

## Environmental Ethics in Islam: Principles and Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The paper is an attempt to explicate and nuance the Islamic perspective of environmental ethics which is divinely guided and recognized in essence. Today humanity is facing one of the sever problems of environmental degradation done partly by human greedy nature and partly by abandoning the religious aspect of environment. Man's pursuance of science and technology has led him to exploit the nature's bounties which in turn resulted into ecological imbalance thus disturbance in the environment. How a man is to act to his environment? And what is the relationship between man, God and nature, are some fundamental questions which I will illuminate in the paper. Apart from that, it also compares and contrasts other secular models of environmental ethics with that of the Islamic. It concludes that Islamic provides a comprehensive model of environmental ethics where at the same time man is a consumer and beneficiary as well as a guardian and trustee of the environment.

**Key words:** Environment • Ethics • Islam • Trustee • Resource

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### INTRODUCTION

Humankind, today, finds himself at a point in history that is critical in terms of the very nature of the relationship to the natural world, as the human activities over the last century have so affected natural world that the environment upon which life depends has been altered [1]. It seems that this environmental crisis started when modern man stopped understanding himself as the 'vicegerent' and 'trustee' of the All-Merciful and stopped understanding nature as a sacred sign [2] and valuable trust from God. For the same reason, then it indicates 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 divine religions and reviewing and re-adjusting our policies regarding the application of modern technology and using natural resources appropriately [3]. Therefore, in the environmental discourse, it has often been argued that what is really needed to solve the present ecological crisis is the 'environmental ethics' [4]. Since the ethics is essentially based on intrinsic value and beliefs, religions have been getting more recognized to define proper environmental ethics mainly because they try to illuminate what possessed intrinsic value [5]. Islam, as a complete

way of life, provides efficient, holistic and comprehensive solutions-ethical principles-to mitigate the present environmental crisis.

In this respect, after discussing basic concepts of environmental ethics and approaches, this paper aims to elaborate some of the Islamic principles and perspective on environmental ethics in the light of the Qur'anic verses and Islamic narrations (*hadith*).

**Environmentalethics-Concepts and Approaches:** The word "ethics" comes from the Greek word "ethos" meaning "habit" or "custom". Defining ethics mean "rules for behavior in accordance with a system of values" [6]. Yang, a noted environmentalist, says "environmental ethics deals with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection and it aims to provide ethical justification and moral motivation for the issue of global environmental protection" [7]. According to Bourdeau [8], environmental ethics is that part of applied ethics which examines the moral basis of our responsibility toward the environment.

While many western philosophers and environmentalists have written on this topic throughout history, environmental ethics only developed into a specific philosophical discipline in the 1970s due to the increasing awareness of the effects that technology,

industry, economic expansion and population growth were having on the environment. However, answering the question of "what obligations do human have concerning the natural environment? Is remained most important [9]. Western solutions of such problems have generally been purely based on materialistic approaches without any linkage with metaphysical doctrines [10]. The following section will briefly look at western environmental ethics approaches.

**Approaches to Environmental Ethics:** In the west a wide spectrum of ethical positions is covered by the umbrella term 'environmental ethics' [11]. Philosophers and environmental ethicists have adopted ethical positions with regard to nature which include: anthropocentrism, biocentrism, liberation/rights theory and ecocentrism [8]. The four schools of environmental ethics disagree mainly on the scope of the duty humans have towards others [13].

From an anthropocentric (human-centered) point of view, humans have a moral duty only towards one another; any duty, they seem to have towards other species or entities is really only an indirect duty towards other people. There is no ethical implication in the relationship between humans and nature [7].

Animal liberation/rights theory propounds that the notion of rights and duties should be extended to the animal and biological kingdom. The supporters of animal rights argue that, like humans, some non-human animals have consciousness or self awareness and a capability of reasoning [5]. Therefore, they have rights that precede other's interests [7].

Biocentrism recognizes the intrinsic value of life and living beings, regardless of their instrumental value for mankind [8], it maintains that all life forms are 'moral entities' to which we should accord equal moral consideration [7, 11].

