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Muslim religious ethics and environmentalism

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MUSLIM RELIGIOUS ETHICS AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

*Dicky Sofjan*¹³⁰

Introduction – The Signs of God

This chapter attempts to expound on religious ethics on environmentalism from the Islamic perspective. It delves into the various meanings of Allah’s Verbal (*ayatun qawliyah*) and Universal Signs (*ayatun kauniyah*). The author argues that Islam, as a religion, holds a steadfast and strong pro-environmental ethical stance. Many of the Holy Quran’s sacred verses, Prophetic traditions and religious ethical teachings are drenched with ecological vision and awareness about planetary consciousness, while instilling curiosity and love for the natural world. The article explains how Islamic precepts such as *khalifah* (steward), *amanah* (trust), *mizan* (balance or equilibrium), *tabdzir* (wastefulness) and *zuhd* (austerity) could be applied in day-to-day Muslim religious life and living to support climate change and sustainability.

To a Muslim (literally, one who submits), Allah is the Creator of all things. He is the “King of Kings” (*Malik al-Amlak*), who controls all

¹³⁰ Dicky Sofjan, Globethics.net Ethics Expert.

dominions, and oversees the multiverse through his compassion and grace. He is the Sustainer (*ar-Rabb*) of life and holds up the sky with no foundations to stand on. Allah holds everything in the balance (*al-mizan*). He is known by many beautiful names and attributes, but the most cited ones are “the Beneficent, the Merciful” (*ar-Rahman, ar-Rahim*).¹³¹

Allah bestows His bounty, wisdom and blessings by appointing messengers and prophets. He reveals His signs (*ayahs*) through sacred Scriptures, through the sayings of prophets and sages, and by way of divine revelation and inspiration (*wahy*) through those who cultivate their hearts and souls. These are categorized as Allah’s ‘verbal signs’ (*ayatun qauliyah*). According to Islamic orthodoxy, the last of the chain of prophets appointed by Him was Muhammad ibn Abdullah in Mecca (now Saudi Arabia), and the last revealed verbatim Word of Allah is Al-Quran (literally, The Recitation), which among others is to affirm previous Scriptures and divine teachings brought by the long line of righteous messengers, holy prophets, virtuous saints and pious sages. In addition to the Quran as the Revealed Word, most Muslims consider the Prophetic traditions (*ahadist*) not only as a source of religious conduct for personal growth, but also a judicial reference.

Another form of God’s signs comprises everything outside the verses of Scriptures and wise speeches of the prophets, saints and sages. This is called the Signs of the Universe (*ayatun kauniyah*). One of the greatest mysteries of all time is creation itself. In Islam, every single creation is wholesome, beneficial and significant, and serves a certain purpose in the fabric of life and the constellation of the multiverse. One of the

¹³¹ The phrase “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful” is cited 114 times in the Quran in the beginning of all chapters, except one. Quranic scholars are still debating whether or not it is part of the Quran proper.

familiar verses from the Quran states: “On earth, there are signs for those with sure faith—and in yourselves too, do you not see?”¹³²

Even as one scrolls through the themes and names of the chapters (*surahs*) in the Quran, one might be surprised to find many references to the natural world and the animal kingdom in the Islamic Scripture. As an illustration, some of the chapters in the Quran include: *Ar-Ra’d* (The Thunder), *Al-Hijr* (The Rock), *Al-Kahf* (The Cave), *An-Nur* (The Light), *Ad-Dhukan* (The Smoke) *Al-Ahqaf* (The Dunes), *Adz-Dzariyat* (The Winnowing Winds) and others. In addition to the above, references to the animal kingdom include: *Al-Baqarah* (The Heifer), *Al-An‘Am* (The Cattle), *An-Nahl* (The Bee), *An-Naml* (The Ant), *Al-Ankabut* (The Spider) and *Al-Fiil* (The Elephant).

This is not to argue that the Quran could be equated with a book of science, or that it could be read as such. Rather, the Quran raises these natural objects and phenomena to get reciters to consider, wonder and ponder about the mysteries of the multiverse. Furthermore, the Quran unambiguously challenged its reciters to unravel them. On numerous instances, the Quran challenges its reciters, and ask: “Will you not reflect?”¹³³ Another verse laments as follows: “Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned?”¹³⁴

In this context, the humankind is part of Allah’s miracle and mystery. The Quran states that the humankind was created in a “perfect mould”.¹³⁵ In one of the most famous Divine traditions (*hadist al-qudsi*),¹³⁶ cited extensively among the Sufis and Muslim mystics, the God of Islam once claimed, “I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be

¹³² The Quran 51:20-21.

