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ISLAM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

ETHICS AND PRACTICE

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An Assessment

Islamic environmentalism has its own unique expression but it is not evident today even in countries that describe themselves as Islamic. Much damage has been done to the universal Islamic ethos since the defeat of the Caliphate in 1924 and Muslims are today, like the rest of the human race, subject to the vicissitudes of an amorphous entity we describe as the modern world. It could be argued that the drive of modernity stems from the push for economic development which is now taxing the earth's resources as never before in human history. As people who are benefiting materially from it and also as people who have in no small measure participated in the processes that have degraded the planet, Muslims have an important contribution to make to the growing debate on this matter. Hence the urgent search in the Islamic texts and traditions for answers, but the immediate problem one encounters here is of language. Islamic environmentalism is buried deep in the matrix of the *shariah* (the basis of Islamic law) and coming as it does from a different milieu, the articulation of this is different. It also needs to be recognised that contemporary environment language is new, itself emerging as it does from a reactive ethos. It was almost non-existent in the middle of the last century, has grown rapidly since then, is still evolving and only emerged as an academic specialism in the latter part of the last century.

The global village is now a homogenised consumer culture which impacts negatively on the biosphere. This has been achieved by the progressive dilution and destruction of old traditional values and the marginalisation of the great religions. There is a divergence of paradigms

deep in the interface between Islam and the West which take the form of two irreconcilable factors that call for some examination. The first is the matter of existence itself and how it is to be defined and the second is the matter concerning money and how it sees the light of day¹.

The traditional world view was challenged by what we have come to know as the ‘enlightenment’ having its origins in 16th century Europe. Richard Tarnas² observes that this movement achieved its maturity in the nineteenth century finally resulting in a radical shift in psychological alliance from the divine to humankind. Descartes (the French philosopher, mathematician) finally breached the flood gates of the old order when he proclaimed that the human race was the “Master and possessor of Nature”. But, the Qur’an exhorts, “*Do not corrupt the earth after it has been put right*” (Al A’râf, 7:56)³. Seyyed Hossein Nasr describes the modern condition thus, “There is near total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilisation which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate with it”⁴.

The second matter concerns money. The financial crisis we are witnessing now has focussed people’s attention on the nature of money as never before and the following cursory look at what’s behind this goes to the root of the issue. One increasingly comes across interesting appraisals of money like this for example: “...in spite of all its fervid activity, money remains a naked symbol with no intrinsic value of its own and no direct linkage to anything specific”⁵. Money has come to be recognised as mere tokens and “there is something quite magical about the way money is created. No other commodity works quite the same way. The money supply grows through use; it expands through debt. The more we lend, the more we have. The more debt there is, the more there is”⁶. These tokens of “value” that we create from nothing and use everyday

grow exponentially ad infinitum. But we know that the natural world, which is subject to drastic resource depletion, has limits and is finite. This equation is lopsided and the question is for how long can we continue to create this infinite amount of token finance to exploit the real and tangible resources of a finite world. Looked at from this perspective, money, as the modern world has contrived it, assumes the characteristics of a virus that eats into the fabric of the planet. The consequences of this become visible as global environmental degradation.

It is generally known that Islam prohibits usury or the taking of interest and the term used in the *Qur'an* for this is *riba*⁷. This term has wide connotations and simply put, it means one cannot have something out of nothing. Thus *riba* is also seen as prohibiting the free creation of credit. The *Qur'an* denounces these practices vehemently and we can see why from the foregoing discussion: “*Those who practise riba will not rise from the grave except as someone driven mad by Shaytan’s (Satan’s) touch*” (Al-Baqarah, 2:275)⁸.

