

ISLAM AND THE ENVIRONMENT: Theology and Impact

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Theology

Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim.

I start in the name of God, the Most Merciful, the One who gives Mercy. The Qur'an, the Muslim Holy book believed to be the exact words of the message revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, tells us that from God, all things come, and to Him everything returns. When everything else is gone, there remains the Face of God.

Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr is perhaps the first, the best and the most prolific modern Muslim writer on 'man and nature'. He points out¹ that the Qur'an describes God (Allah) as *muhīt* (surrounding or encompassing) everything (41:54) – the root of the word 'environment' is the concept of 'surroundings'. God is the ultimate environment, surrounding all aspects of His creation, whether they believe in Him or not (85:20). The word for disbelievers in the Qur'an is *kāfirūn*, which means those in denial, those who cover up their ears and eyes so that they block out the truth, who are unaware and ungrateful to God for His creation, including the fact that He created human beings from tiny beginnings out of 'mingled fluids' and developed them in stages to the point where they have become able to dispute about His existence.

Arrogance is a defining characteristic of the *kāfirūn*. They deny that they will meet their Lord in the next world, that God has the power to resurrect them in another form, just as he had the power to bring them into this world to begin with. They think themselves too great to acknowledge and obey the laws of their Creator, and to fulfil the great Trust (*amāna*) placed in human beings. They are out of tune with Creation, with hearts

¹ 'Sacred Science and the Environmental Crisis: An Islamic Perspective' - Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Islam and the Environment*, Ed. Harfiyah Abdel Haleem, (Ta Ha Publishers 1998)

as hard as rocks, or even harder, for there are rocks from which streams spring out, and some from which water comes when they split open, and others which fall down in awe of God:

The Qur'an continues with a warning to them:

God is not unaware of what you do. (2:74)

Believers, in contrast, are *mu'minūn*, those who have *īmān* (faith) and *'taqwa* (awareness [of God]): the most honoured of people in the sight of God are those who are the most aware of Him (49:13). And how is a person to get this awareness of God? By looking around at God's Creation: God, in the Qur'an, urges people to look at those things they take for granted, and think about them:

Do you see the seeds you sow in the ground ? Is it you who make them grow or We? If We wished, We could turn your harvest into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we are bereft.'

Do you see the water you drink ? Was it you who brought it down from the rain-cloud or We? If We wanted, We could make it bitter: will you not be thankful?

Do you see the fire you kindle? Is it you who make the wood for it grow or We? We made it a reminder and useful to those who kindle it,

so [Prophet] glorify the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (56: 63-74)

Keep on looking as hard as you can:

You will not see any flaw in what the Lord of Mercy creates.

Look around you! Can you see any flaw? Look again! And again! All you will achieve is to tire out your eyes. (67:3-4)

It was in the spirit of seeking to know God better through the signs observable in His creation that Islam generated one of the greatest flowerings of human knowledge in history, collecting the wisdom of all the other civilizations of the time and developing them into practical industries, discoveries, inventions, art and much more, before they were taken up by Europeans to form the basis of the Renaissance.

The Qur'an does contain the concept of God (*sakhara*) 'taming' nature for man's benefit, but stresses that God has ultimate control (*mulk*) and that He could suspend this privilege if He willed. In Sura 67 (entitled *Mulk*) humans are warned:

¹⁵ *It is He who has made the earth manageable for you— travel its regions; eat His provision—and to Him you will be resurrected.* ¹⁶ *Are you sure that He who is in Heaven will not make the earth swallow you up with a violent shudder?* ¹⁷ *Are you sure that He who is in Heaven will not send a whirlwind to pelt you with stones? You will come to know what My warning means.*

In the same sura, God reminds people that He has the power to deprive people of water:

³⁰ *...‘Just think: who can give you flowing water if all your water sinks deep into the earth?’*

This echoes two other verses

We could take it (drinking water) all away
(18:23)

If We willed, We could make it bitter
(56:70)

Although it often speaks of the blessings inherent in water, the Qur’an also reminds us of its destructive side when, in the story of Noah, instead of being sent down in due measure it is ‘loosed’, made to ‘rise high’, and ‘billows surge from every direction’, ‘when nothing could provide protection from the flood’ (11:43)

When We opened the gates of heaven with pouring water and caused the earth to gush forth with springs
(54:11)

Perhaps these verses are particularly relevant at this time.

