

The Ethical Paradigm of Islam and its Implications on Environmental Protection

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ABSTRACT

Islam is a divinely revealed religion. It encompasses all that which is essential for a happy and prosperous life. Not only the religious obligations and the moral behavior of the man are guided by Islam but the things surrounding him are also given equal consideration. One of the important aspects of nature is the environment hence for its protection we find many references in basic sources of Islam where Muslims have been ordained to work for the protection of the environment. Environment protection is an important aspect of Islam. Being stewards of the Earth, it is the responsibility of Muslims to care for the environment proactively. There is a definite purpose behind the creation of different species, be it plants or animals. Muslims are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between living organisms and their environment and to maintain the ecological balance created by Allah. Protection of the environment is essential to Islamic beliefs and mankind has the responsibility to ensure safe custody of the environment. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the teachings of Islam regarding the protection of the environment viz-a-viz the role of Muslims in this process.

Keywords: Islam, Environment, Conservation, Quran and *Hadith*, Ecology

1.1 Introduction

The natural habitat of an organism including everything that affects its growth and survival during its lifetime is collectively known as the environment. In other words, "Environment is the totality of water, air and land interrelationships among themselves and also with the human beings, other living organisms, and property". It includes all the physical and biological processes and their interactions.

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Environmental studies provide an approach towards understanding the environment of our planet and the impact of human life upon it. Since the environment is global, it acts as a multidisciplinary subject encompassing physics, geology, geography, history, economics, physiology, biotechnology, remote sensing, geophysics, soil science, hydrology, etc.¹

1.2 Importance of Environmental Science

The environment belongs to all living beings and is, thus, vital for all. Everybody, regardless of their profession, is affected by environmental issues like global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, dwindling forest, energy resources, loss of global biodiversity, etc. Environment study deals with the analysis of the processes in water, air, land, soil, and organisms that lead to pollution or degradation of the environment. It helps us in establishing a standard for a safe, clean, and healthy ecosystem. It also deals with important issues like safe and clean drinking water, hygienic living conditions and clean and fresh air, fertility of land, healthy food, and development. Sustainable environmental law, business administration, environmental protection, management, and environmental engineering are immersing as new career opportunities for environmental protection and management.²

1.3 Human Activities and their Effects on the Environment

1.3.1 Agriculture

It is the oldest and most widespread occupation of the people in rural areas. Over the years, there have been notable changes in the pattern of farming; Manual farming has been replaced by 'mechanized farming' due to the advancement of different technologies. Plowing is done by tractors in place of bulls. Modern agricultural techniques have eventually changed in both ways. Some of these are favorable and some unfavorable. The changes in the earlier form of agriculture have been brought due to:

- (i) Mechanical factors: Tractors, tube wells, and agricultural equipment.
- (ii) Chemical factors: Fertilizers and pesticides.

1.3.2 Industries

Industrial activities generate a huge amount of waste products which are usually discharged into the water bodies. The smoke from industries also pollutes the air. It also results in noise pollution. Processing of wastes from large chemical plants is a

very complex process because many chemicals are produced that way. In recent years, emphasis is being laid on industrial waste treatment, for the recovery of useful byproducts. By and large, it should be kept in mind that no industrial product is more important than our environment. Nowadays various measures have been taken to transform industrial waste into profitable products to save our environment as well as money. For example, waste papers can be used to make thick covers for notebooks. Industrialization is considered as a synonym for development but it is necessary to review the impact of industrialization on society and the environment otherwise it may lead to the disastrous and life-threatening consequences.

1.3.3 Mining

Mining is the act of extracting ores, coal, etc. from the earth. Mining on an Industrial scale can cause environmental damages from exploitation which can remain long after the mining is closed. The major effects of mining operations on human beings and plants are as follows:

- 1) Mining produces enormous quantities of waste compared to any other natural resource extraction activity. Water dissolves these wastes to produce contaminated fluid that pollutes soil, river, and groundwater.
- 2) Mining also leads to air pollution due to the release of greenhouse gases and other toxic gases, for example, CH₄, CO₂, etc.
- 3) It leads to deforestation including the loss of flora and fauna.
- 4) Mining operations produce a lot of noise. The deafening sound of machinery used in mining and the blasting create conditions that become unbearable to local people and the forest wildlife.
- 5) It leads to the migration of tribal people from mining areas to other areas in search of land and food.
- 6) Mining results in the lowering of the groundwater table.
- 7) It leads to formation of ponds that can alter the hydraulic gradient and drainage basin limits in local regions.

