

Environmental Ethics of Islam

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ABSTRACT:

Islam is the monotheistic religion articulated by the *Qur'ān*, the word of God, and by the teaching of Muhammad (PBUH). Islamic ethics is its moral principles, which defines what is good for the society. It enlightens the sacred views that man must strive to maintain the harmony of their inner and outer environments, in conformity with the world of nature.

In the *Qur'ānic* theology of creation God created this cosmos out of nothing. He created man, as a vice-gerent on this earth. He created lands seas, mountains, plants and animals, and then entrusted all this to humans to take advantage of it. So humans are now guardian of this cosmos for a limited period of time. After this life He will audit and judge the individual for using or misusing the world. The earth thus is a testing ground of the human species.

In other words, the *Qur'ānic* environmental ethics tell us that God has trusted humans His world. They have to prove themselves capable of this trust, by maintaining a balance, in a way to get benefits from the nature, and protect it from discards. Thus the relation of humans to its environment is a relation of “the trustee” and “the trust”.

The Qur'an says, “Cheat not in maintaining the balance. Establish just measure and do not fall short in maintaining the balance.”¹

The article focuses to investigate the ethics in the *Qur'ān* and teachings of the Prophet regarding the relationship of man towards the natural world.

Key words: Environment and Islam; *Qur'ānic* Environmental Ethics; Islam and Nature; Islamic Ethics toward the Natural World, Islam and the Eco-System.

Environment is the surrounding or conditions in which a person, animal or plant lives.

In the broader view sun, moon, sea, earth, forest and desert etc together make an environment for the existence of man and all living beings. While in its closer view man's behavior his altitude and his interaction with his surrounding makes his environment. Living in an unclean, congested and polluted place, result in a physically, psychologically and mentally sick environment. A successful man generates his surroundings by his practice and positive thinking to a healthy life style.²

Ethics emphasizes compassion, mercy and forgiveness toward every one.³ It is for the people, as humans are the only self-reflective, deliberative moral agents on the earth.⁴ The *Qur'ān* says, “And your Lord taught the Bee to built its cell in hills, on trees and in (human) habitats”.⁵ The circle of man ethical kindness starts with family but then radiates outward to one's community. This has even extended to animals and plants in Muslim society.⁶ The human quality that encompasses the concept of the ideal ethical value in the *Qur'ān* is summed up in *Taqwā*. The *Qur'ān* says, “O mankind! We created you from a

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single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)".⁷ The Muslim *Ummah* or community is thus seen as the instrument through which *Qur'ān* ideals and commands are translated at the social level.⁸

Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its nonhuman contents.⁹ It starts with inter-human concerns for a quality environment and ends up with man's relation to animals, plants, species and ecosystems.¹⁰

Islamic environmental ethics is based on legal foundations which Muslims hold to be formulated by God and is termed as the sources of *Sharī'ah*; i.e. *Qur'ān*, *Ḥadīth* and *Fiqh*. These legal instructions have been revealed in such a way that the conscience approves and acknowledges them to be correct. Thus the law itself becomes a part of human conscience, thereby guaranteeing its application and its success.¹¹ According to Islam environment is God's creation and to protect it is to preserve its values as a sign of the Creator.¹² According to a tradition, Prophet Muhammad taught that "all creatures are like a family of God; and He loves the most those who are the most beneficent to His family."¹³

Man's uniqueness is defined by Allah as *Khalīfah* on this earth which literally means the guardian or care taker: "And He it is Who has made you successors (vicegerent) in the land."¹⁴ Man is distinguished as the only creature on this universe endowed with the intellect. The *Qur'ān* says, "Man is gifted with intellect and the power of conceptualization".¹⁵ Thus man should utilize his power of intellect for preserving, protecting and promoting his fellow creatures.¹⁶ Islam also blames those people who do not employ their intellectual faculties of thinking, reasoning and meditating, the *Qur'ān* describes such people as: "They have hearts where with they understand not, eyes where with they see not and ears where with they hear not they are like cattle-may more misguided: for they are heedless of warning".¹⁷

The interaction between the creatures and the environment in their service to one another represents a symbolic scenario supporting the doctrinal belief, in Islam, that it was God who created the interactive system and all of its elements should be nurtured and maintained.¹⁸ The *Qur'ān* verse says, "There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on God: He knows the time and place of its temporary deposit: all is in a clear record".¹⁹ In another verse of the *Qur'ān* says, "And whatever creature that is in the skies and that is in the earth and the angels bow down to Allah and they do not consider themselves great. They fear their Fosterer above them and do what they are commanded".²⁰ Thus all living things are partners to man in existence and submission to God, thus man must be merciful toward animals and strive to ensure the preservation of different species.²¹