Environmental Ethics in Islam

The ethical base of Islam which is derived from the imperatives laid down in the *Qur'an* and expressed in the practice of the Prophet, come under numerous headings. They can however be distilled into just three categories for our purposes bearing in mind public good to be the ultimate objective⁹. They are to do what is right, forbid what is wrong and act with moderation at all times: “*Let there be a community among you who call to the good, and enjoin the right and forbid the wrong. They are the ones who have success*” (Al 'Imrân, 3:104). The *Qur'an* uses an environmental theme in exhorting humankind to be moderate, “*it is He who produces gardens, both cultivated and wild, and palm trees and crops of diverse kinds and olives and pomegranates both similar and*

dissimilar. Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit and pay their dues on the day of their harvest, and do not be profligate. He does not love the profligate” (Al An‘âm, 6:141).

The Qur’an refers to creation or the natural world as the signs (*ayat*) of Allah, the Creator, and this is also the name given to the verses contained in the *Qur’an*. *Ayat* means signs, symbols or proofs of the divine. As the *Qur’an* is proof of Allah so likewise is His creation. The *Qur’an* also speaks of signs within the self and as Nasr¹⁰ explains, “...when Muslim sages referred to the cosmic or ontological *Qur’an*...they saw upon the face of every creature letters and words from the cosmic *Qur’an*...they remained fully aware of the fact that the *Qur’an* refers to phenomena of nature and events within the soul of man as *ayat* ...for them forms of nature were literally *ayat Allah*”. As the *Qur’an* says, “*there are certainly signs (ayat) in the earth for people with certainty; and in yourselves. Do you not then see?*” (Adh-Dhâriât, 51:20, 21).

The Qur’an elucidates -

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

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

*There is instruction for you in cattle.
From the contents of their bellies,
from between dung and blood,
We give you pure milk to drink,
easy for drinkers to swallow.*

*And from the fruit of the date palm and the grapevine
you derive both intoxicants and wholesome provision.*

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

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

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

(An-Nahl,16:65-69)

writer’s emphasis

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

The word ‘nature’¹¹ which is an abstraction cannot be found in the *Qur’an* and the closest modern Arabic usage is the word *bi’a* which connotes a habitat or a surrounding. The *Qur’an* speaks of creation (*khalq*) and it contains two hundred and sixty one verses where this word is used in its various grammatical forms derived from the root **kh l q**. These verses contain references to the human world; to the natural world of the planet

from trees to turtles, from fish to fowl; and to the sun, stars and skies. The very first revelation of the *Qur'an* to the Prophet used this word in its verb form to dramatic effect, “*Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of blood*” (Al-‘Alaq, 96:1,2). Creation is the fabric into which the tapestry of life is worked.

The *Qur'an* is not a text book and we look to certain principles in it that communicate the ecological message to Muslims in a way that could both be understood and also be a spur to action. The following is a crystallisation¹² of what we consider to be the essentials which will bring into focus the dimensions of change that are needed today from an Islamic perspective. The planetary system, the earth and its ecosystems all work within their own limits and tolerances. Islamic teaching likewise sets limits to human behaviour as a control against excess and it could be said that the limits to the human condition are set within four principles. They are the Unity principle (*Tawhid*); the Creation Principle (*Fitra*); the Balance Principle (*Mizan*); and the Responsibility Principle (*Khalifa*).

The Unity Principle

Tawhid is the foundation of Islamic monotheism and its essence is contained in the declaration (*Shahada*) which every Muslim makes and is a constant reminder of faith. It is “There is no God but God” (*lailaha illallah*) and is the foundational statement of the Unity of the Creator from which everything else flows¹³. “Say ‘*He is Allah, Absolute oneness, Allah the Everlasting Sustainer of all*’ ” (Al-Ikhlâs,112: 1, 2). It is the testimony to the unity of all creation and to the fabric of the natural order of which humankind is an intrinsic part: “*What is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allah: He encompasses everything*” (An-Nisâ, 4:126). This is the bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam as this affirms the interconnectedness of the natural order.