¹³³ The Quran 6:50.

¹³⁴ The Quran 23:115.

¹³⁵ The Quran 95:4.

¹³⁶ *Hadist qudsi* is a special category of *ahadist*. It is usually defined as a speech of Allah narrated by the Prophet Muhammad. It is therefore not part of the holy Quran and cannot be used in prayers (*shalat*).

known. So I created a creation [the humankind] so I may be known.”¹³⁷ Thus, the humankind *does* play a central role in creation, at least in its perpetual attempt to seek for the True and Ultimate Reality, which is God itself.

This, no doubt dispels the accusation against anthropocentrism, which argues that creation was created solely *for* human beings to be exploited and utilized for their own selfish purposes, desires, whims and fancies. It is also *not* the predisposition of Islam, nor the Prophet Muhammad, that other species or lesser beings are relegated to secondary status, and therefore required to serve and fulfil the human civilizational project. It does, however, argue that the humankind *does* have an important role in the whole fabric of creation, and such a role is based on religious moral imperative and ethical responsibility.

This chapter attempts to give an overview of how the teachings of Islam provide a strong basis for environmentalism, and care for the planet and all the coexisting sentient beings.¹³⁸ It also provides clear guidance on how religious ethics on environmentalism, as enshrined in the Quran and Prophetic tradition, goes hand-in-hand with reason and intellect.

Human Stewardship

It is evident, that both the Quran and the Prophetic tradition point to a particular purpose and function of the humankind on this planet, which is said to be the “steward on earth” (*khalifah fii al-‘ardh*).¹³⁹ To be able

¹³⁷ For a complete overview of this theme, see the Ph.D. dissertation of Moeen Afnani (2011), “Unraveling the Mystery of The Hidden Treasure: The Origin and Development of a Hadist Qudsi and its Application in Sufi Doctrine,” Near Eastern Studies University of California, Berkeley.

¹³⁸ For a comprehensive overview on “Islam and Ecology”, see Foltz et al. (2003).

¹³⁹ The Quran 2:30.

to perform such function, human beings are bestowed by Allah ‘*aql*’ (reason or intellect) or the innate ability to discern his or her ecological surroundings. Such God-given potentiality and facility carry with them certain obligations from the viewpoint of universal morality and ethics. Being a quintessential servant of Allah (‘*abdullah*’), the humankind is expected to worship God. The Quran states: “And verily, we have not created the *jins* and the human beings, except to worship.”¹⁴⁰ This has been the main doctrine to which the humankind is bound by the need to worship Allah, and Allah alone. Thus, partnering Allah is akin to committing the gravest sin before the Omnipotent (*al-Jabbar*) and Ultimate Judge (‘*Aziz al-Hakim*’).

However, contrary to conventional belief, even among Muslims, the term “worship” (‘*ibadah*’) in Islam holds many meanings and carries with it multiple interpretations. In its most popular, yet restrictive meaning, worship denotes devotion, veneration and adoration toward God by way of prayers, supplication and engaging in benevolent acts to please Allah. Meanwhile, in its broadest and most progressive interpretation, the term encompasses any and all kinds of thoughts, actions and behaviours that are essentially good and/or beneficial to other humans or other species. The Prophet Muhammad famously once said, “The best of you is the best among you in conduct.”¹⁴¹ Consequently, the beauty of Muslim conduct depends greatly on the benefit he or she brings to humans and other species.

As a steward on earth, Muslims are obligated to “enjoin good and forbid evil” (*al-‘amr al-ma’ruf wa al-nahy al-munkar*).¹⁴² Islam therefore is not—as many might think it is—a deterministic religion, as the teaching emphasizes on human agency. Although the God of Islam is thought of as the Almighty and is capable of doing anything and

¹⁴⁰ The Quran 51:56.

¹⁴¹ Shahih Muslim, No.624.

¹⁴² Among others, see the Quran 9:112 and 31:17.

everything, human action, or inaction, *does* matter, especially in relation to the world we live in. Furthermore, the Prophet Muhammad specifically teaches the principle of human agency, which sits at the core of Muslim ethics on environmentalism and other forms of progressive social agenda, by saying:

“Whosoever of you see evil [or destruction], let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest faith.”¹⁴³

In light of the ecological crisis, Muslims therefore cannot sit idly, and it is forbidden to engage in wilful ignorance. It is the responsibility of Muslims, as other human beings, to mitigate the problem and not to resign to fate or determinism. The Quran states, “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”¹⁴⁴ While this serves as the main theory of change in Islam, it could also become an entry point for Muslim applied environmental ethics. Whereby to be a good Muslim, one has to care for the planet and all its inhabitants, and act upon the ecological crisis to mitigate the problem for Heaven’s sake.