1.3.4 Transportation

About 200 years ago, the atmospheric gases were balanced and the atmosphere was able to protect itself from encroaching pollutants. But the various means of transport released oxides of nitrogen, hydrocarbon, and various harmful gases in the

atmosphere. The increased concentration of these gases combined with the growing deforestation and expoliation of natural resources damaged the atmospheric balance and impaired its ability to protect itself. The effect, after all, was a serious and irreparable disturbance in the atmosphere.

1.4 Islam and Environment Protection: An Ethical perspective

Among world religions, Islam has a unique perspective on the question of man's relationship to the environment. Not only does it offer a clear moral position, but also, unlike many other religious traditions, it offers practical solutions to the broader questions arising from the political, economic, and legal dimensions of environmental issues.

From a Quranic point of view, the current environmental crisis must be seen as the direct result of man's activities. The Quran declares: "*Corruption has appeared on the land and sea because of what men's hands have done.*"³

The solution, therefore, is in changing people's behavior. As it says in the Quran: "*Allah does not change the condition of people until they change what is within themselves.*"⁴

It has also been mentioned in a *hadith* that the Prophet ﷺ said: '*This world is a green and pleasant thing. Allah has left you in charge of it (mustakhlifukum) to see how you will behave.*'⁵ Man is therefore in charge - he is Allah's caliph (*khalifah*) on the earth - but he is also responsible for what he does under this deputation.

The issue is thus one of action and behavior, and behind every action, there is an ethical paradigm. The ethical position of Islam as it relates to the environment is simple enough to understand. Allah has created the earth and everything that is on it 'for' man. That is, he may use it as Allah has ordained for him, with the understanding that he is responsible for what he does, that he is being watched and tested, and that he will be rewarded or punished accordingly.

Environment protection is an imperative aspect of Islam. Being custodians of the Earth, it is the responsibility of Muslims to care for the environment practically. There is a definite purpose behind the creation of different species, be it plants or animals. Muslims are encouraged to reflect on the relationship between living organisms and their environment and to maintain the ecological balance created by Allah. Protection of the environment is essential to Islamic beliefs and mankind has the responsibility to ensure safe custody of the environment.⁶

The human race is essentially dependent on nature or, environmentally speaking, on the biosphere as it provides them with all the necessities for their sustenance, growth, and development. But the development & progress of human civilization has brought the biosphere – the giver of products essential for life, living space, quality of life, variety of life, and national economies–to a breaking point. The biosphere is now giving us signals that it is greatly stressed; that it is struggling to cope with natural resource depletion, ozone depletion, acid rain, ecosystem loss, polluted air, land, rivers, and oceans. Yet our future depends on it. The environmental problem started when the modern man stopped looking at himself as the vicegerent and trustee of the All-Merciful God and stopped understanding nature as a sacred sign and valuable trust from God. For the same reason, it seems that the best way to protect the environment from destruction and, indeed, to improve its condition is to revive these forgotten understandings by referring back to the teachings and instructions of Islam and reviewing and readjusting our policies regarding the application of modern technology and using natural resources judiciously.⁷

The Islamic perspective on the environment rests on the belief that Allah is the Creator & Sustainer of the universe. The whole universe along with all of its factors has been created with perfect wisdom (*hikmah*). The number, quantity, and quality of these factors are precisely determined by the divine plan. Each factor plays its ordained role. Everything created by Allah has a just purpose that must be fulfilled.⁸ The Holy Quran, shedding light on this point, says:

“We created not the heavens and the earth and all between them but for just ends, and for a term appointed: but those who reject Faith turn away from that whereof they are warned.”⁹

For the sustenance of His creation, Allah has placed a measured quantity of the environmental resources which matches the total demand of the resources in the universe. This implies the existence of environmental balance in the natural ecosystem. Hence, Islam looks at the environment from the standpoint of balance. The Quran describes the notion of environmental balance in various terms like ‘*adl*’, ‘*qadar*’, and ‘*mizan*’. These terms corroborate the notion of balance in the following Quranic verse: “*Verily all things We have created in proportion and measure.*”¹⁰

