

FROM PERMISSIBLE TO WHOLESOME:  
SITUATING *ḤALĀL* ORGANIC FARMS  
WITHIN THE SUSTAINABILITY DISCOURSE

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The discourse on sustainability, with its trilateral emphases on economy, environment, and social equity, is playing a major role in the growing awareness of contemporary food production methods. The importance of eating local organically produced food has gained mainstream and global recognition. Within communities adhering to religious dietary restrictions, becoming aware of the environmental impact of food production adds another layer to ‘eating mindfully.’ By discursively decentering materialism, the breadth and depth of motivations for practices encompassed within the sustainability discourse widens, providing space for multiple faith-based ‘green’ initiatives to develop. The impetus for developing sustainable practices is often found within these communities’ own traditions, meshing sustainability awareness with religious conceptions of the world. This essay will focus on the emergence of *ḥalāl* organic farms to explore contemporary intersections of the Islamic tradition and the sustainability movement.

**Keywords:** Organic farms; *ḥalāl*; food production; Islam and the environment; sustainability; *ṭayyib*.

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During the past two decades, in the wake of dire predictions by late twentieth century environmentalists of “futures not worth having”<sup>1</sup> caused by human-induced climate change, the discourse of sustainability has offered hope and energy for action. E. F. Schumacher’s 1973 work *Small is Beautiful* has proved particularly inspiring for the sustainability movement; indeed, Chris Turner wrote in 2007 that “almost anywhere I found sustainable life on my cartographic travels, I was looking at an homage to Schumacher.”<sup>2</sup> However, authors such as Donald Worster and Albert Bartlett have expressed reservations about the oxymoronic nature of “sustainable growth.”<sup>3</sup> Worster suggests that the ambiguity of sustainability has the potential to be treacherous, as mainstream organizations employ the “magic word of consensus” to ‘greenwash’ their companies, while assuming that “sustainability can be achieved” with the “institutions of capitalism, socialism, and industrialism and their values intact.”<sup>4</sup>

Schumacher’s status within the sustainability movement emerges from his clear articulation of the foundational pitfalls of the discursive assumptions of progressive materialism. Among other aspects, Schumacher argued that in order to live sustainably, it is necessary to reject “an attitude to life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth—in short, materialism.” Such a mode of being “contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited” and therefore it “does not fit into this world.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, a “lifestyle designed for permanence,” according to Schumacher, must be guided by “wisdom” rather than human cleverness, and be centered on “spiritual and moral truth.”<sup>6</sup> “Wisdom,” Schumacher wrote, “demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and beautiful.”<sup>7</sup> He suggested that sound economics, social justice, and ecological integrity could result from following the “wisdom” based teachings of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or “any other of the great Eastern traditions.” As an example, Schumacher replaces “the meta-economic basis of western materialism” with the “teachings of Buddhism,” to show how definitions of “economic” and

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1. E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973), 64.
  2. Chris Turner, *The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need* (Toronto: Random House, 2007), 288.
  3. Albert Bartlett, “Reflections on Sustainability, Population Growth, and the Environment” (1998), 4.
  4. Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 144 and 154.
  5. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 27.
  6. *Ibid.*, 19 and 30.
  7. *Ibid.*, 31.

“uneconomic” are fundamentally discursive.<sup>8</sup> To a certain extent, sustainability necessitates a spiritual view of the world, or at least opens a space for non-materialistic perspectives.

*Ḥalāl* organic food production exemplifies the convergence of multiple motivations. For people whose “life and worldview...have been steeped in Islamic tradition,” solutions to modern environmental crises cannot be secular concerns.<sup>9</sup> This “eco-ḥalāl revolution”<sup>10</sup> is spearheaded by initiatives such as Norwich Meadows Farm in upstate New York,<sup>11</sup> Willowbrook Farm near Oxford, UK,<sup>12</sup> Abraham Natural Produce in Somerset, UK,<sup>13</sup> Whole Earth Meats near Chicago,<sup>14</sup> Green Zabiha in Virginia,<sup>15</sup> Nature’s Bounty in California,<sup>16</sup> and BlossomPure Organic in Toronto,<sup>17</sup> which are run by Muslims who strive towards sustainability by integrating religious values with ecological goals. Some of these organizations emphasize the dual organic and ḥalāl foci on their websites, while others cater to the broader organic market. An outstanding 2008 article about Norwich Meadows Farm in the food journal *Gastronomica* describes how this integration of ḥalāl and organic enables faith-based approaches to sustainable agriculture to “become an extended form of religious practice.”<sup>18</sup>

Two main modes of interpreting religious sustainability feature prominently in environmentalist literature. The first emerges from a secular worldview, which tends to evaluate religion based on contemporary scientific principles. For example, in a study of the impact of education in inculcating ecocentric/“ecological” or anthropocentric/“spiritual” conceptions of nature, sociologist Gabriel Ignatow has argued that “the public adoption of an ecological worldview is predicated on modern, secular, Western-style mass education.”<sup>19</sup> Faith-based approaches to ecology that “subsume the categories

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8. *Ibid.*, 49.

