

Environmental Protection: An Islamic Perspective

- Mohd Altaf Bhat

Abstract

Environment has been given to all of us in trust by God. It is our responsibility to treat this trust in the best way, and not pollute or destroy it. One of the most serious problems in today's world is the environmental crisis. It is a problem that threatens not only us, but the whole world, and future generations and their right to live in a healthy environment. It seems that this problem started when modern man stopped understanding himself as the vicegerent of God and trustee of the All-merciful God and stopped understanding nature as a sacred sign and valuable trust from God. For this reason it becomes evident that the best way to protect the environment from destruction and, indeed, to improve its condition by channeling the divine mercy to everything at his disposal or within his reach and to review the forgotten understandings by referring back to the teachings and instructions of divine religions and reviewing and readjusting our policies regarding the application of modern technology and in using natural resources appropriately. Environmental protection is an important aspect of Islam. Being the stewards of the earth, it is the responsibility of the Muslims to care for the environment in a proactive manner. In this paper I will try to briefly present some aspects of Islamic perspective on environmental protection in the light of Quranic verses and traditions of Prophet Muhammad .

Key words: *Vicegerent, Environment, Islam, Quran, Plants*

Introduction

Allah's wisdom has ordained stewardship (*khilafa*) to human beings. Therefore, in addition to being part of the earth and part of the universe, man is also the executor of Allah's injunctions and commands. He is only a manager of the earth and not a proprietor; a beneficiary and not a disposer or ordainer. Heaven and earth and all that they contain belong to God alone. Man has been granted stewardship to manage the earth in accordance with the purposes wanted by its creator; to utilize it for his own benefit and the benefit of their created beings, and for the fulfillment of his interests and of theirs, he is thus entrusted with maintenance and care, and must use it as a trustee within the limits dictated his trust.¹

Firstly, I should say that according to Islam, everything in the universe is created by God. It is God Who adorns the skies with the sun, the moon and the stars, and the face of the earth with flowers, trees, gardens, orchards, and the various animal species.

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¹ A. Begader, *Environmental Protection in Islam: A General Introduction*, April ,2016, (available at <http://www.islamreligion.com>)

It is again God Who causes the rivers and streams to flow on the earth, Who upholds the skies (without support), causes the rain to fall, and places the boundary between night and day. The universe together with all its richness and vitality is the work and art of God, that is, of the Creator. It is again God Who creates all plants and animals as pairs, in this way causing their procreation. God created man subsequently to all these.

Environment as a trust from Allah

We are God's vicegerents on the earth; it has been given us in trust. Just as we are not the lords of nature and the world, so the world is not our property which we can dispose of as we wish or as we are able. Nature was created by God and it belongs to God. Everything in nature is a sign of God's existence; that is, a token or missive. The Qur'an expresses this truth as follows:

We shall show them our signs in the [furthest] regions [of the earth], and in their own souls²

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds subjugated between the sky and earth — [here] indeed are signs for a people who thinks³

The above verse illustrates why Muslim scholars look at nature as a book, even calling it "the book of the universe," in this way pointing out that just like the Qur'an, the universe makes known to us our Sustainer and Creator. And the book of the universe has been entrusted to us to preserve and protect. Should those who hold the Qur'an in respect and awe, not touching it unless purified by ablutions, not also treat the book of the universe respectfully and lovingly? Our duty, therefore, as God's vicegerents and trustees, is to show respect for the trust, and to preserve it carefully, in no way wasting its natural resources when using or consuming them.

