

## Environmental Ethics in Islam: A Quranic Approach

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### I. INTRODUCTION

There are hundreds of verses in the Quran that attract the attention of scientists with examples drawn from diverse subjects including cosmology, physics, biology, medicine, oceanography and environmental sciences. This paper explores the Quranic teachings on environmental ethics, emphasising humanity's role as vicegerent (*khalifa*) of Allah on earth. Of the numerous challenges man faces today, the most crucial one is that the very stability of human society is threatened by his excessive exploitation of natural resources as well as by pumping of huge quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, causing depletion of the protective ozone layer in the atmosphere. His behavior in this respect may be likened to killing the very goose that lays the golden eggs. If this goes on unchecked for a long period of time, it is bound to render human life on earth utterly miserable by heaping upon living creatures a wide range of problems and risks from the current climate change like increase in global warming, sea level rise, crop productivity declines, and rise in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere leading to depletion of the ozone layer which serves as a shield against ultraviolet radiation, known to cause skin cancer and several other diseases. In short, the ongoing environmental crisis has become so alarming and catastrophic that some immediate, lasting solution has to be found to the present predicament.

**Role of Religion in Conservation of Nature :** It is gratifying to note that the teachings of all major religions are replete with exhortations and guidelines for the conservation of nature and wildlife. All of them point to the existence of some sort of cosmic order which binds together the entire universe by a preordained law. The main reason for this commonality is that the source of the core teachings of them is one and the same Almighty Creator: "This (the law of righteousness and godliness)<sup>1</sup> is in the earlier scriptures also including those given to Abraham and Moses".<sup>2</sup> In these traditions it is believed that all animate and inanimate objects in nature reflect the glory and love of Allah. Thus nature attains a sort of sacramental character whereby each of its inhabitants should be respected and taken care of by others, as it is created with some definite purpose to serve,<sup>3</sup> The application of religious wisdom, therefore, has the potential of solving the environmental crisis.

It is interesting to note that in the midst of dark clouds hovering all around, some sure rays of hope have also started shining in the form of increased environmental consciousness among both scientists and scholars in recent times. For instance, the modern environmental movement started in 1970, following which April 22 every year is celebrated as the Earth Day globally to raise public awareness and concern for living organisms, the environment and links between pollution and public health. It was followed by the Declaration of Religion and Nature made at Assisi (Italy) in September 1986 which was the first international attempt to bring all religions closer in the contribution towards environmental conservation for resolving this crisis.<sup>4</sup> The Thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held at Bali, Indonesia, further stressed the seriousness of this problem in an effective manner. Then came the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, a landmark international deal struck by nearly 200 nations to lower greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>5</sup>

**Environment-friendly Teachings of the Quran :** Islam has a rich tradition of highlighting the importance of environmental conservation. Islam creates the awareness that every form of life in the biosphere is connected with others through the environment. It thus integrates the concept of environmental conservation as an integral part of the philosophy of life for every believer. Since the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in full glare of history, it was designed not only to perpetuate the religious wisdom of earlier revelations, but also to appeal to reason and intellect of the modern inquisitive human being in a more elaborate and convincing manner. All created things, both animate and inanimate, are mentioned in the Quran as living entities. They are also portrayed as having a definite purpose to serve as well as to function together as a whole in an integrated manner, thereby constituting the ecosystem designed to suit the existence of human life on earth. Thus Islam enhanced man's knowledge of the intricacies of nature's ecology in a significant manner by pointing out that all natural phenomena are interconnected and inter-dependent, and that the entire cosmos is sustained by certain definite laws that are inherent in each object and are in harmony with each other.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the very eco-system from which man is deriving his sustenance could not have been possible but for the existence of other known objects of nature in a state of perfect harmony. Consider, for example, the

following verses: "Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day - there are indeed signs for men of understanding-men who celebrate the praises of God, standing and on lying down on their sides and contemplate the wonders of creation in the heavens and the earth (with the thought) : Our Lord! not for naught hast Thou created (all) this. Glory to Thee! Give us Salvation from the Penalty of the Fire".<sup>7</sup>

"And the earth have We spread out, and placed therein firm hills, and caused each seemly thing to grow therein. And We have given unto you livelihoods therein, and unto those for whom you provide not."<sup>8</sup> The Islamic view of the natural order and the environment is further reflected in the fact that the religion of Islam is defined in the Quran as *din al-fitrat* (religion of naturalness), which is a general invitation to mankind to go back to the life of nature with discipline. Even paradise is depicted in the Quran in the form of gardens with rivers constantly flowing beneath.<sup>9</sup>