9. Leah Koenig, “Reaping the Faith,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 8, no 1 (2008), 80.

10. Nadia Arumugam, “The eco-ḥalāl revolution: Clean food for Muslims,” *Culinate* (blog). [http://www.culinate.com/articles/features/the\\_eco-halal\\_revolution](http://www.culinate.com/articles/features/the_eco-halal_revolution), accessed June 15, 2015.

11. <http://www.norwichmeadowsfarm.com>, accessed June 6, 2015.

12. <http://willowbrookorganic.org>, accessed June 10, 2015.

13. <http://www.organic-halal-meat.com>, accessed June 12, 2015.

14. <http://wholeearthmeats.com>, accessed June 12, 2015.

15. <http://www.greenzabiha.com>, accessed June 12, 2015.

16. <http://www.nbmeats.com>, accessed June 11, 2015.

17. <http://blossompure.com>, accessed June 6, 2015.

18. Koenig, “Reaping the Faith,” 81.

19. Gabriel Ignatow, “Cultural Models of Nature and Society: Reconsidering

of the environmental movement and grant them spiritual depth”<sup>20</sup> are seen as apologetic attempts to bridge the ‘gap’ between religion and science.<sup>21</sup> A milder expression of this mode of interpretation could see “the radical emphasis on nature in Islamic scripture” as holding a “surprising affinity with certain contemporary developments in social theory.”<sup>22</sup> In either case, however, religious perspectives and concerns are seen as supplementing variants of a secular norm.

The second mode configures religious traditions and their responses to ecological crisis somewhat differently. With this mode of interpretation, Islamic concepts like *halāl* and *tayyib* are seen to “far predate[e] the emergence of industrialized agriculture and factory farms” but remain resonant with and “clearly relevant to the present realities of the mainstream American food industry.”<sup>23</sup> This allows for a conceptualization of “positive environmental activities” as “deeply Islamic” by decompartmentalizing ecology and faith.<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that all environmental activities ‘are’ Islamic<sup>25</sup> or that Islam ‘is’ green, but rather that the discourse of sustainability has the potential to decenter purely scientific motivations for environmental activities. With a post-structuralist humility, this attitude to faith-based action recognizes a plurality of motivations and the need for diverse environmental action stressed by sustainability discourse.

Sociologist Daniel DeHanas suggests that by “recasting the question of religion and the environment in terms of the religious or spiritual imagination,” it is possible to identify the “religious resources” or ideas inherent within the religious system that “enable or restrict the capacity for adherents to live in a harmonious relationship with nature.”<sup>26</sup> While DeHanas suggests investigating “creation narratives and theologies of human nature” to tease

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Environmental Attitudes and Concern,” *Environment and Behavior* 38 (2006), 444-445 and 457.

20. Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, “Broadcasting green: grassroots environmentalism on Muslim women’s radio,” *Sociological Review Monograph* 58, no 2 (2009), 149.
21. For further examples of this mode of interpreting religion and ecology, see David Vogel, “How Green is Judaism?” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2001), 349-363; and Jonathan Benthall, “The Greening of Islam?” *Anthropology Today* 19, no. 6 (2003), 10-12.
22. DeHanas, “Broadcasting green,” 144.
23. Koenig, “Reaping the Faith,” 81.
24. DeHanas, “Broadcasting green,” 148.
25. For example, the Earthship described in the documentary film, *Garbage Warrior*, built entirely of beer cans could prove to be highly problematic residence for an observant Muslim.
26. DeHanas, “Broadcasting green,” 142.

out the particular human/nature relationship articulated within a religious tradition, for the purposes of this essay I examine two key terms which are particularly relevant to the discussion of *ḥalāl* organic farms: *ḥalāl* and *ṭayyib*.

### **Ḥalāl**

The Arabic word *ḥalāl* stems from the trilateral root *ḥ-l-l* with a primary lexical meaning of “to untie [a knot].” This meaning of “free from obligation or restraint” leads to the legal definition of *ḥalāl* within Islamic jurisprudence as “lawful, permissible, or allowable.”<sup>27</sup> This category contains multiple complex sub-categories in the traditional schools of law, ranging from the barely permissible to the obligatory. *Ḥalāl*, or lawful, is directly contrasted with *ḥaram*, or forbidden. This Qurʾānic juridical rubric encompasses all aspects of life, including economics, interpersonal relationships, and practices of justice, worship, and consumption. Within Islamic tradition, these concepts arise from the Qurʾān, and through their divine legislation, are “intimately connected with God as immediate expressions of His Will.”<sup>28</sup> Law, in this formulation, becomes sacred; observing the law becomes a form of spiritual practice and worship.