As the final Divine message, Islam insistently draws our attention to this sacred and spiritual dimension of nature. It teaches us too that we are created by God and that we shall

² Al-Quran, 41:53, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The Holy Quran, (translation)

³ Al-Quran, 2:164

return to Him in order to give account for our actions. This means that we are answerable for all that we do, both the good, and the evil. As God's vicegerent on earth, at the Last Judgment man will be called to account for how he acted towards the trust, and how he treated it. The Quran says:

*So glory to Him in Whose hands is the dominion of all things: And to Him will ye be all brought back*⁴

According to Yusuf Ali the message conveyed in this verse is the core of Revelation; it explains the Hereafter: All things were created by God; are maintained by Him; and will go back to Him. But the point of special interest to man is that man will also be brought back to God and is answerable to Him, and to Him alone.⁵ The concept of Divine unity is the basis and essence of Islam. Divine unity is apparent in the unity of humanity and of nature. God's vicegerents on the earth, the holders of His trust, are therefore primarily responsible for preserving the unity of creatures, the integral wholeness of the world, the flora and fauna, and wildlife and natural environment. Thus, 'unity', 'trust', and 'responsibility' are the three basic concepts of Islam. These principles are at the same time the chief pillars of the Islamic environmental ethic. They form also the fundamental values taught by the Qur'an. When we read the Qur'an's verses about the earth, we find that they suggest strongly that it is for man peaceful places which he should take heed of. Thus, the Qur'an draws our attention to nature and to the events that occur in it. The Quran illustrates:

*The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory; there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet you understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbearing, Most Forgiving*⁶

*See you not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth — the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number of mankind*⁷

Cleanliness in Islam

Islam considers cleanliness to be one of the fundamentals of belief. It thus makes a direct connection between belief and cleanliness. It is because of this that throughout the ages

⁴ Al- Quran, 36:83

⁵ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, The Holy Quran, (translation) p. 167

⁶ Al- Quran, 17:44; also 57:1 and 62:1

⁷ Al- Quran, 22:18

cleanliness has been one of the Muslims' most striking characteristics. In one Hadith, God's Messenger says: "Cleanliness is half of belief".⁸

Muslims should scrupulously avoid doing anything to upset or disturb others in any circumstances or in any place. To pollute or dirty the city in which one lives, or the town or village and their surrounding countryside, waters, air, or views, and to scatter rubbish and refuse is both a sin and extremely discourteous. It is lack of thought both for oneself and for others. For thoughtful people know that others will be disturbed by any place they have dirtied, and the beauties of nature spoiled. They are aware that it is an attribute of the believer and a sign of maturity not to leave scattered nutshells, bottles, cans, wrappers, and bits of paper and other refuse in the streets and picnic areas or to do anything that will disturb other people, or even the animals.

Protection of trees, woodland, and green areas

Doubtless, one of the most important aspects of protecting the environment and ecology is the conservation of the trees, forests, woodland, countryside, and all the living creatures whose habitats are such areas. We see that the religion of Islam puts forward important principles for these too. These noteworthy principles related to the conservation of such areas may be classed as moral and legal.

If we look at the Qur'an, we see that the word "tree" is mentioned with various meanings. Despite containing no direct command to plant trees, it speaks of trees and gardens and orchards so frequently and descriptively that it is not possible for any attentive reader of the Qur'an not to grow in awareness of them. The word "tree" is mentioned 26 times in the Qur'an, and the word "paradise" in the sense of garden around 146 times.⁹ The Quran mentions:

It is He Who sends down rain from the skies; with it We produce green [crops], out of which we produce grain, heaped up [at harvest]; out of the date-palm and its sheaths [or spathes] [come] clusters of dates hanging low and near; and [then there are] gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar [in kind] yet different [in variety]; when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! in these things there are signs for people who believe¹⁰

⁸ Sahih Muslim, Kitab-u- Taharah, Darussalam, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 387

⁹ Ibrahim Ozdemir, An Islamic Approach to the Environment, (available at <http://www.crescentlife.com>)

¹⁰ Al- Quran, 6:99

At another places the Quran says:

*It is He Who produces gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar [in kind] and different [in variety]; eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess; for God loves not the wasters*¹¹

Some of the traditions of the prophet (SAW) connected with planting trees and protecting them

“If you have a sapling, if you have the time, be certain to plant it, even if Doomsday starts to break forth.”¹²

“Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit”¹³

“Whoever reclaims and cultivates dry, barren land will be rewarded by God for the act. So long as men and animals benefit from it He will record it for him as almsgiving”

“Whoever plants a tree, reward will be recorded for him so long as it produces fruit”

If a Muslim plants a tree, that part of its produce consumed by men will be as almsgiving for him. Any fruit stolen from the tree will also be as almsgiving for him. That which the birds eat will also be as almsgiving for him. Any of its produce which people may eat thus diminishing it, will be as almsgiving for the Muslims who planted it. The reward accruing from seven things continue to reach the person concerned even if he is in his grave: knowledge he has taught, water he has provided for the public benefit, any well he has dug, any tree he has planted, a mosque he has built, recitations of the Qur’an bequeathed to him, and children who pray for him after his death.