Animal's importance in the *Qur'ān* is obvious from the fact that numerous Chapters of the sacred scripture bear their names, for example, *al-Baqarah* (The Cow); *al-Naḥl* (The Bee), *al-Ankabūt* (The Spider), and *al-Naml* (The Ant). Moreover, one of the striking expressions which the *Qur'ān* uses in referring to animals is that they constitute a "community" (*Ummah*) just like humans. *Qur'ān* says, "There is not an animal on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they shall be gathered to their Sustainers in the end."²²

The fact that, according to the *Qur'ān*, Solomon could understand the

languages of birds and ants implies at least two points. First, communication with animals is possible, Second, we must understand that animals are just like our fellow men, and that there is no clear-cut distinction between humans and non-humans; they are both creatures of the same Creator.²³ In the *Qur'ān*, Prophet Solomon said: "O you people! we have been taught the speech of birds and on us has been bestowed of all things: this is indeed grace manifest (from God)."

Before Solomon was marshalled his hosts—of jinn (genies) and men and birds—and they were all kept in order and rank. At length when they came to a (lowly) valley of ants one of the ants said: "O you ants get into your habitations lest Solomon and his hosts crush you (under foot) without knowing it."²⁴

Prophetic Narration also instructed for being nice to animals, Abu *Hurairah* reported that Prophet Muhammad said, "Do not withhold the superfluous water, for that will prevent people from grazing their cattle."²⁵

Similarly in another *ḥadīth* narrated by Abu *Hurairah*, the prophet said, "While a man was walking he felt thirsty, he went down a well and drank water from it. On coming out of it, he saw a dog panting and eating mud because of excessive thirst. The man said, 'This (dog) is suffering from the same problem as that of mine. So he (went down the well), filled his shoe with water, caught hold of it with his teeth and climbed up and watered the dog. Allah thanked him for his (good) deed and forgave him.' The people asked, 'O Allah's Apostle! Is there a reward for us in serving (the) animals?' He replied, 'Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate'.²⁶

Tree plantation is essential as trees are very useful to us in various ways. It gives us food, wood, shade and life. It keeps our environment suitable for living by the supply of oxygen. It prevents drought and floods and save land from erosion.²⁷ According to Islam plants are the creatures that praise God and are worthy of respect. More-over green has always been considered symbolizing of peace and the color of the clothes of the people of paradise.²⁸ The *Qur'ān* says, "Upon them will be green Garments of fine silk and heavy brocade, and they will be adorned with Bracelets of silver".²⁹

There are a lot of Prophetic traditions advising us about the green environment. The *ḥadīth* says, "The world is green and beautiful and Allah has appointed you as His stewards over it". He sees how you acquit yourselves"³⁰.

In another tradition Prophet (PBUH) said: 'Whosoever cuts down a Lotus tree will have his head put into the Fires of Hell by God.'" *Abū Dāwūd* was asked about the meaning of this *ḥadīth*. He said: "If there is a tree in an open space which provides shade for wayfarers and animals, and someone cuts it down, then God will put that person's head in the Fires of Hell".³¹

In another *ḥadīth* the Prophet (PBUH) said, "If the Hour starts to happen and in the hand of one of you is a palm shoot or seedling; then if he's able to plant it before the Hour happens, and then let him plant it".³² This explains Islam's care for the earth to be green and full of produce until the end of man's life on earth.³³ It encapsulates the principles of Islamic environmental ethics. Even when all hope is lost, planting should continue for planting is good in itself. The planting of the palm shoot continues the process of development and will sustain life even if one does not anticipate any benefit from it. In this, the Muslim is like the soldier who fights to the last bullet.³⁴

Earth is a living being, pulsating with life, for instance how can a dead body

render worship and glorify the lord? No doubt, it is only possible when the body has life.³⁵ The *Qur'ān* says, "On the day will she declare her tidings".³⁶

Vegetation and the specifics make food from the ground, water and sun. This food is required by human and animals in many ways. Thus man, animal and plant all depend on earth. The *Qur'ān* says, "And the earth, He has set it for living creatures".³⁷ Earth has been not only man's fertile source for his sustenance, but it has also been for him a venue of his physical and mental powers.³⁸ In another verse the *Qur'ān* terms the earth as a couch, and it states, "Who has made the earth as a couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith Fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto Allah when ye know".³⁹

Similarly, Man's dependence on earth is not only physical and biological but spiritual and aesthetic as well. The *Qur'ān* says, "He who has made for you the earth like a carpet spread out; has enabled you to go about there in by roads (and channels), and has sent down water from the sky".⁴⁰

