

# Islamic Ethics towards Environmental Protection

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## Abstract

*During the last few decades, academics from a variety of backgrounds have been debating in a wide range of outlets whether religion, especially the monotheist ones, is really responsible for our environmental predicament. Unfortunately, Islam, in general, has been underrepresented in this debate. Furthermore, some of the major environmental problems such as forest destruction, drying of lakes, depletion of groundwater resources, hasty depletion of gas and petroleum resources are taking place in Muslim countries. In this paper, we aim to study the importance of the environment in Islamic instructions such as the Holy Koran and Hadiths in order to find out about the appropriate conduct. It is concluded that Islam is an environmentally friendly religion, which discourages all reckless activities towards environmental resources.*

## Introduction

During the industrial revolution, leading philosophers of the time such as Goodwin and Condorcet were deeply inspired by the rapid economic growth alongside advances in science and technology, but especially by the French Revolution. They had a view of a future society largely free from shortage, war, disease, crime and resentment where every man sought the good of all. Unimpressed by such optimistic views, Robert Thomas Malthus, an English clergyman and economist, published his famous book “*An Essay on the Principles of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement*”

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of *Society*”, which came as a shock to those who had optimistic views of the future (Malthus, 1798).

As the population of England grew, Malthus noticed that poverty increased in some areas despite the economic growth. After observing the growth of population in some northern states of America, where food was plentiful, he concluded that if human population is not taken under control, it has a tendency to double itself in every 25 years. On the other hand, due to the limitation of the arable land, the food supply could not be increased at the same rate. Consequently, he reasoned, humanity would be trapped in poverty, pestilence and wars.

David Ricardo, an exponent of capital accumulation and economic growth, was in agreement with Malthus. Between 1790 and 1810, the corn prices in Britain increased by 18 percent per per annum on average, which was due to the law of diminishing returns. He believed that this would halt the economic growth condemning humanity to a basic and an unenviable existence (Ricardo, 1817). The major factor in his argument was resource scarcity, especially the limitation of arable land and its food growing capacity.

Another notable thinker in the history of economic thought was J S Mill, a famous English philosopher and economist, who argued that a period of sustained growth did take place in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries because of humanity’s fierce struggle for material advancement. However, this endeavour is neither sustainable nor desirable. In his opinion, not many people will want to live in a world crowded by humans and their material possessions. A world where every square metre of land brought into cultivation, every flowery waste of natural pasture is ploughed up, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out would be undesirable. *‘It would be the ultimate waste if the earth losses that great portion of its grandeur so that we can support our ever increasing population on it. I sincerely hope for the sake of posterity that they will be content to be stationary long before necessity compels them to it’* (Mill, 1848).

The concern expressed by Malthus, Ricardo, Mill and others on the natural resources and the environment led to the formation of American Conservation Movement of 1890-1920. The Movement criticised concepts such as consumer sovereignty and *laissez-faire* on grounds that they undermine the wise use of nature’s resources ultimately leading to reckless exploitation from which the loss to humanity would be great. In order to

avoid this situation, governments must take protective steps. The movement did not accept economists into their ranks on grounds that they were, in the main, supporters of uninterrupted economic growth and thus did not pay much attention to conservation (Kula, 2006).

The first and the Second World Wars diverted the attention away from environmental issues. After the Second World War, western economies began to grow rapidly putting pressure on natural resources and the environmental quality. In 1952, the US Material Commission published its report *Resources for Freedom, Foundation of Economic Growth and Scarcity*, (1952) in which great concern was expressed on the deteriorating quality of the environment and increasing resource scarcity. It was argued that the security of supply in critical materials was the foundation of American prosperity and freedom, and thus these resources must be secured and exploited without recklessness.

One of the most influential economists who drew attention to the environmental problems was Kenneth Boulding, (1966). In a short article, *the Economics of Coming Spaceship Earth*, he envisaged the world as a small self-contained spaceship with limited resources and pollution absorbing capacity. If we keep on polluting and overcrowding our world and use its resources recklessly, a regretful situation would emerge. A few years later, model builders capitalised on Boulding's concept of Spaceship Earth and by using computer simulation models, tried to predict the future (Forrester, 1971 and Club of Rome, 1972). What they saw was chaos and mass destruction unless humanity changed its way of doing things. "*The last thought we wish to offer is that man must explore itself, his goals and values, as much as the world he seeks to change*" (Club of Rome, 1972).

All these views inevitably led to a quest about who, in the main, is responsible for our growing environmental predicament. One of the alleged culprits turned out to be religion in general, Christianity in particular.