Animals in the light of Islam

On looking at the Qur’an, the prominent place given animals, the key members of the eco system, is immediately apparent. A number of its *Suras* bear animals’ names: *al-Baqara* (The Cow); *al-Nahl* (The Bee), *al-Anqabut* (The Spider), *al-Naml* (The Ant).

One of the striking expressions the Qur’an uses about animals is that they are a “community” (*umma*). It is especially noteworthy that this concept, which is a significant concept in Islamic tradition and literature, should also be used for animals:

¹¹ Al- Quran, 6:141

¹² Albani, *Silsilat-ul Ahadithi- Sahiya*, Maktab-i- Kudusiya, Lahore, Pakistan, 2009, Vol.2, p.43

¹³ Al Bukhari, Darussalam, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 1997, Vol. 1, p. 29

There is not an animal [that lives] on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but [forms part of] communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they [all] shall be gathered to their Lord in the end¹⁴

Prophet Muhammad enjoined the protection of animals and birds that they should not be ill-treated, but should be well looked after and kept clean, and employed in work suitable to their natures, and should not be loaded with burdens greater than they can bear. The, God's Messenger taught that Muslims should act kindly not only towards human beings but to all living beings. Act kindly to those on the earth so that those in the heavens [the angels] will be merciful to you.

Not wasting the natural resources

It is thus stressed that the purposeless and arbitrary killing of the living creatures of nature, whether large or small, is prohibited, and that those who do so will be called to account by God on the Day of Judgment. Islam forbids the arbitrary hunting of animals for pleasure. A further important Islamic principle related to the environment is the Islamic prohibition concerning thoughtless consumption; that is, wastefulness and extravagance. Wastefulness is not only the thoughtless consumption of natural resources; it is at the same time disrespectful towards God, the Creator and Owner of all the bounties. For this reason, in Islam, eating and drinking of licit food is lawful, but wastefulness is forbidden. At this time we know better than at any other that the world's resources are limited. Extravagance and over-consumption will affect not only us, but forthcoming generations. We are therefore compelled to be aware and sensitive concerning this matter.

Verily We have created all things in proportion and measure¹⁵

Hence, while utilizing the world's bounties, the Muslim should not do so with an unconstrained and irresponsible approach to consumption. On the contrary, he is obliged to base all such actions and the measure of his consumption on Islamic economic principles. Every passing day it is becoming better understood that the world's resources are limited. The following commands of the Qur'an are striking at a time when feasible development and economic models are being widely discussed.

¹⁴ Al- Quran, 6:38

¹⁵ Al- Quran, 54:49

And render to the kindred their due rights, as [also] to those in want, and to the wayfarer; but squander not [your wealth] in the manner of a spendthrift. Verily spendthrifts are brothers of the Evil Ones and the Evil One is to his Lord [Himself] ungrateful¹⁶

Islam permits utilization of the environment, but this should not be arbitrary. Wastefulness and extravagance are prohibited by God

Conclusion

Environmental protection is an important aspect of Islam. Being stewards of the earth, it is the responsibility of Muslims to care for the environment in a proactive manner, therefore 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 religion of Islam attaches the greatest importance to the conservation of the environment as a whole. For the environment and all the living beings within it are created by God. As human beings, we have been entrusted with conserving and developing it. The conservation of the environment is therefore not only a human obligation but also a religious obligation. Indeed, believers should undertake this responsibility more than anyone. It is understandable if someone who does not believe in God and the Day of Judgment is unconcerned with it, but for a believer to be unconcerned is both incomprehensible and unforgivable.

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¹⁶ Al- Quran, 17:26-27

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