The Quran has constantly drawn the attention of man to the inherent equilibrium and balance that pervades the entire universe, where everything is created in due balance and measured proportion. Even the vegetable kingdom providing varieties of crops, fruits, flowers, medicinal herbs, etc., is not only a rich source of sustenance to man and other living creatures, but also plays an important role in maintaining the ecological balance on earth to the advantage of mankind: "And the earth We have spread out (like a carpet) ; set thereon mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance"<sup>10</sup>

"Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measures"<sup>11</sup>

Besides, Allah has enlightened man on exact mathematical laws governing different earthly and celestial creatures as well as maintaining perfect balance in the colossal astronomical universe along with clearcut instructions not to damage the inherent equilibrium of nature in any manner: "The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; and the herbs and the trees - both alike bow in adoration. And the Firmament He has raised high, and He has set up the balance in order that ye may not transgress the balance".<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that of all the living creatures, man alone is given the status of being *khalifat-Allah* (vicegerent of Allah) on earth! Hence, he must show the care which Allah displays towards all His creatures, and that he must possess the love which runs through the arteries of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Quran, man is empowered not only to correct himself and better his lot, but also to influence the state of nature by his observance of the environmental ethics as well as through his deeds and actions, while the rest of creation is conditioned to respond as benefactors and malefactors to his constructive (justified and good) and destructive (unjustified and bad) deeds respectively. In other words, if man remains faithful to God's purpose of creation, he would not only improve his own life, but also become a key factor in affecting the global ecosystem to the extent of making nature yield the seen and unseen blessings of Allah including the replacement of existing living species with more beautiful ones in an ever-ascending order. The realization of this phenomenon is known in religious parlance as spiritual enlightenment. The observation of this point is based on the following and like Quranic verses:

"Mischievous has spread on land and sea because of that the hands of men have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may turn back (from Evil)".<sup>14</sup>

"Eat and drink but waste not by excess; for Allah loveth not the wasters".<sup>15</sup>

"Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and the devil has always been ungrateful to his Lord".<sup>16</sup>

"What can God gain by your punishment, if ye are grateful and ye believe".<sup>17</sup>

"If the people of the towns had but believed and feared God, We should indeed have opened out to them (all kinds of) blessings from

heaven and earth; but they  
rejected the truth, and We brought  
them to book for their  
misdeeds".<sup>18</sup>

## **II. INBUILT DEFENSE MECHANISM IN CREATION**

Apart from the delicate balance and equilibrium maintained in the creation of the universe, the Quran has also drawn attention of mankind and scientists to the inbuilt defense mechanism in nature at a time when nothing was known about the ozone layer and its function in maintaining the earth habitable for living creatures. Consider, for example, the Quranic verse: "And we have made the sky a protected ceiling, but people are ignorant of its signs and functions".<sup>19</sup> Scientifically, this verse highlights the protective nature of Earth's atmosphere, which acts as a shield, protecting life on earth from harmful solar radiation and celestial impacts. Now it is a well-known fact that the atmosphere filters UV rays, regulates temperature and maintains a habitable environment on earth.<sup>20</sup>

**Another important Quranic verse that deals with the role of the stars, reads as follows:** "And indeed, We have adorned the nearest heaven with lamps and made them (the stars) missiles for shooting the devils".<sup>21</sup> Scientifically, these stars, while adorning the night sky, influencing the cosmos and serving as navigational aids, also protect the earthly atmosphere from the devils (things harmful for living creatures on earth). Modern astronomy also reveals the role of the stars in the universe, aligning with the Quran's description of them as lamps illuminating the sky and as guards protecting the sky and the earth. It is remarkable to note that the delicate balance and inbuilt defense system found in creation can be seriously compromised and damaged by the destructive deeds and actions of man on earth caused mainly by his ruthless exploitation of natural resources by throwing to the winds all norms of environmental sustainability. As described in the Quran, the term corruption applies as much to the corrupt practices and deeds of man in his social life as to his unimaginative, unmindful destruction of natural resources.

**Measures taken by Prophet Muhammad to curb Environmental Pollution :** The Prophet (peace be upon him), regarded as the Quran in action, was conscious of the necessity to keep the environment neat and clean and hence his teachings included cleanliness of the body, hands, teeth, nails and hair; cleanliness of dress, eatables and drinkables; cleanliness of dwelling places, roads and cities; and cleanliness of the sources of water, i. e. rivers, ponds and wells to check water pollution. Some of the measures he prescribed for environmental pollution as well as epidemic and contagious diseases are mentioned below:

"Cleanliness is one half of the  
faith".<sup>22</sup>

"Cleansing the teeth purifies the  
mouth and pleases Allah".<sup>23</sup>

"Guard against the three practices  
which invoke curses of Allah:  
urination in the watering places, in  
the shade and on the  
thoroughfares".<sup>24</sup>

"If you hear of an epidemic in any  
place, do not proceed to it; and  
when it breaks out in your place,  
do not flee from it, so that the  
disease is not communicated to  
other places".<sup>25</sup>

