

Islam's Approach to the Environment

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“It is He who made you trustees of the earth.....”

(Quran 6 :166)

Introduction

The Islamic worldview is that God created the universe and every single atom and molecule it contains and that the laws of creation include the elements of order, balance and proportion: “He created everything and determined it most exactly” (Quran 25:2) and “It is He Who appointed the sun to give radiance and the moon to give light, assigning it in phases ... Allah did not create these things except with truth. We make the signs clear for people who know” (Quran 10:5).

God created human beings in the “best of moulds” (Quran 95: 4) infusing them with a sense of wonder and compassion for His magnificent creation. Endowing them with conscientiousness, prudence and sagacity, He then entrusted His splendid creation to them, bestowing on them the stewardship of the preservation of life and nature. The conservation of earth as a sanctuary and asylum was thus bequeathed as a Trust. Control and power over environment are thus part of a Trusteeship based not merely on will but discretion. It is a liability vested in human beings.

Islam also teaches humans that all creatures of God, whether it be the petite ant or a huge lion, serve a certain purpose in the larger scheme of God's world: “There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you.” (Quran 6:38)

Muslims are to uphold this responsibility. Abuse of power indicates violation of the Trust.

The question is : have human beings honored this Stewardship ?

Islam, Environment and Trusteeship

And indeed God offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains and they declined to bear it and feared it; but humans undertook to bear it.....”
(*Quran 33 : 72*)

Having been swept away like the forces of history into a domain that treats the natural world as an exploitable resource, economic indicators, industrial development and consumerism have become the governing parameters of society. There has been a corresponding erosion and a withering understanding of Holy Texts of the sacred nexus between the human community and natural order.

The challenge of an environmental crisis demanded a response from world religious to construct an environmental ethics based on religious values. Consequently studies of sacred texts with a view of the relevance of ecological features has amplified over a period of time. Accordingly, a lively interest in the Eastern, Indian and Far Eastern religious traditions and culture also has enhanced recent literature on the subject. This paper considers the Islam’s perspective on the subject.

Islam provides an ecological view point that is practical as well as ethical in terms of environment. For many, it may undoubtedly come as a revelation to know how categorical the Qur’an is about protecting and conserving the environment. The word “earth” (*ard*) appears no less than 485 times in the *Quran*. *Shariah*, the word for Islamic Law, literally means “source of water.” Its approach to the environment is holistic as all things in creation are interrelated to everything else; whatever affects one part ultimately affects all other parts as well and as human life been distilled from the essence of nature and so is inextricably bound to it.

Among the varied and complex reasons, perhaps the most telling is that most people including Muslims are unaware of the environmental dictates of Islam. Few know that *Quranic* verses describing nature and natural phenomena outnumber verses dealing with commandments and sacraments. In fact, of about roughly 6,600 verses in the Holy Qur’an, some 750 or one eighth of the Book, exhort believers to contemplate and reflect on nature, to learn of the relationship between living organisms and their environment, to exercise reason and to retain and sustain the balance and proportion God has built into His creation. The earth’s resources land,

water, air, minerals, forests are available for our use, but such gifts are bestowed from God with certain ethical restraints imposed on them. These are meant to meet needs, but only in a mode that does not disturb or disrupt the ecological balance and that does not compromise the capacity of future generations to meet their requirements or needs.

Since it has the ability, and propensity and to reason and think, humanity has been granted the trusteeship or stewardship of God on earth. Nature is created on the principle of equilibrium and balance, and as a steward of God it is the responsibility of human beings to ensure that his or her actions do not disrupt this sense of balance. Stewardship does not imply dominance or authority over other living beings: because ownership belongs to God alone. Stewardship invests humans with a moral responsibility in safeguarding God's creation.

Stewardship requires that humans learn to live in harmony with alongside with nature. That is why reflecting on nature and appreciating its internal workings has been made the essential basis of knowledge in Islam. Human beings can perceive God's "signs" in all the natural phenomena that surround and encircle them and should, therefore, observe them to comprehend "God's way," which is the Quranic terminology means for "laws of nature. " Thus "in the succession of night and day," "in the water that comes down from the sky, giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless," "in the change of the winds," "in the mountains towering above the earth in the hives of the bees and the flight of the birds, " "in the wonder of the seed," "in the springs that gush forth from within the earth in these and similar *Quranic* verses, God reminds humankind that there are "messages for those who reason and think. "

In several instances the *Quran* points to the hydrological cycle and the quintessence role water plays in sustaining life on earth. With reference to the fertility of the soil, soil erosion, wildlife extinction and even toxic waste management, to the unique properties of fresh and sea water, to the course of rivers and the presence underground of springs and aquifers, and most significantly to the aquatic origin of life, the Qur'an places water at the top of all the natural phenomena on earth.

One of the great principles of ecology is diversity of life and the role it plays to make the earth habitable. Without the biotic diversity of plants, animals and microorganisms that share the planet with us, life as we know it could not exist. All living species have a right to live and flourish on earth, not because of their potential use to humans, but because their presence sustains the harmony and proportion of God's creation. This is expressed thus: *"And the earth—we have spread it out wide, and placed on it mountains firm, and caused life of every kind to grow on it in a balanced manner, and provided means of livelihood for you as well as for all living beings whose sustenance does not depend on you."* (Quran 15:19)

By emphasizing that humans are only a diminutive part of the universe, the *Quran* shows out the illogicality of the anthropocentric world-view. Human beings are only one of God's creations, existing with other living beings in an interwoven system where independency of life and energies is a primary factor. *"Greater indeed than the creation of man is the creation of the heavens and the earth."* (Quran 40:57)

Respect for animal life is incumbent. One familiar story from the life of the Prophet recounts how, during a journey, one of Prophet Muhammad's companions removed a baby pigeon from a nest. Muhammad confronted the thief and gently returned the bird to its nest. "For charity shown to each creature with a wet heart, there is a reward," the Prophet declared. In the words of Allah, "There is not an animal in the earth, nor a creature flying on two wings, but they are nations like you." (Quran 6:38)

Islamic cleric Mufti Imam Tajuddin H. Alhilaly, *, argues that all living things "are partners in existence and they deserve their own respect. The *Quran* proclaims that it is Allah who "sends down water from the sky, and therewith We bring forth buds of every kind. We bring forth the green blade from which we bring forth the thick-clustered grain; and from the date-palm, from the pollen thereof, spring pendant bunches, and gardens of grapes, and the olive and the pomegranate."