### **Christianity and the Environment**

In 1966, Lynn White, a medieval historian and practicing Christian, gave a lecture entitled '*Historic roots of our ecological crises*' at the American Society for the Advancement of Science. One year later, the paper was

published in the most prestigious scientific journal; *Science*. In this, White argued that the roots of our environmental problems could be traced to the Bible, in particular the Old Testament. The Judea-Christian faith first established a position that separated man from nature and guided the former to the position of supremacy over the latter (White, 1967).

The Old Testament states that '*Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon earth*', (Genesis 1:22). It is also argued that the Bible separated God, and ultimately human beings from the rest of creation, as humans were made in the image of the Almighty. This, in fact, reduced nature to a mere object and guided Christians towards a utilitarian and ultimately destructive attitude towards the environment.

Another factor in his argument was that Christianity eliminated Paganism, the original faith of Europe, from almost the entire geography of the continent. According to White, this event was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of the western culture. In Paganism, and to a lesser extent in Asian faiths, man is a part of nature not the dominant master of it. However, White does not deny the existence of different viewpoints and lifestyles in Judea Christianity. For example, St Francis of Assisi was committed to a life of poverty and repentance, and treated all living things as a close kin emphasising the importance of communion with nature.

White's paper started a fierce and continuous debate in ecological as well as theological literature about the faith and the environment. Unfortunately, Islam has been under represented in this debate.

However, some writers thought that White's thesis was not strong enough. For example, McHarg (1977) refers the Old Testament as a disturbing text, which has cultivated and legitimised a utilitarian and inevitably destructive attitude towards the nature. In rabbinical interpretation of the Bible in the middle ages, it is argued that God shows Adam the Garden of Eden and says '*all I have created, I created for you*'. According to Stahl (1993), Lord of the Universe has created our world without any deficiency, which it is indeed a part of the Jewish tradition, so that man can utilise what has been laid on for him.

Many Christian writers criticised and accused White and his follower of misunderstanding the Christianity. For example, Thomas (1984) points out that White over emphasised the extent to which human needs are motivated by religious teachings. He states that Japanese worship of nature did not prevent widespread pollution in that country. Tuan (1970) finds that in non-Christian eastern regions, where supposedly environmentally friendly faiths rule, the environmental destruction is as bad as in the west if not worse. According to Ferguson and Roach (1993), Judea-Christian tradition is more than capable of developing a contemporary ethics towards environmental protection. Livingstone (1994) believes that God was a wise conservationist and humans made in the image of God should act as caretaker of creation. In John Calvin's doctrine, if a man passes a field, he should avoid any harm to the ground and pass it onto future generations as he found it. He concludes that let everyone sees himself as the steward of God in all things he possesses.

Thomas (1984) notes that in contemporary Christian literature, the idea that claims everything has been created for humanity is no longer the dominant viewpoint. If the faithful looks close enough, he/she will find sufficient wisdom in Christianity to encourage stewardship towards the environment. Al Gore (1992), a former US vice president and a Nobel Laureate, is the most prominent writer in the promotion of stewardship doctrine. To him, a good Christian should avoid any injury to the environment, which is God's creation. In the past, the Church has probably failed to take with sufficient seriousness a concern for the environment and thus we should not shy away from self criticism. Equally, we should not see environmental catastrophe as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy.

If the roots of our environmental problems go back to the monotheist theology, then there must be a better understanding of its teaching and reorientation. Indeed, HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, a former president of the World Wide Fund for Nature, created the Alliance of Religion and Conservation with the intention of getting the major faiths to look into their traditional attitude to see whether they ought to be concerned with the current situation (HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, 1992). To this effect, some work has been done in Turkey by the Phanar Patriarchate who conducted regular seminars on the environment throughout the 1990s. In these gatherings and resulting publications, it has been emphasised

that Christianity has never implied recklessness towards the environment (Phanar Patriarchate, 1992). A community who meets its material needs by damaging the environment saps the moral fibre of its members and demeans human life. Christianity is against this mentality. The Christian ethos is one of simplicity, sharing and assuring that everybody meets its cultural and spiritual needs in which the attention is focussed on the quality of life, not on accumulation of material wealth. This may entail challenging existing production and distribution methods in a concerted effort for healing the environment.

Lynn White, a few years after publication of his much-discussed paper, suggested that there are indeed passages in the Old Testament that teaches us to be respectful to the environment.

### **Islam and the Environment**

Islam commands influence on about 20 percent of the humanity covering a very large territory especially in Africa, Europe/Middle East and Asia. Unfortunately, some of the greatest environmental problems have occurred in Muslim countries. Many examples can be given such as, the destruction of the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which was once the fourth largest lake in the world but now only 10 percent of its original size remains. During the last couple of decades, desertification of sub-Saharan Africa created famines and displaced millions of people. In Indonesia, because of official and illegal logging activities, almost complete destruction of the natural forests took place, which was once home to one of the richest biodiversity resources in the world. In 1900, 84 percent of the country was under natural forests, but today the figure is about 10 percent. Depletion of ground water resources in Saudi Arabia due to large scale wheat production in the desert that caused the country to become a major wheat exporter, but at the expense of rapidly falling ground water levels. Finally yet importantly, hasty exploitation of oil and gas deposits in the Middle East. In contrast to such deeds, Islam as a major world religion frowns upon any excessive and damaging activity towards the environment.

