ISLAM AND THE ENVIRONMENT - ETHICS AND PRACTICE

AN ASSESSMENT

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Preamble

Very few people should now be left unconvinced of the threats that face Planet Earth especially after the massive media coverage surrounding the failure of the Climate Summit in Copenhagen in December 2009. However, the evidence that human activity is largely responsible for the degradation of the planet continues to be ignored although the onus remains with each one of us to change and the absence of an agreement in Copenhagen demonstrates our lack of willingness to do so. Why are we then reluctant to change in the face of dire predictions? Change can be forced on us by the state through the use of economic stratagems such as deflation and taxation but we are looking here at more deep seated tendencies that define human behaviour. Can religion provide the antidote for dealing with these tendencies? Can it summon the positive forces in our breasts to address this matter? This essay is an attempt to explain how Islam defines human connections with the earth and how we may be kinder to it as the source of the generous gifts that sustain all our lives.

Islamic environmentalism has its own unique expression but it is not evident today even in countries that describe themselves as Islamic. The globalizing forces of a secularizing modernity have had a major impact on the world’s far-flung Muslim community, especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the Caliphate in 1924, and Muslims are as much exposed to the forces of materialism, secularism, and the many threats to the ecosystem as any other people. It could be argued that the driving force of modernity stems from the push for economic development which is now taxing the earth’s resources as never before in human history. The global village is now a homogenised consumer culture which impacts negatively on the biosphere. This has been achieved by the progressive dilution and destruction of old traditional values and the marginalisation of religion, and Islam has not been immune to this process.

As people who are benefiting materially from it and also as people who have in no small measure participated in the processes that have degraded the planet, Muslims have an important contribution to make to the growing debate on this matter. Hence the urgent search in the Islamic texts and traditions for answers to the contemporary ecological issues, but the immediate problem one encounters here is one of language and culture. Islamic environmentalism is buried deep within the matrix of the shariah (the basis of Islamic law) and coming as it does from a different milieu than the Western secular mould, the articulation of this is different. It also needs to be recognised that contemporary environmental language is new, itself emerging as a scientific response to unprecedented ecological problems made possible by the emergence of new disciplines which allow the synergy of living organisms, habitats and biological systems to be modelled accurately for the first time. It was almost nonexistent in the middle of the last century, has grown rapidly
since then, is still evolving and only emerged as an academic specialism in the last fifty years or so. Whereas Western ecology is based on secular premises, Islamic responses to the growing crisis are based on the precepts of a religious tradition which assert the divine nature and origin of the universe, humanity and life itself. There is a thus a divergence of paradigms deep in the interface between Islam and the West which takes the form of two irreconcilable issues that call for some examination. The first concerns existence itself and how it is to be defined and the second concerns material wealth or money and how it is generatedvii.

The traditional world view was challenged by what we have come to know as the 'enlightenment' having its origins in 16th century Europe. Richard Tarnasv observes that this movement achieved its maturity in the nineteenth century finally resulting in a radical shift in psychological alliance from the divine to humankind. Descartes (the French philosopher and mathematician) finally breached the flood gates of the traditional Christian ordervi when he proclaimed that the human race was the "Master and possessor of Nature". But, the Quran exhorts, "Do not corrupt the earth after it has been put right" (Q 7:56)vii. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the modem condition thus, "There is near total disequilibrium between modem man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modem civilisation which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate with it"viii.

The second issue is money. The financial crisis we are witnessing now has focussed people's attention on the nature of money as never before and the following cursory look at what's behind this goes to the root of the issue. One increasingly comes across interesting appraisals of money like this for example: "... in spite of all its fervid activity, money remains a naked symbol with no intrinsic value of its own and no direct linkage to anything specificix. Money has come to be recognised as mere tokens and "there is something quite magical about the way money is created. No other commodity works quite the same way. The money supply grows through use; it expands through debt. The more we lend, the more we have. The more debt there is, the more there is"x. These tokens of "value" that we create from nothing and use everyday grow exponentially ad infinitum. But we know that the natural world, which is subject to drastic resource depletion, has limits and is finite. This equation is lopsided and the question is for how long can we continue to create this infinite amount of token finance to exploit the real and tangible resources of a finite world. Looked at from this perspective, money, as the modern world has contrived it, assumes the characteristics of a virus that eats into the fabric of the planet. The consequences of this become visible as climate change and massive global environmental degradation. It is generally known that Islam prohibits usury or the taking of interest and the term used in the Qur'an for this is ribaxi. This term has wide connotations and simply put, it means one cannot have something out of nothing. Thus riba is also seen as prohibiting the free creation of credit. The Qur'an denounces these practices vehemently and we can see why from the foregoing discussion: "Those who practise riba will not rise from the grave except as someone driven mad by Satan's touch" (Q 2:274).