Ecocentrism advocates that environmental ethics should give due consideration to ecosystems, including their non-living natural objects, since forests, lakes, wetlands, etc. are valuable in their own right and deserve moral consideration [8]. Ecocentrism dramatically expands the definition of what is a 'moral entity' to include nature as a whole [7].

Many believe that separation between worldly living and religion is the main root of environmental crises. They argue that religions help to shape our attitudes towards nature and other human beings. Religious values and ethical beliefs form behavior toward others, including our relationship with all creatures like plant and animal life. It

is believed that the environmental crisis is a religious or moral one and getting return back to religious tradition is the main. Therefore, the time is more propitious to investigate of the potential solutions of particular religions toward mitigating the environmental crisis, by developing more comprehensive environmental ethics for the earth community; this reality helps us to go forward to other center of value can be found in 'theocentrism'- a God centered approach to the world solution [5].

Today, Islam has something very special-a unique world view-to offer us as it is the summation of all past teachings and provides us with a positive code of life transactions in the natural state and perhaps provides the only satisfactory alternative to the destructive path we are taking today. The Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him), being the main sources of Islamic teachings, show us the way [14].

**Islam on Nature:** The Islamic view of nature is neither based on ecocentrism nor anthropocentrism, but is essentially theocentric (God-centered) [15], wherein it is believed that everything in the universe is created by God. The Qur'anic portrayal of nature, as found in numerous verses, is multifaceted [16]. The Qur'an emphatically declares that nature is created by One, the Allah:

- *There is no God but He, the Creator of all things (Qur'an 6:102).*

This Oneness of Allah frames the understanding of nature and links nature of the divine, but do not make it divine as pointed earlier in the introduction. Nature stands as a sign of God Almighty's creation. Since, the Creation or nature is referred to as the signs (*ayat*) of Allah and this is also the name given to the verses of the Qur'an. 'Ayat' means signs, symbols or proof of the divine. As the Qur'an says:

- *There are certainly signs in the earth for people with certainty; and in yourselves. Do you not then see? (Qur'an 51:20, 21).*

Therefore, Qur'an invites people to ponder over their environment [17]; for nature is characterized by duality, whereas God is characterized by Unity (*Tawhid*) [16]. Many verses in the Qur'an speak of respecting and reflecting on God's glory in His creations (Qur'an 50:6; 21:30; 13:2; 6:73). One verse clearly states this relationship between God the Creator and the creation [18]:

- *The seven heavens and the Earth and all beings therein, Declare His glory: There is not a thing but celebrates His praise (Qur'an 33: 72).*

Therefore, the distinction between the Creator and created makes the latter in Islam (e.g. nature, animals, humans and other creatures) a unified class of God's creation. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), in regard to God's creation said, "all creatures are God's dependents and the most beloved to God among them is the one that does good to God's dependents." These dependents, though diverse, have five characteristics in common.

First, all creation is a reflection of God's sacredness, glory and power [18, 3]. The Qur'anic verse notes about such creation:

- *Whithersoever you turn there is the Face of God (Qur'an 11:115).*

Second, God's creation is meaningful and orderly, has purpose, value, wisdom and function [1, 17, 19, 20]. The Qur'anic verses say:

- *And the Earth we have spread out; set therein mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance (Qur'an 15:19);*
- *And look for his Creation for any discrepancy! And look again! Do you find any gap in its system? Look again! Your sight, having found none, will return to you humbled (Qur'an 67:3-4).*

Third, the created world is Muslim [17, 4]; actualized to worship and obey God [18, 19]. Hence, the Qur'anic verse states:

- *See thou not that to Allah bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and Earth, the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among humankind (Qur'an 22:18).*

Fourth, God has made water the basis and origin of life [18, 1]. The Qur'anic verse says:

- *We made from water every living thing (Qur'an 12:30)*

Fifth, Humans are not the only creatures that are worthy of protection and recognition in Islam. All that Allah has created are 'nations' or 'communities' unto themselves [19, 18]. As the Qur'an states:

- *There is not an animal (that lives) on Earth. Nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms a part) of a community like you (Qur'an 6:38).*

Therefore, one immediate conclusion, from an environmentalist perspective, is that every individual creature or being has its own metaphysical existence as a sign of God and by its very being manifests and reveals His majesty and mercy. Said Nursi-a contemporary Turkish Muslim thinker-views nature as 'the book of the universe'. He views the universe "as a whole and a meaningful book of the Eternally Besought One; and all beings from the ground to the Divine Throne are a miraculous collection of Divine missives.... and since they act as mirrors to and have a relationship with that Sovereign, the value of all things infinitely surpasses their individual value" [10]. According to Seyyed Hossain Nasr, an Iranian intellectual, nature is "the theatre wherein are manifested His signs" [17]. Therefore, from the above discussion, it is evident that every creature deserves attention and consideration for its relation to the divine [17, 20].

Thus, Ozdemer [17] points that; a different view of nature—which is unique to the Islam—emerges. The Muslim lives in a world that is alive, meaningful, purposeful and more importantly, Muslim like himself, even prostrating itself before God. The immediate result is the discovery of the wholeness of all creation and integration with it, physically and spiritually. When a devout Muslim looks at his environment, everything seems to be somehow familiar and friendly. Moreover, everything is a symbol and a sign, pointing to an all-wise and all-merciful creator.

- A believer of Islam is always aware of the fact that: "Our Lord is He who gave to each (created) thing its form and nature and further gave (it) guidance." (Qur'an 20:50). Therefore, in order to get a holistic world view of Islam's concern with non-human beings, it is necessary to know Islam's attitude towards animal and plant kingdom.

**Islam's Attitude Towards Animals and Plants:** Islam looks upon these created beings, both animals and plants, in two ways:

- As living beings in their own right, glorifying Allah and attesting to His power and wisdom;
- As creatures subjected in the service of man and other created things, fulfilling vital roles in the development in this world [1].

Therefore, Islam enjoins human beings certain obligations towards these living creatures; for humans will be responsible on the Day of Judgment, how they have treated these creatures. The owner of an animal is obliged to feed it and to treat it if it is ill. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "God punished a woman because she imprisoned a cat until it died of hunger. She neither fed it, nor let it obtain its own food" [6]. Even, when the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was asked, "Is there a reward doing good with these animals"? He said, "There is a reward in doing good to every living thing". In another *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says that: "If without good reason anyone kills a sparrow, or a creature lesser than that even, the living creature will put his complaint to God on the Day of judgment, saying: 'So-and-So killed me for no purpose'" [1, 6].

Regarding the plants, the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) also declared in a *hadith*, "If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and a human, bird or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him". Even if doomsday was expected imminently, human beings would be expected to continue their good behavior. The Prophet said: "If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has a seedling in hand, let him plant it" [21, 1, 6]. This *hadith*, maintains Al-Damkhi, summarizes the principles of Islamic environmental ethics.

**Attitude Towards Other Natural Resources:** According to Islam, Allah has bestowed all the resources of nature which all human beings require in order to fulfill their objectives such as contemplation and worship, sustainable use and enjoyment and appreciation of beauty apart from securing their basic biological needs. Allah has ordained sustenance for all people and for all living beings. Thus the utilization of these resources-water, land, forests, minerals, etc.-is the right and privilege of all people and all species. Man should not regard such use as restricted to one generation above all other generations [1]. This is confirmed in the Qur'an:

- *And you devour the inheritance (of others) with devouring greed (Qur'an 89: 19).*

Therefore, man should not abuse, misuse, or distort the natural resources as each generation is entitled to benefit from them, but is not entitled to 'own' them in an absolute sense [1, 6]. Further, Shomali [3] maintains that Islam opposes mischief and corruption in all forms. Any act of mischief is condemned, whether it be in respect to human beings or living beings or even non-living beings, as has been said that "the earth can provide for everybody's need, but not enough for one man's greed" [4]. The Qur'an says:

- *Do no mischief on the earth, after it has been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of God is (always) near to those who do good (Qur'an 7:56).*

Moreover, Bagader *et al* [1] write "While the attitude of Islam to the environment, the sources of life and the resources of nature is based partly on prohibition of abuse, it is also based on construction and sustainable development" [22]. This integration of the development and conservation of natural resources appears in the idea of bringing life to the land and causing it to flourish through agriculture, cultivation and construction.