The story of Adam’s creation in the Qur’an encapsulates the relationship of man and nature:

When the angels asked God, ‘How can You put someone [on earth] who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?’ ... ‘He said, ‘I know things you do not.’ (2:30).

From this verse it is clear that God surrounds even man’s disobedience and destructiveness. God’s own power is far above what man can conceive.

The Qur'an constantly reminds people that God is able to wipe out whole communities. Human beings are only 'successors on the Earth' and there was 'a time they were nothing to speak of' (76:1). He can replace us whenever we fail to do His will, but He sends warnings to us, via prophets, holy scriptures and our own consciences, as well as the example of the fates of earlier peoples, to tell us how best to behave. With His transcendent power He is able to bear with our human failings to an extent beyond our own understanding. He gives us respite, and chances to repent and turn back towards Him:

*Corruption has appeared on land and sea as a result of people's actions and He will make them **taste** the consequences of **some of their own actions, so that they may turn back.** (30:41)*

St Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals and the environment, was a ground-breaking thinker in changing the then prevalent Christian view of nature and the environment as a threat to the spiritual life, into one of praising and celebrating God 'through' His creation:

Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
Mother Earth
who sustains and governs us,
producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and
herbs.

Compare his hymn with the following verses from the Qur'an:

Have you [Prophet] not considered that God sends water down from the sky and that We produce with it fruits of varied colours? That there are in the mountains layers of white and red of various hues, and jet black? That there are various colours among human beings, wild animals, and livestock too? It is those of His servants who have knowledge who stand in true awe of God (35:2 -8)

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All the creatures that crawl on the earth and those that fly with their wings are communities like yourselves (6:38)

The seven heavens and the earth and everyone in them glorify Him. There is not a single thing that does not celebrate His praise, though you do not understand their praise: He is most forbearing, most forgiving.’ (17:44)

‘There is nothing that does not proclaim His praise’ (17:54).

Do you not see that all those who are in the heavens and earth praise God, as do the birds with wings outstretched? Each knows its [own way] of prayer and glorification: God has full knowledge of what they do. Control of the heavens and earth belongs to God: and to God is the final return. (24:41-2)

I hope it is becoming clear from what little I have said, that Islam has the wherewithal to provide the sort of paradigm that some ecologists are looking for, where all creation is viewed as a living manifestation of God’s power, worshipping Him together, with man occupying a minor, if unusually responsible and favoured position.

We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them by land and sea. We have provided good sustenance for them and favoured them specially above many of those We have created. (17:70)

Muslim practice

That more Muslims are not aware of the importance of caring for God’s creation is a result of degenerate educational methods that do not stress the meaning of the Qur’an, but only rote learning and correct recitation, and that place narrow-minded emphasis on the five pillars alone.

On a political and legal scale in formerly Muslim countries, the vast and generally compassionate edifice of Islamic law, built on the basis of the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has largely been overwhelmed and subsumed by European laws based on Roman and Christian foundations, leaving only the private ritual and family laws to the Muslims, while in some places, all its Islamic social, business and environmental laws remain in abeyance. Many people continue to denigrate Islamic law and resist any revival Muslims try to achieve, without investigating whether it has anything to teach them.