The Creation Principle

The *Fitra* principle describes the primordial nature of creation: “Allah’s natural pattern on which He made mankind” (Ar-Rûm, 30:30). Mankind was created within the natural pattern of nature and being of it, his role is defined by that patterning¹⁴. *Fitra* is the pure state, a state of intrinsic goodness and points to the possibility that everything in creation has a potential for goodness and the conscious expression of this rests with humankind.

The Balance Principle

In one of its more popular passages the *Qur’an* describes creation thus –

*The All-Merciful taught the Qur’an
He created man and taught him clear expression.
The sun and moon both run with precision.
The stars and the trees all bow down in prostration.
He erected heaven and established the balance -*
(Ar-Rahmân, 55:1-7)

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

The Responsibility Principle

This principle establishes the tripartite relationship between the Creator, humankind and creation. God created everything for humankind

and appointed it the vice-regent (*Khalif*) on this earth: “*it is He who appointed you Khalifs on this earth*” (Al-An‘âm,6:165). This role was one of trusteeship (*amanah*) which imposed a moral responsibility, “*We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains but they refused to take it on and shrank from it. But man took it on.*” (Al-Ahzâb:72). This assumption of responsibility made humankind accountable for their actions; “*Will the reward for doing good be anything but good?*” (Ar-Rahmân, 55:60).

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

Evolution of Islamic Environmentalism

As Muslim populations grew and expanded territorially their requirements in government became increasingly complex and the *Shariah* accordingly became more sophisticated. To the *Qur’an* and *Sunnah* (the actions and sayings of the Prophet) were added two other elements: The consensus (*ijma*) of scholar jurists and the process of reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*). Islamic law (*fiqh*) evolved out of this process and there are two other traditional instruments which were incorporated into this system and which could usefully serve the purpose of formulating environmental law in the Muslim world today. The first

of these is interpretation in context (*ijtihad*) and the second is custom and practice (*'urf wa adat*).

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

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

The *Shariah* also evolved within the guidelines set by three principles agreed upon by scholar jurists over the centuries. They are –

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

As the Muslim interaction with the environment evolved, it manifested into a range of rules and institutions. As the Muslim community expanded out of its sparse desert environment, it was confronted by many challenges, one of which was relative abundance. This brought about other problems like over exploitation and waste in its train. Muslims applied themselves to these problems assiduously and it would be salutary to look at this legacy¹⁵. The following is a brief summary of how the *Shari'ah* developed in this area over the past 1400 years.

Legislative Principles

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

Institutions

1. People who reclaim or revive land (*ihya' al mawat*) have a right to its ownership.
2. Land grants (*iqta'*) may be made by the state for reclamation and development.
3. Land may be leased (*ijara*) for its usufruct by the state for its reclamation and development.
4. Special reserves (*hima*) may be established by the state for use as conservation zones.
5. The state may establish inviolable zones (*harim*) where use is prohibited or restricted. Every settlement has a right to create such zones managed by the people and where use is severely restricted. Additionally, it is permitted to establish these zones adjacent to sources of water and other utilities like roads and places of public resort.
6. Makkah and Madinah are known as the Two Inviolable Sanctuaries (*al-haramain*) where trees cannot be cut down and animals are protected from harm within their boundaries. They serve as examples of best practice.
7. Charitable endowments (*awqaf*) may be established with specific conservation objectives.

Enforcement

The primary duty of the Islamic state is to promote the good and forbid wrong doing. As part of these functions, it has the mandate to protect land and natural resources from abuse and misuse. From its earliest years the Islamic state established an agency known as the *hisba* whose specific task was to protect the people through promoting the establishment of good and forbidding wrong doing. This agency was

headed by a learned jurist (*muhtasib*) who functioned like the chief inspector of weights and measures and chief public health officer rolled into one. He was also responsible among other similar duties for the proper functioning of the *hima* and *harim* zones and acted as what one may describe as an environmental inspectorate.

The development and application of these principles and institutions have seen a decline over the past two centuries as the world view based on the exploitation of natural resources for profit gradually overtook this model. We are experiencing the consequences of this now. However, there are clear indications as to how this Islamic heritage has been and could again be put to good use in the modern context.