Environmental Ethics in Islam

The ethical base of Islam which is derived from the imperatives laid down in the Qur'an and expressed in the practice of the Prophet, comes under numerous headings. They can
however be distilled into just three precepts for our purposes, bearing in mind public good to be the ultimate objective. They are to do what is right, forbid what is wrong and act with moderation at all times: "Let there be a community among you who call to the good, and enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. They are the ones who have success" (Q 3:104). The Qur'an uses an environmental theme in exhorting humankind to be moderate, "it is He who produces gardens, both cultivated and wild, and palm trees and crops of diverse kinds and olives and pomegranates both similar and dissimilar. Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit and pay their dues on the day of their harvest, and do not be profligate. He (Allah) does not love the profligate" (Q 6: 142). The Quran refers to creation or the natural world as the signs (ayat) of Allah, the Creator, and this is also the name given to the verses contained in the Qur'an. Ayat means signs, symbols or proofs of the divine. As the Qur'an is proof of Allah so likewise is His creation. The Qur'an also speaks of signs within the self and as Nasr explains, “...when Muslim sages referred to the cosmic or ontological Qur'an ...they saw upon the face of every creature letters and words from the cosmic Qur'an: ...they remained fully aware of the fact that the Qur'an refers to phenomena of nature and events within the soul of man as ayat ... for them forms of nature were literally ayat Allah”. As the Qur'an says, “there are certainly signs (ayat) in the earth for people with certainty; and in yourselves. Do you not then see? (Q 51:20, 21).

The Qur'an elucidates -

Allah sends down water from the sky
and by it brings the dead earth back to life.

There is certainly a Sign in that for people who hear.

There is instruction for you in cattle.
From the contents of their bellies,
from between dung and blood,
We give you pure milk to drink,
easy for drinkers to swallow.
And from the fruit of the date palm and the grapevine
you derive both intoxicants and wholesome provision.

There is certainly a Sign in that for people who use their intellect.

Your Lord revealed to the bees:
'Build dwellings in the mountains and the trees,
and also in the structures which men erect.
Then eat from every kind of fruit
and travel the paths of your Lord,
which have been made easy for you to follow.'
From inside them comes a drink of varying colours,
containing healing for mankind.

There is certainly a Sign in that for people who reflect.

(Q 16:65-69 - writer’s emphasis)

The universe we inhabit is a sign of God's creation as is the environment of our innermost selves. They both emanate from the one source and are bonded by only one purpose, which
is to serve the divine will. This bonding of the cosmic to the inner core of each individual is the deep ecology of Islam. The Qur’anic view holds that everything on the earth was created for humankind. It was God's gift (ni’mah) to us, but a gift with conditions nevertheless. The tests are a measure of our acts of worship (ihsan) in its broadest sense. That is living in a way that is pleasing to Allah, striving in everything we do to maintain the harmony of our inner and outer environments.

The word 'nature' is an abstraction which cannot be found in the Qur’an and the closest one comes to this is the modem Arabic usage of the word bi’a which connotes a habitat or a surrounding. The Qur’an speaks of creation (khalq) and it contains two hundred and sixty one verses where this word is used in its various grammatical forms derived from the root *kh I q*. These verses contain references to the human world; to the natural world of the planet from trees to turtles, from fish to fowl; and to the sun, stars and skies. The very first revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet used this word in its verb form to dramatic effect, "Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of blood" (Q 96:1). Creation is the fabric into which the tapestry of life is worked, or rather the living tissue from which organic beings are formed.

The Qur’an is not a text book and we look to certain principles in it that communicate the ecological message to Muslims in a way that could both be understood and also be a spur to action. The following is a crystallisation of what we consider to be the essentials which will bring into focus the dimensions of change that are needed today from an Islamic perspective. The planetary system, the earth and its ecosystems all work within their own limits and tolerances. Islamic teaching likewise sets limits to human behaviour as a control against excess and it could be said that the limits to the human condition are set within four principles. They are the Unity principle (Tawhid); the Creation Principle (Fitra); the Balance Principle (Mizan); and the Responsibility Principle (Khalifa).