The concept of *ḥimā* has existed since the time of the Prophet Muhammad. It involved the government's protection of specific unused areas, so that no one can develop them in any way.⁴¹ The Prophet (PBUH) said: "No *ḥimā* except for Allah and His Apostle". We have been told that Allah's Apostle made a place called *an-Naqā'* as *ḥimā*, and 'Umar made *al-Sharaf* and *al-Rabadha ḥimā* (for grazing the animals of *Zakāt*).⁴²

"*Iqtā'*", is another system in Islam for the management of land. It is also termed as the allocation of lands, which aims to acquire benefit for the community from the land. It refers to the government's action of assigning a piece of land to a developer who is expected to render it productive, benefiting himself and the community.⁴³

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges we've ever faced. The *Qur'ān* says, "By the sky which returns".⁴⁴ God swears by the sky and its function of 'returning'. Rain, for one, is 'returned' to Earth by the clouds in the atmosphere. In Islamic doctrine, a divine oath signifies the importance of relation to the Creator, and manifests His majesty and the supreme Truth in a special way. Plants, animals, and man all depend on the heaven for getting water and sunlight from the sky for their existence and for the continuation of their lives. The *Qur'ān* says, "And We send down pure water from the sky, thereby to bring to life a dead land and slake the thirst of that which We have created- cattle and men in multitudes".⁴⁵

The universe we inhabit is a sign of God's creation as is the environment of our innermost selves,⁴⁶ thus in order to protect our generations we have to think about the environment related issues, green house effect, global warming, and the depletion of ozone layer. In the *Qur'ān* Almighty God termed the sky as a ceiling for the dwellers of earth. It Says, "(He) who made for you the earth a bed (spread out) and the sky a ceiling...".⁴⁷

In yet another verse, God warned man not to transgress the balance, The *Qur'ān* says, "He created man and taught him clear expression. The sun and the moon both run with precision. The stars and the trees bow down in prostration. He erected heaven and established the balance, so that you would not transgress the balance. Give just weight do not skimp the balance. "He" laid out the earth for all living creatures".⁴⁸

Water is seen by *Qur'ān* as a cleaning agent, *ḥalāl*, used in the preparation for prayer, *Wuḥūd*, as well as for variety of religious actions in Islam. Water carries the

genes at the start of procreation. It gives life to earth and is used to clean man physically and spiritually.⁴⁹ Human health, agriculture, forests, and aquatic life, in fact the whole ecosystem is affected by problems associated with water.⁵⁰ Islam forbids wasting water and using it without benefit.

The Prophet is reported to have cursed a person who spoils three places, the high road, the shade of a tree, and the river bank, owing to this tradition each of these three elements is protected by the system of *ḥaram*, which literary means protected or banned zone.⁵¹

The preservation of water for the nourishment of humankind, animal life, bird life and vegetation is a practice that gains Allah's pleasure. The *Qur'an* says, "Then let man look at his food, (and how We provide it); For that We pour forth water in abundance; And We split the earth in fragments; And produce therein corn; And Grapes and nutritious plants; And Olives and Dates; And enclosed Gardens, dense with lofty trees; And fruits and fodder; For use and convenience to you and your cattle".⁵²

The *Qur'an* and the *ḥaram*, place a number of obligations and responsibilities upon Muslims: the conservation of existing water supplies in the best possible way, the prevention of any activity that might lead to the pollution of water resources or spoil the purity and characteristics of the water, and never adopting an extravagant or irresponsible attitude in the consumption of water.⁵³ The *Qur'an* says, "... and eat and drink and be not extravagant; surely He does not love the extravagant".⁵⁴ The tradition says, "Prophet (PBUH) passed by his companion *Sa'ad*, who was washing for prayer, and said, "What is this wastage, O *Sa'ad*?" "Is there wastage even in washing for prayer?" asked *Sa'ad*; and he said, "Yes, even if you are by a flowing river!"

Noise pollution is also discussed in the *Qur'an* and made sure that human being should not be subjected to loud and annoying noises to prevent harm, physically and psychologically. In the *Qur'an*, *Luqman*, advised his son saying: "...and lower thy voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass".⁵⁵ The *Sharḥ* does not allow loud voices in the Mosques, even if it is *Qur'an* that is recited

Man's duty is to use his intellectual faculties to understand the guiding signs provided by God, as Muslim being a successor of God, is answerable before the Supreme Authority for the psychological and behavioral altitude that whatever he does, think, feel is motivated by this quest of unity. The natural world thus is brought under moral control.