A Contemporary Muslim Response

For Muslims their faith (*din*) is a whole, an organic reality, where every element has a function as a part of this whole. For example, law in Islam does not make sense without the ethical dimensions of the divine revelation. Law in the west is amoral. It deals with man-made ends for man-made purposes. The Muslim idea of the highest form of civilization is the one that is pleasing to Allah. However, in today's global order of which Muslims are a part, conspicuous consumption tops the list of priorities. Muslim nation states of which there are now about sixty are willing co-optees to this consumer ethic. It should be obvious from this that it becomes almost impossible for Muslims whether individuals or nation states, to give expression to a normative Islam under the present globalised system; a system, which is in direct conflict with the two fundamentals (discussed earlier) that are part of the Islamic worldview. There now prevails a schizoid tendency in Muslim society whereby it strives to maintain its deep attachment to Islam while it persists in tasting the fruits of the current order.

However, people are increasingly taking a serious look at the current model of endless growth that supplies a contrived demand for consumer goods which appears to be insatiable and which is in the end impacting on the biosphere with drastic consequences. This concern is reflected in the west by the growth of activism and protest organisations. These same trends (differently expressed) appear in the Muslim world. The form this usually takes is the demand for the establishment of the “just order” under the *Shari’ah* to replace the socialist and capitalist models, which are now seen as failures. It is difficult to see where these demands for change will take Muslims but it is increasingly felt that the current order is untenable in terms of keeping the planet in good repair.

One could say with a reasonable degree of certainty that the environmental problems we see today would not have happened in a society ordered in accord with Islamic principles because its world view “defined limits to human behaviour and contained excess”¹⁶. We have seen how this was done in the realm of environmental protection although its stated aim was not precisely that. Rather it came about in the course of establishing public good, one of the basic principles of the *Shari’ah*. Safeguarding against human excess had the effect of protecting the natural world.

The *Shari’ah* evolved holistically and new situations were dealt with through the processes we have discussed above and there is nothing to stop this from continuing. However there are important impediments to its proper application today and they are –

1. The *Shari’ah* is no longer supreme even in Islamic states because of the dominance of the global system now in place. The influence of international trade and finance is a case in point.

2. The *Hisbah* which was once the ‘environmental enforcement agency’ is now virtually non-existent.
3. Civil administration has separated itself from the body of the people who are coming to be known as “the religious authorities” i.e. a clergy, which is not recognised in Islam¹⁷. The concept of *din* is wearing thin and as a consequence the holistic approach suffers.
4. Following the western model Muslim states increasingly function in watertight compartments. As a mirror of what is happening in the west, Muslim economists and environmentalists are two separate species with opposing perspectives.
5. The nation state model, which all Muslim countries have adopted, has economic development as its highest priority. Coping with environmental change is much lower down the scale.

The position set out in this paper is that of Islam and as we have observed earlier, there is a clear issue of conflicting paradigms. The question is how to implement the teachings and practices of one worldview into an institutional framework devised by another that has a diametrically opposite outlook. Although it may be possible to incorporate the principles of Islamic environmental law into the legislative programmes of Muslim countries, the problem will remain one of implementation unless appropriate institutional arrangements are made to replace the old and now virtually defunct ones. It is also interesting that efforts to meet this new challenge in Muslim countries are made by secular agencies; this is only to be expected as this is generally not seen as a “Muslim problem”. The role of the Muslim scholar jurists has been redefined into a “religious” one as the nature of the Muslim state has changed in its attempt to cope with modernity. The Muslim scholar

jurists were unwilling partners to this change and were replaced by a secularised administration which gradually weakened their influence as it began to take charge. However, there is an awakening amongst Muslims to the realities of global warming for example and therein lies a paradox: A secular articulation of current concerns appears to be motivating Muslims to look for answers from within their own traditions.