Environmental impoverishment in Koranic lands (Hejaz and surrounding geography) predates Islam. Arabian history is full of writings

about once prosperous communities who declined due to environmental abuse (Ruthven, 1991). Well before the birth of Prophet Mohammed, the trade route between Mecca and Damascus was full of settlements containing springs and lush vegetation enabling travellers to rest and replenish their supplies. When the Prophet used this route during his commercial travelling before the revelations, desertification was biting hard (Ibnu'l Esir, 1970). The collapse of Ma'arib Dam in Saudi Arabian Peninsula's south-west corner, which marked the end of an ancient civilisation, is another environmental disaster, most likely caused by careless environmental conduct (Cragg, 1971). There is an important message in the Holy Book warning the faithful about environmental fragility; *"If at early morning your waters have sunk away, who then will give you clear running water"*, (Holy Koran 1909, The Kingdom, verse 30). In another Surah it is revealed that *"We have created over you seven heavens and we are not careless of the creation. And we sent down water from the Heaven in due degree, and we cause it to settle on earth; and we have the power for its withdrawal"*, (Holy Koran 1909, The Believers, verses 10-16).

Good environmental management especially on fragile territory is a matter for survival of the communities there, and we are constantly reminded of this by the events in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the scriptures, the reference to the destroyed date gardens due to insufficient provision for the future is another case in point. *"As we proved Meccans as we proved the owners of the garden, when they swore that at morning they would cut its fruits, but added no reserve, wherefore an encircling desolation from God swept round it while they slumbered..... and in the morning it was like a garden whose fruits had all been gone .....they said truly we have been in fault, yes we are forbidden our fruits"*, (Holy Koran 1909, The Pen, verses 18-27).

Some scholars point out that in the Holy Koran there is a prophecy about the global warming, which is largely created by burning of excessive fossil fuels. *"But mark the on the day when the Haven will give out a palpable smoke, which shall enshroud mankind which will be afflictive torment. They will cry, our Lord relive us from this torment, see we are believers. But how did warning avail them, when an undoubted apostle had come to them and they turned their back on him"*, (Holy Koran, The Smoke, verses 9-13). Canan (1995) regards that this centuries old warning may be about the

global warming in which the world is like a room where there is a smoking fireplace without a chimney. Global warming is the end product of pursuing material advancement in a reckless manner. Economic growth driven by profit motive has now become the central goal of a modern society and nothing is allowed to stand in its way. Furthermore, there is a concerted effort by special interest groups to play down the environmental effect of economic 'progress'. Instead of eliminating harmful operations such as excessive discharge of greenhouse gasses, which would mean lowering economic growth, the public are told that such hazards have been blown out of all proportion (Galbraith 1974). Like other spiritual texts the Holy Koran warns people against the greed that drives humanity away from proper values, divergence from 'the way'. Could it be that humanity's pursuit of material advancement at any cost made Heaven give out the palpable smoke; the greenhouse effect of atmospheric pollution?

The secondary source of Islamic instruction is Hadiths, words and deeds of the Prophet. Hadiths have been laboriously studied since the coming of Islam, a process that has left a substantial amount of moral conduct in the Muslim world. Many believe that the Prophet's task was not confined to passing God's message on, but also it was intended that he should set examples by his words and deeds.

Prophet was very fond of trees and in a number of Hadiths, he suggested that not only should existing trees be protected but also the faithful should plant new ones for charitable purposes for they provide shade and habitat for birds and insects. In one of his teachings, the Prophet recommended that "*If the Day of Judgement erupts while you are planting a tree, carry on and plant it*" (Munavi, 1971). Prophet also disliked the killings of animals without a just cause such as for food or self-defence. He was particularly keen on avoiding injury to ants as he instructed his followers not to disturb nests by lighting fire or by engaging in any other damaging activity. One can argue from this that biodiversity protection should be a part of the Islamic ethics. In this respect, it may not be misleading to suggest that protection of tropical and other forests and hence biodiversity, especially in Islamic countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia, is an essential duty for Muslims.

Water is recognised in Islam as the element that starts the cycle of life, (Holy Koran, The Thunder and He Frowned). In addition, Surah Bee states, *“It is He who sendth down rain out of Heaven; from it is you drink; and from it are the plants by which ye pasture. By it He causeth the corn, and the olives, and the palm trees, and the grapes to spring forth for you, and all kinds of fruit”*.