Another important measure taken by the Prophet in this context was that he emphasized upon his followers the importance of botanical and agricultural activity on as large a scale as possible, saying:

"Even if anyone knew that the  
world would end the next day, he  
should plant a tree".<sup>26</sup>

"Whosoever possesses land, he  
should either cultivate it himself or  
give it to his brother gratis for the  
purpose of cultivation. He can keep  
it with him uncultivated only if the

brother refuses to cultivate it".<sup>27</sup>  
"The act of planting a tree or of sowing seeds by a Muslim, thereby providing sustenance to birds or mankind or animals is but regarded as a charitable gift from him".<sup>28</sup>

Yet another important measure taken by the Prophet towards conservation of natural resources was that overindulgent lifestyles characterised by wastefulness and extravagance were prohibited by him. For example, he forbade the excessive use of water while performing ablutions. Once when he saw his Companion Sa'd use a lot of water in his ablutions, he instructed him saying that he was wasting water. Sa'd asked if there could be wastefulness of water even while performing the ablutions. The Prophet replied in the affirmative, saying that even if he performed it on the bank of a rushing river.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the above, Islam prohibited all kinds of intoxicants including smoking. It is a well-known fact that the use of tobacco adversely affects not only the health of man, but also the environment, as cultivation, processing, consumption and disposal of it contributes towards deforestation, soil depletion, loss of soil nutrients and pollution due to heavy use of agro-chemicals. As per the statistics provided by the World Health Organization, consumption of tobacco in different forms kills about seven million people annually. Now it is scientifically demonstrated that tobacco smoke emissions spew thousands of tons of carcinogens, toxic substances and carbon dioxide gases into the environment. Thus the tobacco industry is a heavy polluter and is enlisted under the red category. Processing tobacco leaves requires huge quantities of fuel wood, which ultimately leads to deforestation. Since consumption of tobacco amounts to throwing oneself into the jaws of death, it is strictly prohibited in the Quran: "And do not throw yourselves by your own hands over to ruin".<sup>30</sup> Since tobacco is an intoxicating substance and harmful to health of man, it is automatically included among things prohibited in Islam.

It is remarkable to note that the impact of implementation of these teachings on the medieval Arab-Muslim society was tremendous. Even some European writers are full of praise for them on this count. Their cities like Makkah, Madinah, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordova and Constantinople were kept quite neat and clean. That was the main reason why the Muslim world, so long as it implemented these sanitary measures, was saved from the onslaught of dangerous epidemics which occurred in different parts of the world, killing large numbers of people. It is noteworthy that the great plague known as the Black Death which swept through Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century, killing one-fourth of its population, stopped at the borders of the Muslim world because of Islamic measures of cleanliness alone.<sup>31</sup>

The efficacy of these teachings is further illustrated by the fact that George Bernard Shaw has, in his book, *The Doctor's Dilemma*, highly applauded the importance and role of the Islamic care of cleanliness in building a healthy society by describing that when Britain conquered the Muslim Sandwich Islands (now the Hawaiian Islands), it compelled the native population to renounce Islam and adopt Christianity. And no sooner did it succeed in replacing Islam by Christianity than this led to outbreak of epidemic diseases in the Islands; "because the formulators of the superseded native religion, like Mahomet, had been enlightened enough to introduce as religious duties such sanitary measures as ablution and the most careful and reverent treatment of everything cast off by the human body, even to nail clippings and hairs; and our missionaries thoughtlessly discredited this godly doctrine without supplying its place, which was promptly taken up by laziness and neglect".<sup>32</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, it is manifestly obvious that the current environmental crisis caused by the false, negative desires of man by throwing to the winds all norms of environmental ethics symbolizes the triumph of Satanic forces over the common sense of man as eloquently and figuratively elaborated in the Quran: "I (Satan) will mislead them (mankind), and I will create in them false desires; I will order them to slit the ears of cattle and to deface the (fair) nature created by God. Whoever, forsaking God, takes Satan for a friend, hath for a surety suffered a loss that is manifest."<sup>33</sup> This devilish pattern of human behaviour is undoubtedly the biggest problem of the modern world which if not tackled and corrected on an urgent basis, is bound to render human life on earth more miserable. And the way it is being handled by the international community at the political level is not at all encouraging. As such religious intervention is the only hope in resolving the global environmental crisis. The issue of protection of the environment can be tackled more efficiently if it is highlighted by environment-friendly major religions of the world as a religious duty incumbent upon their respective followers by sensitizing them on the seriousness of the matter as well as on their indispensable responsibility towards nature and future generations of mankind. This task can be better facilitated by educating

people on key issues of environmental ethics such as biodiversity conservation, waste management and reduction of carbon footprint.

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