Islamic Religious practices with possible environmental impact

- Islam has been accused of degrading the environment and cruelty to animals through the ritual slaughtering of sheep on Eid al-Adha, in memory of the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham (pbuh), although the ritual slaughter is meant to be the least painful, swiftest and most hygienic form of slaughter, and the sacrifice is meant to be a way of feeding poor people, including the pilgrims on the Hajj. In some cases it is not obligatory, even on the Hajj, let alone for people at home.
- The ritual importance of washing before prayers makes some Muslims heavy users of water, although the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) urged his followers not to waste water 'even if you have the resources of a whole river'.
- Muslims now tend to eat a lot of meat, although their Prophet rarely ate it, only when someone gave him some as a present, and then he preferred to give some of it away. His main diet was of dates, milk and cereals like barley.

Some Muslim countries are among the greatest producers of oil, and so have a vested interest in carbon emissions, but earlier, during the 'Golden Age' of Islamic civilization, (9th-13th centuries CE) the main power sources were (and in some places still are) wind, water, and animals, and these environmentally-friendly technologies spread throughout the Muslim world and into Europe. We are now returning to them and trying to develop ever more efficient ways to use them.

In discussion with some ordinary Muslims in Ilford, we heard about the simple living habits practised by their parents in their countries of origin, and how uncomfortable they were with the wasteful habits of modern city life here. From Indonesia and Africa, we have heard of places where aspects of the original Islamic respect for creation are still practised. Efforts to talk about sustainable living in Islamic terms with Muslims living here and abroad have met with favourable responses compared to ones based on utilitarian or secular reasoning or government directives.

Some Muslims are now working with others and on their own to revive Islamic respect for God's creation and justly maintain the Balance He installed in it. They realise that any injustice humans

commit towards God's creation, human or otherwise, will upset that Balance so that it works against us. They point to the evidence of such unjust behaviour all around the world and its effects and probable effects as observed by scientists, 'people who know': the Qur'an advises those in doubt to ask 'people who have knowledge'.

Some Muslims are returning to their religious sources to bring back the environmental wisdom they contain. This includes laws for sharing out water resources, preserving pastureland, and greening the desert as well as for wider economic justice. It is vital to make these known more widely to Muslims and others, and put them into practice.

Examples

In 1986 a seminal 25th Anniversary Interfaith Ceremony was held by WWF, appropriately at Assisi, home of St Francis, Patron Saint of Animals and the Environment. At this ceremony, each religion produced a statement of its own teachings on the environment. The Muslim statement was made by Dr Abdullah Omar Naseef (see handout).

In 1995, sponsored by WWF-UK, WWF-International, MOA International and the Pilkington Foundation, The Alliance of Religions for Conservation, ARC, was founded in order to assist and encourage environmental work among the religions. It works closely with all of the world's major religions.² The most recent development emerging from this interaction between religions is an investment company, 3iG, to combine ethical and eco-friendly investment with each religion's principles (<http://www.3ignet.org/news/>). It appointed its first secretary-general in December 2005 and will be meeting in Rome this month.

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES), founded in 1994, seems, in the UK at least, to be the only dedicated Islamic Environmental NGO, and it has inspired the formation of independent Islamic environmental networks in major

² *Climate Change Partnership Handbook* by Paola Triolo, published by ARC <http://arcworld.org/downloads/ClimateChange.pdf>

cities like London, Birmingham, Sheffield and Swansea. IFEEES helped to organise the 1996-1998 series of faith-based conferences on Ecology held at Harvard University, and the largest study so far of *Islam and Ecology* (580 pages) emerged from this. There are also Muslim QANGOs, in Jordan for instance, which concern themselves with the environment, and also arms of the various governments of Muslim countries, which are mainly secular, but bow to Islamic law in some respects.

In May 2004 the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt held a meeting of Chief Justices of Arab and other countries to form the 'Arab Judges' Union for the Protection of the Environment', whose aim, in collaboration with the UNEP Global Judges' Programme, is to strengthen 'the capacities of judges to carry out their judicial functions in the area of environment and development.' Various books and papers have been written on Islam and its environmental legal provisions, including some very good papers in the Harvard book just mentioned.

Much more remains to be done, but momentum is gathering and I hope this talk has been a small step in the right direction.

Talk written in 2006.