his care for animals and plants, which could be an efficient lever to modify Muslims' mentalities.

He explains that the overarching rule in Islam is this: what fulfills life is 'halal' (permitted), and what destroys life is 'haram' (forbidden). It is not allowed, for example, to kill an animal if you won't eat it. “If you shoot and kill a bird as part of recreational hunting, on the day of judgement this bird will question and judge you,” he said.

From the Islamic point of view, he explained, humans are included but placed at the center of the environment. “The beauty that surrounds us, the water, the food, the flowers, God created all those for us (...) he trusted us to take care of all creatures,” he stressed.

Father Angelos Guirguis, the third member of the panel, is the Pastor of the Cavern Church in Old Cairo. His take on the relationship between Nature and humankind differs significantly. He believes that “we need to reach a deeper understanding of our scriptures in order to stop viewing Nature as an object at our disposal, but to see humankind as an intrinsic part of Nature.”

Moving to the concrete case of Egypt, Father Angelos pointed at the lack of comprehensive vision, which always

come second to individual needs. “How can we make sure that the streets, the country is as clean as the inside of people's homes, he wondered, when garbage containers are stolen from the streets?”

Him and Dr. Salah believe that enforcement of regulations and fines need to be put in place by the authorities to encourage citizens to act in a more environmentally-friendly way, and also add to this the importance of education.

According to Dr. Salah, people who have the education and still throw garbage out the window need to be inspired to change their attitude by morals and religion, and the ones who are pious need to be educated about the harmful consequences of destroying what sustains life.

“Religion helps people feel part of a community, and part of a larger network that includes animals and plants, all connected to each other,” Karsheh said. “If we harm our living networks, we harm ourselves,” he concluded.

Background Information:

The Cairo Climate Talks are conceived, organized and hosted as a cooperation between the German Embassy in Cairo, the Egyptian Ministry of Environment, the German Science Center (DWZ), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). For more information, please visit our [website](http://www.cairoclimatetalks.net) or contact press@cairoclimatetalks.net.