The above ayah makes a general statement about the existence of equilibrium in everything. The process of creation & growth of all things follows the principle of

balance. Now, we will focus on some important components of the environment and their preservation from an Islamic perspective:

a) Nature

There are more than 750 verses in the Quran that are related to nature. Fourteen chapters of the Quran are named after certain animals and natural incidents, such as: 'the Cow', 'the Cattle', 'the Thunder', 'the Bee', 'the Ant', 'the Daybreak', 'the Sun', 'the Night', 'the Fig' and 'the Elephant'. Moreover, there are many cases in which God takes an oath by some natural phenomena like: 'the dawn' and 'the fig and olive'.¹¹ In numerous verses, the Quran states that all the natural phenomena have awareness of God and glorify God: *"And We made the mountains and the birds to celebrate our praise along with David."*¹²

In many verses, the natural phenomena are characterized as divine signs indicating the knowledge, the wisdom, and the power of God, such as:

*"Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits men and the water that God sends down from the cloud, then gives life with it to the earth after its death and spreads in it all (kinds of) animals, and the changing of the winds and the clouds that are made subservient between the heaven and the earth, there are signs for a people who understand."*¹³

b) Water

In Islamic culture, water is highly regarded. The word *maa'* (water) is used in the Quran about 60 times. Water is introduced as the origin and the source of life. For example, the Quran says: *"And We have made of water everything living."*¹⁴

A Muslim who wants to perform *salah* or touch the Holy Quran or circumambulate the Ka'bah in Makkah must be ritually pure and to be ritually pure he needs to make ablution with water.

c) Earth

Every Muslim in his *Salah* has to prostrate to God several times on the earth (or an earthly material like soil or sands). If water is not available or using water is harmful to one's health (e.g. because of injury), one needs to use earth or earthly materials in a special way to perform ritual ablution.

God created the earth and laid it out for humanity. He also made the earth manageable and tractable. God has made for people a means of their livelihood on earth. Human beings should utilize the earth and construct upon it.¹⁵ The Holy Quran says: *“He is the one who created you from the earth and settled you upon it so that you might cultivate the land and construct towns and cities in which to live.”*¹⁶

d) Deforestation

Islam is against the cutting or destruction of plants & trees unnecessarily as is evident in the following Hadith: Abdullah ibn Habashi reported that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: *He who cuts a lofty-tree (without justification), Allah will send him to Hellfire.*¹⁷

Islam highly recommends planting trees and urges people to protect them to the extent that planting a tree is considered an act of worship, for which special prayer is recommended. The Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *‘Unless you are compelled, do not cut down a tree!’*¹⁸

e) Animals

According to Islamic teachings, animals have numerous rights, for which human beings are held responsible. There are six rights for the beasts that their owners should observe:

- they should not be forced to carry what they do not have the strength to bear,
- they should not be rode while the rider is speaking,
- they should be given their provisions when they stop,
- they should not be branded (imprinted) or burnt,
- they must not be struck at their face because they glorify God and
- they should be allowed to drink when they pass by water.

A fundamental right for animals is the right to life. According to a well-known *hadith*, the Holy Prophet ﷺ said:

“While a man was walking he felt thirsty and 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 (SAW)! Is there a reward for us in serving (the) animals?" He replied, "Yes, there is a reward for serving any animate (living being)."*¹⁹

1.5 Governing rules in Islamic environmental ethics

Some of the major Islamic instructions on how to treat the environment and natural resources can be formulated as follows:

1.5.1 Benefit from natural resources in a responsible way

The emphasis of the Quran and Prophetic traditions on the preservation of nature and natural phenomena does not imply that we cannot benefit from them. Indeed, the Quran suggests that God has created them for man to dominate and benefit from them.

Nature and natural phenomena are also signs of God, on which we should reflect to come to a better understanding of God and a closer relationship with Him. We also need some of the natural materials for the performance of some acts of worship. Therefore, we can benefit from them materially and spiritually as well.

1.5.2 Act towards nature as a guardian

Not only must man responsibly use natural resources but also, as the vicegerent of God on the earth (2:30; 6:165; 35:39), he must assume responsibility for their maintenance and improvement of their condition.

Failure to observe divine pleasure and carry out his responsibilities towards himself and the world certainly leads to man's dissatisfaction as well as the destruction of the world. God is the True and the whole creation is based on the Truth. Following the True leads to the tranquility of the heart and ultimate satisfaction as well as an abundance of divine blessings including both material and spiritual ones.