Hence, the right to utilize and harness natural resources necessary involves an obligation on man's part to conserve then both quantitatively and qualitatively.

**Islamic Principles of Environmental Ethics:** The key Islamic teachings concerning nature and the environment closely follow those dealing with the Islamic understanding of humanity. Thus, the eco-ethical principles discussed below are well-known concepts related to the Islamic worldview on the nature, meaning and value of life, particularly humankind's relationship with the Creator and its interaction with the rest of humanity, the world and its creatures [15].

**Principle of Unity (Tawhid):** Any discussion of ethics in Islam must, of necessity, start with an exposition of the concept of *Tawhid* that exemplifies the oneness and unity of Allah: the recognition that there is one, absolute, transcendent Creator of the universe and all that it contains. As an ethical rule, *Tawhid* dictates the acceptance of God as the only source of all values. As such, *Tawhid* is the matrix for human thought and action; it is all-pervasive and penetrates every aspect of our endeavors. It is the guiding principle of religion and ethics, politics and social behavior, epistemology and science and at the center of Muslim curiosity regarding

the nature [21, 23, 24]. According to Lubis [19], *Tawhid* is the fundamental statement of the oneness of the Creator, from which everything else follows. It is the primordial testimony to the unity of all creation and to the interdependence of the natural order of which humanity is an intrinsic part. Many verses in the Qur'an confirm this reality.

**Allah Says in the Qur'an:** *To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth all obey His will and it is He who originates creation... (Qur'an 30:25).*

**In Another Verse, Allah Says:** *What is in the heavens and the earth belong to Allah. Allah encompasses everything (Qur'an 4:125).*

The whole of creation-the work of one Originator-works within a defined pattern. Another verse in the Qur'an refers to the heavens and the Earth as extensions of God's throne, thus conveying the idea that creation was designed to function as a whole. Each of its complementary parts, including humankind, plays its own self-preserving role and in so doing supports the rest [19].

- *Unto Him belongs all that is in the heaven and all that is on the earth and all that is between them and under the ground (Qur'an 20:6).*

Thus, *Tawhid* is the point of origin of a theological doctrine of ecology. All things seen or unseen are God's signs (*ayat*), as discussed earlier and act as witnesses to His existence [24]. Moreover, Khalid [30] says *Tawhid* is the 'bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam' as it affirms the interconnectedness of the natural order, the creation of One God. *Tawhid* also indicates that an understanding of the metaphysical aspects of the Creator has profound implications for ethical conduct for humans are enjoined to act morally in obedience to Him and in fulfillment of His commands.

Therefore, from *Tawhid* emerge the concepts of *khilafa* and *amana*-will set out the purpose and nature of human conduct on earth [21, 24].

**Principle of Trusteeship (Khilafah):** This principle relates to human vicegerency or '*Khilafah*' on earth. The Islamic worldview is that God created humankind and bestowed upon it a position of a steward or trustee on Earth, referred to as a *Khalifa*. The term *Khalifa* is derived from the verbal root *khalafa* meaning 'he came after, followed, succeeded' [24, 19, 6]. This is confirmed in the following Qur'anic verses:

- *And lo! Your Sustainer said to the angels: Behold, I am about to establish upon earth a Khalifa. (Qur'an 2:30)*

**In Another Verse, Allah Says:** *It is He Who appointed you Khalifs on this earth" (6:167).*

Of the nine times, says Lubis [19], the word *Khalifa* and its plural are found in the Qur'an; seven times it is used in conjunction with the prefixed *fi al-ardh* or on earth, on this planet. In each case it refers to a person, people, or mankind in general, to whom Allah has entrusted part of His power on earth. The term *Khalifa* has also been translated as steward, deputy, viceroy, guardian and vicegerent. Vicegerency covers every aspect of life and essentially tests humanity's just exercise of authority over those within their stewardship, including nature [15].