"The earth is our first mother," says Imam Alhilaly. "Therefore it has certain rights over us. One of these rights is making it come alive with green vegetation and other plant life. How important is the planting of trees? In the words of the Prophet: "When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hands, he should plant it."

A thinning biotic diversity sponging and diminishes the earth's resources whose principal cause is human greed changes the role of human beings from a steward to a predator, from a nurturer to a destroyer. A complex technology of machine and apparatus as the vanguard of human existence by its intrinsic dynamism is sometimes the cause of steadily estranging humanity from nature . The Quran says: "We bestowed on you from on high the ability to make use of iron, in which there is awesome power as well as a source of benefits for man. " (Quran 57.25) The power inherent in natural elements, whether iron or uranium or silicon can, if harnessed for disparaging rather than advantageous ends, obliterate sensitivity towards other creation.. Caution must be exercised in the use of technology with its attendant mechanization lest it reduces all life to a nonentity and breed hubris as in the case of the atom bomb and the dreadful plight of life in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

In the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Muslims find the quintessence and embodiment of Qur'anic guidance. With regard to land and forestation the Prophet has stated:

"Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded."

"If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part."

"Whoever brings dead land to life, that is, cultivates wasteland, for him is a reward therein. "

With a view to the prediction of ecological disaster facing our planet public concern over such phenomena as the greenhouse effect, ozone holes, acid rain, and the extinction of species' builds upon that which followed publication in the 1960s of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which made ecology a household word. An international effort is now underway to confront environmental ills that plague the earth. Muslim involvement must be active and cannot remain reactive and minimal.

Muslims awaken to the challenge of preserving the global ecosystem, modern Islamic scholars must illuminate the ecological principles of the Qur'an as they apply to

contemporary environmental issues. “*Corruption has appeared on land and sea as an outcome of what men’s hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste the evil of some of their doings, so that they might return to the right path.*” (Quran 30:41), implying that destruction of the natural environment follows from immoral and unethical use of natural resources.

The simplest yet a far reaching allegory of Heaven is described in the form of a Garden – the Garden of Bliss (*Jannah or Jannah un Naim*) (Quran 5: 68) The gentle green in the foliage, with sloping green turf valleys and banks; the exotic colors and shapes of flowers ; the soft and melting beauty of clouds and mists; the landscapes with cool colors with views of murmuring brooks ; the music of waterfalls and birds; the perfume of flowers and subtle scent of the shrubbery, the moisture and the morning dew or even the garden soil; the exquisite fruits, the lush lawns are some of the ecstasies and delight of a peaceful, beautiful landscape.

The challenge facing Muslim scholars and scientists is to devise on the foundation of such Qur’anic dictums that address environmental issues in the modern context, from “deforestation and soil erosion to drought and flood, from wild life extinction to toxic waste, from the carrying capacity of a habitat to a land ethic, from the application of technology to the preservation of community and culture, from greenhouse effect to acid rain, from nuclear power to genetic engineering, from population and poverty to North-South equity, from stewardship to sustainable development.”

Failing to pursue the Quranic decrees, we have certainly, disturbed the ecological balance. And it is for us to correct it. This necessitates effort, will and bold change. To restore ,preserve the *mizan* or balance in nature; accountability, responsibility as custodians, stewards and trustees is essential .”Man shall have nothing but what he strives for” (Quran 53:39). Maintenance of the ecosystems harboring life in all its forms including animals, birds, insects and plants are required. Recycling waste, conservation of water and other natural resources, reversing the process of deforestation by encouraging tree plantations are essential.

One of the incidents often recalled with humility by Muslims concerning the environment is the instruction by Abu Bakr, the first Caliph of Islam, to his armies. In addition to prohibiting the army not to harm or cause injury women, children and the inûrm, he ordered them not to hurt animals, destroy or damage crops or cut down trees. Destruction and impairment of life and nature were barred even in times of war. Further the environment is not a subject for separate treatment as the human condition was never detached from the natural order.

Human greed damage obliterated life and devastated the environment. Global warming at present is a serious issue. Corruption of land and sea has led to fecundity. “...And do not desire corruption in the land. Indeed, God does not like corruptors.” (*Quran* [28:77](#)) ...And do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption.”(*Quran* [2:60](#))

Our catastrophes are self-inflicted. We seem to have open the path to a process of self destruction. As religious-environmental engagement and references to environmental stewardship in sacred texts is firmly rooted in Religious texts , the present crisis calls on religious leaders to engage with governments and institutions on eco-themed worship services that will inspire , enlighten and illuminate.

“ Transgress not in the balance and weigh with justice and fall not short in the balance. It is He Who has spread the earth for His creatures : therein is fruit and palm trees with sheaths and grain in the blade, and fragrant herbs. Which of the favors of your Lord will you deny.....”(*Quran* 55, 9-12)

References

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