The Islamic theology terms this world as a test for the hereafter, the *Qur'an* verse says, "Verily! We have made that which is on earth as an adornment for it, in order that we may test them (mankind) as to which of them are best in deeds".⁵⁶

According to Islam man duty is so onerous and burdensome that no other creature would accept it.⁵⁷ The *Qur'an* says, "Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it."⁵⁸

Man must work humbly on earth as; he depends on it for food drink and the very air he breathes. The *Qur'an* says, "Verily we have created Man into toil and struggle"⁵⁹

In Islamic philosophy, Man accepted nature as a trust (*Amana*) for his moral struggle. Trust is a mutual commitment. Individual becomes trustees through whom a moral and spiritual vision is fulfilled in personal life.⁶⁰ God expressed his confidence in the ability of man for preserving nature as his responsibility. Now man has to prove this

responsibility by his efforts. The Islamic rationale for an ecological ethics rests firmly on the *Qur'ān* notion of *Amana*. The *Qur'ān* says "Muslim societal ethics is a quest for equilibrium, accepting the mandate of trusteeship and striving to be a moderate community (*Ummah Wasa'ah*)"⁶¹

Wasting is prohibited in Islam. Earth is of the Lord, it is the inheritance of the righteous. Man is invited to enjoy all it has to offer for the comfort and enjoyment of man, to eat and drink but not to commit waste. For waste is hateful to the lord.⁶² The *Qur'ān* says, humans are guardians of God's Creation⁶³, and man should not create disorder/ pollution⁶⁴ Only humans need the guidance of a scripture as only the human species has a free will; all other species do their God given task automatically (e.g. bees pollinating flowers).

The tree plantation is advised to Muslims in the prophetic *ḥadīth* on the authority of *Anas bn. Malik*, the prophet said, "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him."⁶⁵

Islam discouraged lavish and unjust consumption of resources, wasteful attitude and extravagance: The *Qur'ān* says, "... and eat and drink and be not extravagant; surely He does not love the extravagant".⁶⁶ To enjoy the bounties of God's provision and not to over indulge, is the way of Muslim society⁶⁷.

The promotion of harmony and mutual respect on earth is also a *Qur'ān* universal order. It eradicates evils of violence emanating from ethnic and racial enmities on earth.⁶⁸ The *Qur'ān* says, "O Mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribe, that ye may know each other not that ye may despise each other".⁶⁹ Another verse says, "Do not mischief in earth after it hath been set in order"⁷⁰.

Killing one man is a killing of humanity. Even animal killing without reason is strictly forbidden and the Prophet (PBUH)says, "If without good reason anyone kills a sparrow, or a creature lesser than that even, the living creature will put his complaint to God on the Day of Judgement, saying: 'So-and-so killed me for no purpose.'"⁷¹

To be polite with animals and plants even during war is the teaching of Islam. Prophets companion, *Abū Bakr* says, "Do not cut down trees and do not kill animals except for food (in the enemy territory)".

Islamic concept of *ḥimā*, must be adopted, which permits the creation of not only animal sanctuaries, but also any form of environmental reserve, whether of plant, fish, birds or any form of endangered species.⁷² *No'mān bn. Bashir* reported that, the prophet commented, "Truly every king has a sanctuary (grazing land) which is forbidden to the people."⁷³

God has created everything in this universe in due proportion and measure both quantitatively and qualitatively. God has declared in the *Qur'ān*: "Verily, all things have We created by measure".⁷⁴ The Significance of measure or the concept of balance (*al-Mīzān*) is disturbed by man through industrialization which results in the so-called greenhouse effect.⁷⁵

The *Qur'ān* clearly explains us how the planet earth would come to an end. The verse says, "The (Day) of Noise and Clamour, what is the (Day) of Noise and Clamour, and what will explain to thee what the (Day) of Noise and Clamour is, (It is) a Day whereon men will be like moths scattered about, and the mountains will be like carded wool."⁷⁶ The disaster of the atomic blasts of the present day is completing the indications given for the end of life on earth.

Conclusion

The environment is one of the many critical issues that have arisen as a challenge to the survival of living things. According to Islam all creations belong to Allah. Animals and plants are partners to man in the universe. The earth, sky, water and air is for man's sustenance. Human role on this planet is that of a guardian. The earth is the temporary dwelling for him. He will be rewarded or punished in the Here-After according to his deeds towards God's creation. Man being an integral component of nature has the right to use natural resources, but he is not allowed to disturb the overall environmental balance. The disturbed natural balance will ultimately end with his self-destruction. *Qur'an* uses the term *Murfi liheen* (reformers) in contrast to *Mufsideen* (corruptors) who have spoiled the natural balance to serve their own ends. Muslims have been commanded to do "*al-'Amal al-ḥayy liḥ*" (acts of reformation), to take up corrective measures for improving the society by bringing justice, peace and tranquility to restore a physically and mentally healthy pollution-free society. As Almighty God warned in the *Qur'an*, "And when he goes away, he strives throughout the land, to cause corruption therein and destroy crops and animals". And Allah does not like corruption".⁷⁷

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