Muslim minorities, particularly those living in the west, have an important role to play. Living in the belly of the beast gives them the advantage of perspective and their understanding of events could lead to a unique contribution to the melting pot of ideas that could lead us out of this impasse. For example Muslim groups in the West are re-examining alternative currencies and ways of trading that are based on the *fiqh* of Islam.¹⁸ “*Corruption has appeared in both land and sea because of what people’s own hands have brought about so that they may taste something of what they have done, so that hopefully they will turn back*” (Ar-Rûm,30:41). In other words learn from your mistakes and change your ways.

Whilst their full expression of Islam is constrained by their context it is important for Muslims to both engage in the debate concerning the environmental crisis and at the same time work in partnership with like minded groups and organisations to alleviate the problem. At the root of the crisis is personal behaviour and if a Muslim were true to himself the inclination would be the welfare of others with whom he shares a finite world, which needs to be cared for in the interests of the generations to come. Islamic environmentalism begins with the self and then radiates to the home, the school, the mosque and the wider community.

There are endless possibilities for Muslim activism in this area seen in the light of giving service to humanity and much progress can be made if Muslim countries take their responsibilities to the environment seriously.

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- ¹ Fazlun M. Khalid; Islam and the Environment; Vol. 5, Social and Economic Dimensions of Global Environmental Change, pp 332-339; Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change; John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Chichester, 2002.
- ² Tarnas R. (1996) *The Passion of the Western Mind* (pp.275-281); Pimlico, London.
- ³ The translation of the Qur'an used is that by Bewley A and A (1999) *The Noble Qur'an*, Bookwork Norwich, England. The figures in brackets in the text are references to chapter and verse in the relevant sections of the Qur'an
- ⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr; *Man and Nature*; Unwin Paperback, London 1990; p.20; (first published 1968 by George Allen and Unwin).
- ⁵ Kurtzman J. (1993) *The Death of Money* (p.77). Little, Brown & Co, Boston USA.
- ⁶ Kurtzman J. (1993) *The Death of Money* (p.85). Little, Brown & Co. Boston USA.
- ⁷ For an appraisal on interest see Diwaney T .E. El (1997) *The Problem With Interest*, Ta Ha, London.
- ⁹ Doi A.R.I (1984) *Shariah: The Islamic Law*. Taha, London.
- ¹⁰ Nasr S.H. (1993) *The Need for a Sacred Science* (pp.130, 131). Curzon Press, Surrey England.
- ¹¹ The word "nature" will continue to be used in this essay for linguistic convenience. For a further explanation on terminology see Khalid F.M. (1999) *Qur'an, Creation & Conservation* (pave), Islamic Foundation for Ecology & Environmental Sciences, Birmingham UK.
- ¹² These ideas have been developed by us over the past two decades and discussed at various international fora.
- ¹³ The second half of this declaration is "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah" (*Muhammadur Rasulullahi*).
- ¹⁴ For a discussion on *Fitra* see Yasien Mohammed (1996) *Fitra*. Ta-Ha, London.
- ¹⁵ For more information on this subject see (a) Bagadeer A.A and others (1994) IUCN Environmental Policy and Law Paper No.20, second revised edition. Gland, Switzerland and Cambridge, UK. (b) Llewellyn O. (1992) *National Legal Strategies for Protected Areas Conservation and Management*. Paper delivered at IVth World Congress on National Parks & Protected Areas, Caracas, Venezuela. (c) Dien M.I. (2000) *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*. Lutterworth, Cambridge, England.
- ¹⁶ Khalid F.M. (2000) *Islamic Pathways to Ecological Sanity – an Evaluation for the New Millennium* (p.7). Ecology and Development, Journal of the Institute of Ecology no. 3, Bandung, Indonesia.
- ¹⁷ This is the case in the Sunni tradition of Islam which accounts for about 85% of the world's Muslim population. The Shia tradition has an established clergy.
- ¹⁸ Douthwaite R. (1996) *Short Circuit* (pp.156-160). Green Books, Totnes Devon, England