Water in arid Biblical and Koranic lands is most important for the communities to sustain life. In addition, water is a cleaning agent in Islam. Before prayer, Muslims must wash their mouths, nostrils, face, neck, ears, arms and feet. After sexual activity, faithful must wash the entire body, because without this cleaning activity a Muslim cannot pray. The Prophet disliked polluting rivers and wells and instructed the followers accordingly, (Izzi-Dien 2000). Furthermore, He frowned upon excessive use of water even when it is available in abundance. In a well-known Hadith, once the Prophet noticed a Muslim called Saa'd who was using more water than necessary for washing himself before prayer. He warned him not to use too much water for washing. Saa'd objected by saying that there was no scarcity of water and what he was doing was not diminishing the quantity available to others. The Prophet's response was *“even if a Muslim by using the abundant waters of a raging river washed himself four times instead of three he would be committing an error”*, (Ibn'i Mace 1962). Therefore, the waste of water, or any other natural resource is frowned upon in Islam.

In Islamic countries, water supply is considered as a communal responsibility. The rationale for this is that bringing water to frequently used mosques and then distributing the rest is highly cost effective. Once a system of water supply to the community is established for the purpose of worship, then it would be cheap to provide water for other purposes such as drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. The Prophet believed that Muslims are partners in the supply and consumption of water, and thus nobody should be allowed to prevent access to natural water resources (Abu Yusuf, 1985).

Pollution was not a widespread problem during the lifetime of the Prophet. However, he was concerned about the public burden, which may be imposed upon them by those engaged in pollution creating commercial activities. At the root of our current pollution problems, including global warming, there is unrestrained economic activity. Modern Muslim scholars contend that it is impossible to justify global or local pollution no matter

how much the culprits benefit from it. In fact, any activity that may impair the wellbeing of the public was frowned upon by the Prophet (Ibnu'l Esir, 1970).

The Kyoto Protocol aims to moderate the problem of global warming by way of limiting greenhouse gas emissions, which started in 2005. Its first target was to curtail emissions of the industrialised countries, who agreed to it, by 5.2%, on average, for the period 2008-12 relative to 1990 levels. Under the Protocol, 52 industrialised countries committed themselves to limiting their emissions of greenhouse gasses. Each member country has created a national authority to manage its inventory and reports annually to the United Nations about its emission levels.

As the first leg of the scheme was ending in 2012, delegates from nearly 200 countries gathered in a Muslim country, Qatar, to discuss the extension of the Kyoto scheme. After two days of intense negotiations, nations decided to extend the protocol until 2020. This keeps the only legally binding plan alive to combat global warming. When the meeting in Qatar was held, the government there decided to inform the public in 150 mosques about global environmental problems including the greenhouse effect of atmospheric pollution. Imams in mosques prepared Friday teaching (sermon) informing the faithful about their duties to protect the environment. The head of Qatar Islamic Culture Centre, Mr Abdullah Al-Mulla, argued that if care for the environment is encouraged through religion, it would give the best results. Cengiz (2012) contends that this type of valuable initiative has not yet been taken on board in Turkey. During the 2012 budget negotiations in Turkish Parliament when 4.6 billion lira was allocated to the Department of Religious Affairs, no argument was advanced that protecting the environment is, or should be, a part of its duties. On Department of Religious Affairs' website, there was no substantial argument that Islamic instructions forbid any damage to the environment.

## **Conclusion**

Despite being an anthropocentric faith, Islam is an environmentally friendly religion. However, usually there is a gap between a tradition's ideals and its expression in the real world, which is conspicuous in Islam as well as in other faiths like Christianity. A look around parts of the Islamic

world shows us a picture, which is far removed from the Koranic teaching and humble living of the Prophet. Money that almost exclusively relies on the sale of non-renewable fossil fuel deposits, which has been relentlessly accumulated and its material rewards conspicuously displayed in the Gulf, where the living can hardly be described as humble. Saudi Arabia for a number of years used her precious ground-water resources in order to produce wheat in the desert, and sold it in the world market well below the production cost to the detriment of farmers elsewhere in the world, where lands are naturally suited to this crop.

Natural forests of Indonesia are almost gone and Malaysian forests are being put under an increasing pressure. The destruction of the Aral Sea is a major issue for most environmentalists, but in the Central Asian Muslim countries, it is not a priority as they are preoccupied with developing their oil and gas deposits. Despite the well-publicised hazards of nuclear technology, Iran and Turkey are working hard towards establishing a capacity for nuclear power. Iran is a fossil fuel rich country who does not need nuclear power. Today, some of the most worrying environmental problems in the world are found in the regions, where the majority of inhabitants are Muslim who now share with others some of the blame for worsening environmental problems. The eco-friendly Islam is most urgently needed to rectify the situation.

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