*Tawhid - The Unity Principle*

*Tawhid* is the foundation of Islamic monotheism and its essence is contained in the declaration (Shahada) which every Muslim makes and is a constant reminder of faith. It is "There is no God but God" (*la ilaha illal-Iah*) and is the foundational statement of the Unity of the Creator from which everything else flows. "Say 'He is Allah, Absolute oneness, Allah the Everlasting Sustainer of all" (Q 112: 1, 2). It is the testimony to the unity of all creation and to the fabric of the natural order of which humankind is an intrinsic part: "What is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allah: He encompasses everything" (Q 4:125). This is the bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam as this affirms the interconnectedness of the natural order.

*Fitra - The Creation Principle*

*Fitra* is the principle that describes the primordial nature of creation: "Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind" (Q 30:29). Mankind was created within the natural pattern of nature and being of it, his role is defined by that patterning. *Fitra* is the pure state, a state of intrinsic goodness and points to the possibility that everything in creation has a potential for goodness and the conscious expression of this rests with humankind.

*Mizan - The Balance Principle*
In one of its more popular passages the *Qur’an* describes creation thus –

The All-Merciful taught the *Qur’an*
He created man and taught him clear expression.
The sun and moon both run with precision.
The stars and the trees all bow down in prostration.
He erected heaven and established the balance...

(Q 55:1-5)

Allah has singled out humankind and taught it clear expression that is the capacity to reason. All creation has an order and a purpose and is in a state of dynamic balance. If the sun, the moon, the stars did not bow themselves, that is serve the purpose of their design, it would be impossible for life to function on earth. This is another way of saying that the natural order works because it is in submission to the Creator. It is Muslim in the original, primordial sense.

**Khalifa - The Responsibility Principle**
This principle establishes the tripartite relationship between the Creator, humankind and creation. God created everything for humankind and appointed it the vicegerent (*Khalif*) on this earth: "it is He who appointed you *Khalifs* on this earth" (Q 6:167). This role was one of trusteeship (*amanah*) which imposed a moral responsibility, "We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains but they refused to take it on and shrunk from it. But man took it on." (Q 33:72). This assumption of responsibility made humankind accountable for their actions and encouraged positive action. "Will the reward for doing good be anything but good?" (Q 55:59).

We can deduce in outline from these four principles that creation is complex and finite. It emerged from one source and was designed to function as a whole. Humankind like the rest of the natural world was, as part of the natural patterning of creation, in a state of goodness with potential for good action. It is inextricably part of this pattern, but it is the only element of it that can choose to act against the divine will using the very gift of reasoning bestowed upon it by the Creator. Submission to the divine will, the natural law that holds in check the instincts of the predator, is the way to uphold our responsibilities as the Creator's *Khalif*. Humankind is the guardian of the natural order.

**Evolution of Islamic Environmentalism**

As Muslim populations grew and expanded territorially their requirements in government became increasingly complex and the *Shariah*, the basis of Islamic law (*fiqh*) accordingly evolved to meet these conditions. The bedrock of this process is the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* (the actions and sayings of the Prophet) and to this were added the consensus (*ijma*) of scholar jurists and the process of reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*). Two other elements were incorporated into this system which could usefully serve the purpose of developing environmental law in the Muslim world today. The first of these is interpretation in context (*ijtihad*) and the second is custom and practice (*’urf wa adat*).

The *Shariah* expanded and evolved within this framework to set defining standards for Muslim behaviour within the divine decrees of the Quran, including among others, family law,
civil law, commercial law and environmental law. The following are examples of how the Qur'an defines the place of law in society: "You who have iman (faith); be upholders of justice, bearing witness for Allah alone, even against yourselves or your parents and relatives. Whether they are rich or poor, Allah is able to look after them. Do not follow your own desires and deviate from the truth. If you twist and turn away, Allah is aware of what you do" (Q 4:134). Truth takes precedence over love, even love for one's parents and love is known habitually to conceal the truth. There is no compromise with truth and justice, "so call and go straight as you have been ordered to. Do not follow their whims and desires but say, I have iman in a book sent down by Allah and I am ordered to be just between you ..." (Q 42:13). The Qur'an also asks us to be just to our natural surroundings, "We did not create the heavens and earth and everything between them, except with truth" (Q 15:85); truth in this context being associated with justice.

As the Muslims who succeeded the Prophet attempted to give expression to the divine decree, the scholar jurists approached this matter with great diligence and formulated an 'environmentalism' derived from the imperatives laid down in the Qur'an and the example set by the practice of the Prophet. This environmentalism is not of the kind we are familiar with today which is a reaction to our excesses; rather it is based on the laying down of patterns of behaviour which are the norms of society.