In addition to the principle of human agency, Islam provides a fountain of wisdom on how to love and care for the planet and *all* of Allah’s creation. Stewardship in Islam entails not only passive co-existence with other species, but also the need to appreciate, respect and care for all the species that Allah has created on this planet and beyond. Here, the planet is considered as a trust (*amanah*) given by Allah to be cherished and looked after,¹⁴⁵ something that is obligated upon those who have reason, intellect and ecological vision. The real test and trial

¹⁴³ *Shahih Muslim*, No.34.

¹⁴⁴ The Quran 11:13.

¹⁴⁵ The Quran 33:72.

as a steward is that we—as wise humans (*homo sapiens*) who were entrusted with the *amanah*, are unremittingly trapped in a state of forgetfulness.

The hasty desire and yearning for material gains and worldly pleasures have caused humans to forget their status as a *khalifah fii al-'ardh*, and therefore engage relentlessly in environmental exploitation, resulting in ecological destruction and degradation. What immediately transpires is the devaluation of the natural world, which in turn causes us to relinquish the teachings and wisdom of our own religious traditions.

The teachings of the Prophet Muhammad abound with respect to how Muslims should interact and engage the environment. For the Prophet of Islam, the whole earth is pure and sacred. “The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification.”¹⁴⁶ Given the context of the barren desert where he grew up in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad also has a penchant for trees and plants. He was reported to have said, “If a Muslim plants a tree or grow grains and a bird, a person or an animal eats from it will be counted as a charity for him.”¹⁴⁷ Another Prophetic tradition also relates to planting saplings as the Day of Reckoning unfolds. Prophet Muhammad said, “If the Resurrection were established upon one of you, while he has in his hand a sapling, then let him plant it.”¹⁴⁸ The significance of such teaching is that Islam is pro-life, and sees trees, plants, flowers, birds, bees and humans as a sharing community, where every party benefits. This is wholly consistent with the Quranic pronouncement that states:

‘There is not a living creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected

¹⁴⁶ *Shahih Bukhari*, No.331.

¹⁴⁷ *Shahih Bukhari*, No.12.

¹⁴⁸ *Musnad Ahmad*, No.12491.

nothing in the Book, then unto their Lord they (all) shall be gathered.’¹⁴⁹

When it comes to resources, Islam is very clear about its stance on extravagance or wastefulness (*tabdzir*). It also has legal implications in Islamic law, as wastefulness constitutes an impermissible (*haram*) act or behaviour, and is disliked by Allah. The Quran states the following:

‘He is the One Who produces gardens—both cultivated and wild—and palm trees, crops of different flavours, olives, and pomegranates—similar ‘in shape’, but dissimilar ‘in taste’. Eat from the fruit they bear and pay the dues at harvest, but do not waste. Surely He does not like the wasteful.’¹⁵⁰

The Prophetic tradition also highlights the need to consume only what is needed and necessary, and forbade Muslims to engage in wastefulness. On the need to use scarce water in the desert, the Prophet Muhammad once said, “Do not [waste] water even if performing ablution on the bank of a fast flowing large river.”¹⁵¹ Another one was narrated from ‘Amr bin Shuaib that a man came to the Prophet and said: “I am poor and I do not have anything, and I have an orphan (under my care). He said: “Eat from the property of your orphan without being extravagant, wasteful or keeping it as capital for yourself.””¹⁵²

In contrast, Islam therefore views modesty and austerity (*zuhd*) as a key to happiness, and a way to prevent transgression of God’s laws and trust. The Prophet Muhammad once said, “Richness is not having many belongings, but richness is the contentment of the soul.”¹⁵³ Such contentment is often found in being grateful with what one has and

¹⁴⁹ The Quran 6:38.

¹⁵⁰ The Quran 6:141.

¹⁵¹ As recorded by Al-Tirmidhi.

¹⁵² As recorded by An-Nasa’i, No.3665.