Thus, a *Khalifa* takes on a trust and must hold it in harmony with the wishes of its grantor, Allah, making human beings vicegerents and not lords and masters of the earth in a dictatorial sense. This principle, as discussed by Muslim environmental scholars, portrays men and women as trustees or stewards, who are provided with bounties that should be enjoyed within limits [15].

**Principle of Responsibility:** In the context of the concept of *Khalifa*, a related term is *amana* or trust. Allah offers *amana* to the heavens, to the earth, to the mountains-to the rest of creation-but they all refused; only a human being took the risk of accepting it [6, 19]. As Allah says in the Qur'an:

- *Verily, We did offer the amana to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to bear it Yet man took it - for, verily, he has always been prone to tyranny and foolishness (Qur'an 33:72).*

Allah offered the trust to man, the trustee and he accepted the responsibility. Man chose the *amana*, the faculty of choice and relative free will and gained thereby the capacity to live for good or evil. As *Khalifa* on earth, says Lubis [19], man must fulfill that trust placed on him by Allah, by acting justly in accordance with Allah's laws, or be false to that trust and perpetuates tyranny and injustice against Allah's earth and His creation.

- *For He it is Who has made you Khalifa on earth, and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed on you. And thereupon We made you their Khalifa on earth, so that We might behold how you act (Qur'an 6:165).*

However, this metaphysical exaltation of humans is linked to a weighty moral burden-to adhere to a code of action reflecting the best social behavior and highest ethical values. These ethical horizons incorporate not only humankind, but all generations and all created beings. Humankind thus needs to use the foresight, wisdom and knowledge which they have been granted to guide the way in which they use natural resources [15].

This is confirmed, states Lubis [19], by part of a *hadith*, reported by Abu Sa'id Khudri, that Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him), said: "*The world is sweet and green (alluring) and verily Allah has installed as Khalifa in it in order to see how you act.*" In another *hadith*, writes Mohamed [15], the Prophet Muhammad (peace and be upon him) so eloquently uttered: "*Each of you is a shepherd and will be answerable for those under his care.*"

The concepts of *khilafah* (man's vicegerency) and *amana* (trusteeship) summarize the entire Islamic rationale for an ecological ethic, since nature being an estate belonging to God, has been given to humankind merely as a trust [21, 25]. Moreover, Ammar [18] adds that Humans in Islam have a dual relationship with nature. On the one hand, they are nature's manager, but they are also its user. The Qur'anic verse notes:

- *Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your (use) all things in the heavens and on Earth and has made his bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, both seen and unseen (Qur'an 31:20).*

This dual role of the *Khalifa*, vicegerent, creature of God and user of Earth creates the moral burden for Muslims, is one of the important tests in reaching the Gardens of Heaven [18, 21, 26]. Thus, the Man's position in the cosmic system created by God is unique in rights as well as in responsibilities [27].

So from the above discussion, it is clear that unity, trusteeship and responsibility-*tawhid*, *Khalifa* and *amana*- the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an. It is these values which led the Prophet Muhammad (peace be

upon him) to say: "Whosoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded" and "If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is a charity on his part". Environmental consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mental and physical make-up [23].