The Shari'ah also evolved within the guidelines set by four principles agreed upon by scholar jurists over the centuries. They are -

1. The interest of the community takes precedence over the interests of the individual.
2. Relieving hardship takes precedence over promoting benefit.
3. A bigger loss cannot be prescribed to alleviate a smaller loss and a bigger benefit takes precedence over a smaller one.
4. Conversely a smaller harm can be prescribed to avoid a bigger harm and a smaller benefit can be dispensed with in preference to a bigger one.

As the Muslim community expanded out of its sparse desert environment, it was confronted by many challenges, one of which was relative abundance. This brought about other problems like over exploitation and waste in its train. Muslim jurists applied themselves to these problems assiduously and the following is a brief summary of how the Shari'ah developed in this area over the past 1400 years.

**Legislative Principles**

1. Allah is the sole owner of the earth and everything in it. People hold land on usufruct – that is for its utility value only. There is a restricted right to public property.
2. Abuse of rights is prohibited and penalised.
3. There are rights to the benefits derived from natural resources held in common.
4. Scarce resource utilization is controlled.
5. The common welfare is protected.
6. Benefits are protected and detriments are either reduced or eliminated.

**Institutions**

1. People who reclaim or revive land (ihya 'al mawat) have a right to its ownership.
2. Land grants (iqta) may be made by the state for reclamation and development.
3. Land may be leased (*ijiara*) for its usufruct by the state for its reclamation and development.

4. Special reserves (*hima*) may be established by the state for use as conservation zones.

5. The state may establish inviolable zones (*harim*) where use is prohibited or restricted. Every settlement has a right to create such zones managed by the people and where use is severely restricted. Additionally, it is permitted to establish these zones adjacent to sources of water and other utilities like roads and places of public resort.

6. Makkah and Madinah are known as the Two Inviolable Sanctuaries (*al haramain*) where trees cannot be cut down and animals are protected from harm within their boundaries. They serve as examples of best practice.

7. Charitable endowments (*awqaf*) may be established with specific conservation objectives.

**Enforcement**

The primary duty of the Islamic state is to promote public welfare (see first paragraph under Environmental Ethics in Islam above). As part of these functions, it has the mandate to protect land and natural resources from abuse and misuse. From its earliest years the Islamic state established an agency known as the *hisba* whose specific task was to protect the people through promoting the establishment of good and forbidding wrong doing. This agency was headed by a learned jurist (*muhtasib*) who functioned like the chief inspector of weights and measures and chief public health officer rolled into one. He was also responsible among other similar duties for the proper functioning of the *hima* and *harim* zones and acted as what one may describe as an environmental inspectorate.

The development and application of these principles and institutions have seen a decline over the past two centuries as creeping globalisation, the economics of industrialisation and the profit motive gradually overtook this model. We are experiencing the consequences of this now. However, there are clear indications as to how this Islamic heritage has been and could again be put to good use in order to address environmental and ecological problems now faced by all humankind.

**A Contemporary Muslim Response**

For Muslims their faith is a whole, an organic reality, where every element has a function as a part of this whole. For example, law in Islam does not make sense without the ethical dimensions of the divine revelation. From an Islamic perspective secular law is amoral. It deals with man-made ends for man-made purposes. The Muslim idea of the highest form of civilization is the one that is pleasing to Allah. However, in today's global order of which Muslims are a significant part, conspicuous consumption tops the list of priorities. Muslim nation states, of which there are now about sixty are willing co-optees to this consumer ethic. It should be obvious from this that it becomes almost impossible for Muslims whether individuals or nation states, to live according to a normative Islam today, which is in principle much kinder to the environment. The present globalised model is in direct conflict with the two fundamental precepts (discussed earlier) that are part of the Islamic worldview. There is now a schizoid tendency in Muslim society whereby it strives to maintain its deep attachment to Islam while it insists on enjoying the fruits of the current consumer society. For example
this manifests itself in ‘Islamic banking’ a term considered by many Muslims as an oxymoron to say the least.

One could say with a reasonable degree of certainty that the environmental problems we see today would not have arisen in a society ordered in accord with Islamic principles because its world view “defined limits to human behaviour and contained excess”. xx We have seen how this was applied in the realm of environmental protection although its stated aim was not precisely that. Rather, it came about in the course of establishing public good, one of the basic principles of the Shari’ah. Safeguarding against human excess had the effect of protecting the natural world. The Shari’ah evolved holistically and new situations were dealt with through the processes we have discussed above and there is nothing to stop its principles being observed to address contemporary environmental issues. However there are important impediments to its proper application today and they are –

1. The Shari’ah is marginal even in Islamic states because of the dominance of the global system now in place. The influence of international trade and finance is a case in point.
2. The Hisbah is an agency that has the potential to set down environmental guidelines and act to resolve conflict in matters relating to natural resource utilisation but it is now virtually non-existent.
3. The state and the apparatus of government have separated themselves from the body of Islamic scholars (ulema) who are coming to be known as “the religious authorities", a euphemism for a clergy, which is not recognised in Islam.xx
4. Following the Western model, the specialists and ministries of Muslim states increasingly function in watertight compartments. As a mirror of what is happening in the West, Muslim economists and environmentalists tend to be two separate species with opposing perspectives.
5. The nation state model, which is now the universally accepted form of governance which all Muslim countries have adopted, considers economic development as its highest priority. Coping with environmental change is much lower down the scale.