Dietary law is thus one particular aspect of a much broader concept, albeit the one perhaps most commonly discussed in the Western context. The Islamic legal rulings about *ḥalāl* food are unambiguous, having clear basis and description in the tradition. Generally, all food is considered *ḥalāl* for Muslims unless explicitly forbidden (as with alcohol and pork). All other meats must be slaughtered according to the dictates of the law by pronouncing the name of God and slicing the jugular veins of the animal with a sharp, smooth blade. *Ḥalāl* regulations emphasize human accountability in raising animals for meat: every need of domestic animals must be fulfilled while the ritual slaughter itself must be swift and compassionate and the animal should not be killed in the presence of other animals.

While many contemporary *ḥalāl* butchers offer meat that ostensibly meets the basic requirements, growing awareness of factory farming methods in the Muslim community have led some to question whether non-organic meat can truly be classified as *ḥalāl*.<sup>29</sup> Statistics such as “75% of *ḥalāl* meat in America comes from pork-fed cows” indicates a lack of knowledge amongst Muslims about “origin of [meats] or the conditions under which they have

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27. Edward William Lane, *Madd al-Qamus, an Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1863), entry on *ha-lam-lam*, 619-622.

28. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2004), 277.

29. Shahed Amanullah, “If it’s not organic, it’s not *ḥalāl*,” editorial published online at [AltMuslim.com](http://AltMuslim.com), January 9, 2004. Accessed June 11, 2015.

been produced.”<sup>30</sup> The US-based initiative known as *Beyond Halāl: Faith in Food* asks whether *halāl* is “good enough” in a world where “economics has overtaken ethics and we are increasingly disconnected from our food.”<sup>31</sup> This organization, a forum and resource base for Muslims looking for information on sustainable food, carries the tagline, “*Halāl* is about what we can eat. Beyond *Halāl* is about what we should eat.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Tayyib**

Muslims advocating more sustainable food practices argue that many in “North America have emphasized the *halāl* over the *tayyib* when it comes to meat consumption,”<sup>33</sup> but they contend that it is not enough to fulfill the requirements of *halāl* while ignoring the Qur’ānic injunction to eat what is *tayyib*.<sup>34</sup> Semantically, *tayyib* arises from the root *t-y-b*, meaning “to be pure, good, clean, and pleasant.”<sup>35</sup> In the Qur’ān, *tayyib* occurs frequently as an adjective in conjunction with *halāl*, modifying the concept of *halāl* by further specifying the general category of ‘lawful.’ As Toshihiko Izutsu has noted, “the Qur’ān brings in the specific idea of ‘sanctification’ by associating *tayyib* with *halāl*.”<sup>36</sup> Just as the concept of *halāl* applies in a broad range of life practices, the word *tayyib* is used in the Qur’ān in a wide variety of contexts. In the Qur’ānic parable, a good (*tayyib*) word is likened to a healthy, well-rooted, fruit-bearing tree that continuously spreads goodness.<sup>37</sup> *Tayyib* in this instance is used to describe words and therefore language, which forms the basis for culture and social relationships. Fertile land is also described as *tayyib*,<sup>38</sup> as are lawful earnings and wealth.<sup>39</sup> An oft-repeated prophetic supplication refers to sustenance and

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30. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 42.

31. <http://beyondhalal.com>, accessed June 12, 2015.

32. *Ibid.*

33. “It is time to be organic and natural,” SoundVision article, <http://soundvision.com/info/halal/healthy/organicornot.asp>, accessed June 12, 2015.

34. Nearly every *halāl* organic farm website discusses the concept of *tayyib*, and the broader Muslim public is also taking part in this discussion. See for instance <http://yohosame.wordpress.com/2015/04/14/halal-and-tayyib-in-the-here-and-now-ezra-erickson> (blog), accessed June 12, 2015.

35. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, entry on ta-ya-ba, 1900-1903.

36. Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 274.

37. “...a *tayyib* word is like a *tayyib* tree, its roots firm and its branches reaching into the sky. It produces fruit continuously, by the Will of its Sustainer...” Q 14:24-25.

38. “From *tayyib* land comes forth vegetation by permission of its Lord...” Q 7:58.

39. “O you who believe, spend charitably from the *tayyib* things which you have

provisions as *tayyib*.