¹⁵³ *Shahih Muslim*, No.2247.

living a well-balanced life in perfect harmony with nature. Unfortunately, despite the abundance of evidences from the Scriptures, Prophetic traditions, interpretations and teachings,¹⁵⁴ many Muslims today still live in wastefulness, without due consideration for the environment and the extractive industries that feed on it. Ironically, based on data from food sustainability, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, two main Muslim majority nations, are the “largest food wasters”.¹⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia stands at 427kg, while Indonesia is at 300kg per person per year, followed by the United States and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁵⁶

The intellectual challenge before us therefore is to reconnect the religious ethics with environmentalism. Some attempts have been made, but further outreaching and awareness building need to be done to ensure the message trickles down to the local communities. In 2015, for instance, Islamic faith leaders, scholars and environmental activists announced the “Islamic Declaration on Climate Change”. One of the things agreed upon by the Muslim leaders is “the scientific consensus on climate change” and the need “to stabilize greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate systems”.¹⁵⁷ They also committed themselves to “100 % renewable energy and/or a zero emissions strategy as early as possible”.¹⁵⁸

At the national level, Indonesian Muslims have probably been the most successful in terms of getting traditional religious authorities to highlight the need for greater sensitivity toward the ongoing ecological

¹⁵⁴ See Magunjaya (2010) for a combination between principles and practice as experienced by environmental non-governmental organizations in Indonesia.

¹⁵⁵ For more on food sustainability, see: <https://foodsustainability.eiu.com/food-loss-and-waste/>

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ For more, see: <https://unfccc.int/news/islamic-declaration-on-climate-change>

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

crisis. The Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI), a representative body of local Muslim organizations, has issued seven *fatwas* (legal opinions) on environmental conservation.¹⁵⁹ Over the course of almost 40 years, the MUI has issued seven environmentally friendly *fatwas*, which cover the following strategic areas:¹⁶⁰

- “Population, health and development” (1983)
- “Water recycling” (2010)
- “Environmentally friendly mining” (2011)
- “Conservation of rare species for a balanced ecosystem” (2014)
- “Waste management to prevent environmental degradation” (2014)
- “Utilization of alms, charity, donations and endowments for the construction of community water and sanitation systems” (2015)
- “Rule on burning forest and land and how to mitigate it” (2016)¹⁶¹

Now, whether or not the efficacy of these *fatwas* has any bearing on the country’s track record on environmental protection and conservation is a different question altogether. However, Indonesia is perhaps the most progressive Muslim country when it comes to connecting Islamic religious ethics and environmentalism. Furthermore, just recently in 2019, Indonesian Muslim environmental leaders also initiated the establishment of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, whose main goal is “to stop deforestation” and “bring the commitment, influence and moral authority of religions to efforts to protect the world’s rainforests and the indigenous peoples that serve as their guardians”.¹⁶² Thus, it is without doubt that what the Indonesian Muslims did in this context is by far the

¹⁵⁹ See Mangunjaya and Praharawati 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ For more on MUI *fatwas*, see: <https://mui.or.id/fatwa/>

¹⁶² See <https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/>

most progressive compared to all other Muslim populated countries of the world.

Even in the Islamic Education Scientific Organization (ISESCO)—whose function is almost similar to the UNESCO but only for the members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)—the idea that religion could be a significant contributing factor in the protection and conservation of the environment had only recently been acknowledged. Among other things, ISESCO has been looking at the effects of climate change and ways to implement sustainable development programs and strategies for the Muslim countries. In early October 2019, during the 8th Conference of Environment Ministers (ICEM), the ISESCO adopted the so-called “Rabat Declaration on the Promotion of Cultural and Religious Roles in the Protection of the Environment and Achieving Sustainable Development”.¹⁶³

Muslim Religious Ethics

As much as Muslim religious ethics is derived from the sacred Scriptures and Prophetic tradition, *‘aql* plays a central role in the development of human conduct and behaviour. Based on the exposition in the previous sections, Islam emphasizes stewardship and human agency in its environmental envisioning, which compel Muslims to apply the religious ethics of environmentalism or “green deen”.¹⁶⁴ In many ways, this is consistent with the notion of the Muslim “heart ware of ecological sustainability”, which emphasize the “inner dimension of the drivers of sustainability”, wherein

‘...it points to values, faith, religious convictions and spiritual practices in all the things beyond the materiality of ecology and

¹⁶³ For more on the Rabat Declaration, see: <https://www.icesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/12/Rabat-Declaration-ICEM8-Environment.pdf>

¹⁶⁴ On the concept and application of “green deen”, see Abdul-Matin (2010).

the workings of ecological governance. It is based on the sense of spiritual interconnectedness and the heightened awareness of the role of human beings as “stewards on earth”.¹⁶⁵

First, as a steward on this planet, human beings have been entrusted by God to safeguard the natural environment to ensure its sustainability and fulfil the functions that Allah has intended, which is to bring sustenance for both human beings and the other living species. The notion of stewardship entails that moral responsibility lies in the shoulders of human beings, who have been bestowed the faculties necessary to discern the signs of God better than other species, to care for the planet and all its inhabitants.