As we have observed earlier, there is a clear issue of conflicting paradigms in the interface between Islam and the West. The question is how to implement the teachings and practices of one world view within an institutional framework devised by another that has a radically different outlook. Although it may be possible to incorporate the principles of Islamic environmental law into the legislative programmes of Muslim countries, the problem will remain one of implementation unless appropriate institutional arrangements are made to replace the old and now virtually defunct ones. It is also interesting that efforts to meet this new challenge in Muslim countries are made by secular agencies; this is only to be expected as threats to the ecosystem are generally not seen as a "Muslim problem". The role of the Muslim scholar jurists (fuqaha) has been redefined into a "religious" one as the nature of the Muslim state has changed in its attempt to cope with modernity. They were unwilling partners to this change and were replaced in the sphere of state policy by a secularised administration which gradually weakened their influence as it began to take charge. However, there is an awakening amongst Muslims to the realities of such issues as climate change and deforestation, and therein lies a paradox: The tide of secular expressions of
current concerns appears to be motivating some Muslims to look for answers from within their own traditions.

Muslim minorities, particularly those living in the West, have an important role to play in formulating such answers. Living in the belly of the beast, so to speak, gives them the advantage of a perspective based on an immediate, intensely untheoretical engagement with the issues. Their understanding of events refracted through the lens of Islam could lead to a unique contribution to the synthesis of ideas that could lead us out of this impasse. For example Muslim groups in the West are re-examining alternative currencies and ways of trading that are based on the fiqh of Islam. The Qur'an asserts, "Corruption has appeared in both land and sea because of what people's own hands have brought about so that they may taste something of what they have done, so that hopefully they will turn back" (Q 30:40). In other words learn from your mistakes and change your ways.

Whilst their full assertion of Islam as the exclusive solution is constrained by their context, it is important for Muslims to both engage in the debate concerning the environmental crisis and at the same time work in partnership with the other traditions and like-minded groups and organisations from outside the world of Islam. At the root of the crisis is personal behaviour and if Muslims were true to themselves their spontaneous inclination would be to prioritise the welfare of others with whom they share a finite planet, which needs to be cared for in the interests of the generations to come. Islamic environmentalism begins with the self and then radiates to the home, the school, the mosque and the wider community and out to all humankind. There are endless possibilities for Muslim activism in the common struggle to save the planet once ecological issues are seen in the light of giving service in a world created for us by an act of divine love. Much progress can be made if both Muslim countries, and individual Muslims themselves, take the environmental heritage of their faith more seriously.

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The translation of the Qur'an used is that by Bewley A and A, *The Noble Qur'an*, 1999, Bookwork Norwich, UK. The figures preceded by the letter Q in brackets in the text are references to chapter and verse in the relevant sections of the Qur'an.


Ibid (p.85).


The word "nature" will continue to be used in this essay for linguistic convenience. For a further explanation on terminology see Khalid F.M., *Qur'an, Creation & Conservation*, 1999, Islamic Foundation for Ecology & Environmental Sciences, Birmingham, UK.

These ideas have been developed by us over the past two decades and apart from being presented at various international fora they have been used as core messages in the development of our training resources which are now being used internationally from Africa to Indonesia. The effectiveness of our techniques can be demonstrated by our success in Zanzibar where fishermen who attended our workshops have stopped dynamiting coral reefs and are now participating in a conservation programme to save fish stocks.

The second half of this declaration is "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" (*Muhammadur Rasulullah*).

For a discussion on *Fitra* see Yasien Mohammed, *Fitra*, 1996, Ta-Ha, London

For more information on this subject see –


By our reckoning there are only two countries that have declared themselves as Islamic States and they are Saudi Arabia and Iran. The rest of the fifty six states which are part of the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) are states with Muslim majorities run on secular lines.


This is the case in the Sunni tradition of Islam which accounts for about 85% of the world's Muslim population. The Shia tradition has an established clergy.