One of the most frequent occurrences of *tayyib* in the Qurʾān is in the context of *ḥalāl* food. Most of the verses enjoining *ḥalāl* food simultaneously describe it as *tayyib*. For example, one verse reads, “O humankind! Eat of that which is lawful (*ḥalāl*) and wholesome (*tayyib*) from the earth.”<sup>40</sup> It is significant to note that this verse is addressed to all people, without restriction to Muslims; what is *tayyib* and *ḥalāl* is considered healthy for humans in general. *Tayyib* inherently encompasses the legal definition of *ḥalāl*, while going beyond its minimum requirements. By the same token, however, *tayyib* does not carry the legal force of *ḥalāl*.

Within the discourse on organic *ḥalāl* food, *tayyib* is often translated as ‘wholesome’ and is used to cover all facets of sustainability. *Tayyib* is thus understood to encompass all aspects of the physical, environmental, social, economic, and ethical footprints of a particular food. For example, in her article on Norwich Meadows Farm, Leah Koenig writes that, according to the owners of the farm, “produce that has been sprayed with pesticides...or harvested by poorly paid migrant workers would not be *tayyib*. Neither would fast-food cheeseburgers or sodas filled with high-fructose corn syrup and preservatives.” In this formulation, animals raised without proper care and respect and slaughtered industrially would not qualify as *tayyib*, even if the basic requirements of *ḥalāl* were met. Wholesome food, therefore, must not only be healthy, relatively unprocessed, and produced without degrading the environment, but also promote healthy social and economic relationships among people.

Schumacher’s insistence upon small-scale production, “a system based on attention to people, and not primarily to goods,” focuses upon the root cause of these systemic issues.<sup>41</sup> “For every activity there is a certain appropriate scale,” he writes, and exceeding that size reduces efficiency, dignity, happiness, and fulfillment.<sup>42</sup> In *Green Deen*, Ibrahim Abdul-Matin describes Yasir Syeed of Green Zabiha slaughtering *ḥalāl* turkeys:

The Islamic slaughtering process is like a form of worship. ‘It’s like prayer,’ Yasir says. ‘You don’t want it reduced to a mechanical action. The same person should not be slaughtering each time. The idea is to understand the value of it. You are not supposed to let the process become rote.’ Yasir was careful to wash his hands and put his knife down between each slaughter. He is very conscious of how significant killing a living thing is...You have to do the slaughter with presence. It is a physical, spiritual,

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*earned...*” Q 2:267.

40. Q 2:168.

41. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 70.

42. *Ibid.*, 62.

and technical act.<sup>43</sup>

In some ways, the desire for *tayyib* food production is mirrored in Wendell Berry's description of sustainable farming as an agriculture that "does not deplete soils or people."<sup>44</sup> Returning to Schumacher's definition of sustainability—a lifestyle designed for permanence—the concept of *tayyib* appears to provide a viable, faith-based model for achieving sustainability. However, in contradistinction to *ḥalāl*, there is no standard of 'measuring' *tayyib* within Islamic tradition. Therefore, if *tayyib* is to be more than a vague or voluntary concept in the contemporary world, a criterion for assessment would need to be developed. Some, like the owner of Norwich Meadows Farm, find the third-party standard certified organic label helps achieve scientific aspects of farming while setting the stage for *tayyib*: "I don't know all of the research, so I need [the organic label] guidelines."<sup>45</sup>

*Tayyib* extends beyond organic certification, which does not address the economic or social aspects of sustainability. It depends upon integrity and responsibility, and represents a meta-economic value system. As Schumacher notes, to "press non-economic values into the framework of the economic calculus" necessarily eviscerates the "sacredness out of life."<sup>46</sup> However, converging the measurable standards of organic and *ḥalāl* has the potential to prefigure production of human-scaled *tayyib* food. The space (or vagueness, as some would have it) within sustainability accommodates a variety of sub-discourses, whereby *ḥalāl* organic farms can be conceptualized within a broader paradigm of action-based solutions to climate change and environmental degradation. While the contemporary necessity for wholesome *tayyib* lifestyles is gradually beginning to be conceptualized in western Muslim communities, the "spiritual imagination" of the Islamic tradition yields a range of fascinating and complex resources to enable sustainable living.<sup>47</sup>

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43. Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010), 176-177.

44. Wendell Berry, as quoted in Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, 148.

45. Interview with Norwich Meadows Farm owner Zaid Kurdieh, <http://whatisfresh.tumblr.com/post/653477360/norwich-meadows-visit-part-two> (blog), accessed June 14, 2015.

46. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, 43.

47. DeHanas, "Broadcasting green," 142.