Second, the principle of balance or equilibrium (*mizan*) is the be-all end-all of Islamic environmentalism. In keeping with the Islamic tradition and ethos, Muslim environmental ethics envisions the world as a place of beauty and balance. Humans should therefore ideally work toward developing a planetary consciousness and sense of responsibility, as a being gifted with reason and intellect to discern and decipher the signs of God. This entails the need to enjoin work that benefits the preservation of the planet, protection of biodiversity and mitigation of species extinction and not against them. Such a stance would likely put environmentally conscious Muslims at odds with those who aspire to frantic development without due consideration for ecological sustainability.

Third, Muslims are morally compelled to perpetually assess their main purpose in life. This requires them to examine their everyday choices in life, particularly in terms of their mode of production and consumption. Should there be any contradiction between their choices in life and their commitment to Islam, some form of transformation would need to take place to ensure that the religious spirit and ethics of

¹⁶⁵ See Sofjan (2020): 30-31.

environmentalism remain intact. Again, a life of austerity is the norm in Islam, if the Prophet Muhammad and his family are to be the standard bearer. *Zuhd* stands diametrically opposite to *tabdzir*, which could bring both suffering and invite Allah's wrath.

Fourth, if societal transformation were to take place, individual level ethics would have to be transposed to the collective realm. Both formal and non-formal education remains the most efficacious means to transfer the necessary knowledge and wisdom on ethical environmentalism. Religious education in schools and mosques (e.g. Friday sermons) should therefore include a constant flow of content to build awareness about the environment, to instil love, appreciation and wonder of the natural world as enshrined in the Quran and taught by the holy Prophet. In the absence such awareness and vision, Islam would be relegated to a religion of consumerism, and Muslims would be at lost without any meaningful connections with their surrounding environment.

Fifth, Muslims need to be engaged in climate action and practice sustainability, not simply because it is a global agenda or that global investments are pouring in to confront those challenges, but rather because Islam demands it. And our reason and intellect have confirmed the science behind climate change and sustainable development.¹⁶⁶ In other words, the realisation on the phenomenon of global warming and the need to place emphasis on sustainable development practices are observable facts that can be scientifically proven. In fact, the current ecological crisis, if true, has been foretold by the Scriptures and anticipated by the Prophet.

¹⁶⁶ For more reading on "Islam and sustainable development", see Al-Jayyousi (2012).

The Quran states,

“Corruption has appeared on land and sea as a result of people’s actions and He will make them taste the consequences of some of their own actions so that they may turn back.”¹⁶⁷

Conclusion

For religiously committed Muslims, the Quran, the Prophetic tradition, and *‘aql* serve as the highest sources of truth and inspiration. They provide cues in life, and help Muslims make everyday life decisions regarding what constitute good or bad thoughts, actions and behaviours. As demonstrated, many Islamic religious precepts prove useful to infuse Muslim planetary consciousness and environmental awareness. In terms of the religious and spiritual resources, there are almost no limits to how Islamic religious ethics could contribute to the human understanding about their role as the *khalifah fii al-‘ardh*, whose moral obligation and ethical responsibility lies in mitigating, and not perpetuating, the current ecological crisis.

However, such a process cannot be accomplished as long as the self transformation and active social reforms do not take place. As Nasr (1989) reminds us:

“It is still our hope that as the crisis created by man’s forgetfulness of who he really is grows and that as the idols of his own making crumble one by one before his eyes, he will begin a true reform of himself, which always means a spiritual rebirth and through his rebirth attain a new harmony with the world of nature around him.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ The Quran 30:41.

¹⁶⁸ Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (1968/1989). *Man and Nature*, p.9.

As such, Muslim religious leaders, scholars and environmental activists need to come to terms with the idea of reforming themselves, while revitalizing the minds and hearts of people, notably the young generation, to develop a deep, strong and genuine sense of the natural wonders of the multiverse. This in part could be achieved by further infusing curiosity about the multifarious intellectual challenges that the Quran presents, and how the Prophet Muhammad had led a life, which fully appreciated and respected all life forms on the planet and beyond. This, after all, was the principal reason why Allah had sent down the Prophet Muhammad as a “mercy unto the multiverse” (*rahmatan li'l'aalamin*).¹⁶⁹

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¹⁶⁹ The Quran 21:107 states, “We have not sent you [O Muhammad], except as a mercy unto the multiverse.”

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