**Current Problems and Future Perspectives:** Today, however, it has been observed that some of the most marvelous environmental problems in the world are found in countries where the majority of the inhabitants are Muslim [28]. Then it must now be asked that if the teachings of Islam concerning the natural order as outlined above are still alive and do offer models for increased environmental responsibility among Muslims [29], why then are such severe environmental ethics violated by Muslims themselves? And why are the current degradation and future dangers facing the environment mainly connected with Muslim countries? Why are the Islamic environmental ethics neither more evident in the voices from the Islamic world which have been and are heard in the West, nor more effective in the practical realm in preventing ecological disasters than in other parts of the globe? And what should Muslims do to discontinue this violation of environmental ethics? These four questions need urgent attention from Muslim scholars as future dangers and events in Islamic nations, especially in the Middle East, have the potential to create environmental impacts of major magnitude [6, 29].

As a response to the questions, many scholars have diagnosed the poor environmental record among the Muslim countries. According to Timberlake [31], this violation "is certainly not due to lack of money or appropriate technology, but due to a clear rift between the theory of Islamic environment and planning and the practices that exist in the Muslim world". The reason for such a rift, argues Timberlake, is that leaders and policy-makers in the Muslim countries are separated from their religious and cultural roots and even from their own people. Timberlake further maintains that almost all Muslim nations as dictatorial regimes of which none could truly be described as 'Islamic' and believed that a leadership divorced from its people will be divorced from the environment of the people. Such environment will suffer from neglect; and from the gross misuse of money and manpower.

Similarly, Nasr [29], argues that Islam lies hidden behind the cover of Western cultural, scientific and technological ideas and practices emulated and aped to

various degrees of perfection, or rather of imperfection, by Muslims during the past century and a half. For Khalid [28], The main reason for this is that the Earth once considered by humankind to be sacred has now been reduced to an exploitable resource since the conceptual construct which the modern world functions within, is decidedly anti-environment. Society today is about economic progress and material gain and this takes precedence over everything else [14, 31].

Therefore, Manzoor [25], a noted critic, advocates that for the Muslim world the answer to the current environmental dilemma lies in entirely going forward to the environmental ethics of Islam; in giving a practical shape to the environmental dictates of the Holy Qur'an and Sunna by producing legislation in such areas as pollution, conservation and urbanization and returning to the environmentally conscious traditions and lifestyles of Islam. Further elaborating this, Nasr explains that in practical terms the Islamic world must carry out two extensive Programs despite all the obstacles placed before it by external factors. The first concerns formulating and making clearly known in a contemporary language the perpetual wisdom of Islam concerning the natural order, its religious significance and intimate relation to every phase of man's life in this world. The second program is to expand the awareness of Islamic teachings concerning ethical treatment of the natural environment and apply them whenever necessary, according to the principle of the Islam itself [29].

Hence, Religious awareness and Islamic guidance should be employed in all possible means at all levels to call all individuals to commit themselves to Islamic ethics, morals and manners in dealing with nature, the environment and the natural resources for their sustainable use and development [1].

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, today, in the world view of environmental crisis, Islam has a very special to offer to the world to avert this multifaceted crisis. We believe that the environmental crisis is a moral one. The paper studied that Islam provides very efficient ethical principles to deal with the environmental crisis. The essence of such Islamic based environmental ethics is that all the resources upon which life depends have been created by God as a trust (*amana*) in our hands. Man, the vicegerent (*Khalifa*) of God on earth, is only a manager of resources not a proprietor, a beneficiary and not a disposer.

Although, in the wake of the environmental awareness in the late seventies, Western scholars have adopted their own approaches being based purely on materialism, range from human-centric (anthropocentric) to non-human-centric (ecocentric), but Islam's approach, theocentric (God-centered) -being holistic and comprehensive aims at the universal common good for all created things.

The paper also briefly studied the Muslim nations apathy towards the environment, paper maintained that due to the man's greed and egoism, he has lost his connection with the nature; he has forgotten his role as a vicegerent and trustee on earth. The paper advocates that the core issues of environmental ethics is to rethink the 'place' of human beings on Earth and the relationship that they should have with nature. Discussing the role Islamic ethical principles of Unity, Trustee and Responsibility, the paper finds that Islamic teachings enhance environmental consciousness of the people, which enables them to establish friendly relationship with the nature and the environment.

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