For example, the Holy Quran says: *And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (against evil) We would certainly have opened up for them blessings from the heaven and the earth, but they rejected, so We overtook them for what they had earned.*²⁰

On the other hand, arrogance before the True and selfishness leads to confusion, forgetting one's self, breakdown of human relations, and even severe damage to the physical world. This is against the laws of the creation and, as a result, the world would resist such people and finally would rebel and save itself from ultimate

corruption. This may be one way of understanding the following verse: *“And should the truth follow their low (carnal) desires surely the heavens and the earth and all those who are therein would have perished and been corrupted.”*²¹

1.5.3 Recognize your role as a trustee

The Holy Quran states: *“We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. But man assumed it.”*²²

This means that human beings have been given the responsibility of guardianship and trust (*al-amaanah*) by God to care for and serve as a channel for the blessings of God to all creation. Humans are invested with special status and responsibility as trustees on earth and must fulfill the requirements of that trust. According to Islam, nature is a divine trust and man is the trustee. It can also be argued that since future generations also have the right to benefit from it, nature is also a trust for them.

1.6 Virtues related to human treatment of the environment

1.6.1 Preservation, not Profligacy

Protecting the environment from detriments of all kinds and preserving nature is the philosophy of Islamic environmentalism. Being the trustee of nature, this is the duty of humans to take care of environmental sustainability. Along with proper care of the environment, Islam also cautions not to be profligate and wasteful.²³ Allah gives the order to humankind: *“O Children of Adam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship, and eat and drink (freely), but do not waste: verily, He does not love the wasteful.”*²⁴

1.6.2 Simplicity

Simplicity is an important feature of Islamic life having far-reaching implications for the environmental balance. The Holy Quran has ordained such a life by proscribing extravagance. It says: *“Do not be extravagant, surely Allah does not like extravagant.”*²⁵

1.6.3 Cleanliness

Tidiness and cleanliness are very important in Islam. This can be understood from the fact that cleanliness has been declared as half of a believer's faith.²⁶ Scholars have explained that through this narration one can conclude that cleanliness is of two types: exterior and interior. By repenting and obeying God's commands, a believer purifies his inner self; and by making ablution and maintaining cleanliness, one purifies his outer self thus completing his faith and reaching its perfection.

1.6.4 Moderation and balance

A believer should be moderate in all aspects of his life including his use of nature. Indeed, the whole world is based on order and harmony (*mizaan*). Exceeding limits in using nature or natural resources is extravagance, which is considered a major sin in Islam. For example, the Quran says:

*And eat and drink and be not extravagant, surely He does not love the extravagant; And do not squander wastefully. Surely the squanderers are friends of satans and Satan is ever ungrateful to his Lord.*²⁷

1.6.5 Thankfulness

Another important quality of a believer is thankfulness, not only in words but also in deeds. Thankfulness by deeds means to use divine blessings in the way which is right and, therefore, pleasing to God. To misuse divine blessings or harm those, for example by destroying jungles and polluting water, are signs of ungratefulness which is severely condemned in Islam. For example, the Quran says: “*Have you not seen those who have changed God's favor for ungratefulness and made their people alight in the abode of perdition?*”²⁸

1.7 Vices related to human treatment of the environment

1.7.1 Extravagance

One of the great threats to human society and the environment is extravagance. The origins of this are greed and negligence. This character is controlled by religious teachings. In Islamic sources, two sins are distinguished. One is *israf* or wasteful consumption. Another sin is *tabdhir* or squandering. These two concepts are brought into play to adjust human behavior.

1.7.2 Vandalism

Nobody in Islam is allowed to cause harm or loss to others. This is a general rule which is supported by many verses and *hadiths* and, in particular, by the well-known prophetic *hadith*: ‘*There shall be neither harming nor reciprocating harm.*’²⁹ This *Hadith*, about which tens of books and essays have been written, means that there is no place in Islam for inflicting any harm on one's self or others.

1.8 Conclusion

Islam is a universal religion and its concern for the environment is a universal one, cutting across national, religious, and geographical barriers. Its major commandments are directed, not to the Muslims alone, but to the human race. Hence, when it comes to the question of conserving natural resources, the Almighty Allah's decree is enforced upon 'people' rather than on Muslims alone. It's evident from the above discourse that great emphasis is put in the Quran and Hadith on the sanctity of nature and natural phenomena. Thus, it becomes clear that in Islam the environment is sacred and has an intrinsic value. Even if there is no threat or shortage, we must still look after natural resources, protect animals and plants and, more generally, improve and develop the environment. As the vicegerents of God, we have to channel the mercy of God to everything within our reach.

References and Endnotes

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