

The Islamic Perspective of Environment

Dr. Shakeel Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies
Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, India
shakeel1781@gmail.com

Abstract

In recent decades, Islamic countries have encountered austere criticism for their environment's approach. Some of the grievous environmental problems exist in the Islamic realm. A compound web of issues like economic competition, globalisation, and power struggle contributed to the environmental crisis in Muslim nations. Various scholars highlighted the importance of revisiting the Islamic principles regarding the environment to contain the destruction. On the other hand, many scholars have criticised Islamic principles as purely ethical and unscientific, without deeply diving into its sermons. Islamic principles place importance on the individual's duty to conserve the ecosystem. The article presents a brief description of verses dealing with the environment and explores into the eco-philosophy of Islam scriptures and the preachings. Besides, the piece also critically analyses the disapproval surmounting ethical eco-principles of Islam.

Keywords: Islam, Islamic Perspective, Environment, Eco-Philosophy, Eco- Principles

Introduction

The environment consists of all the exterior settings and stimulus that impact living being's life, conduct, progress and maturation. It also provides necessary living resources, health and value life to all the living beings. The vast quantity of natural resource supplied by the environment has assisted humankind to evolve. However, in the due process of evolution, man has ruthlessly exploited environment; with the scientific and technological advancements, utilisation of the environment became further tranquil. The severe ill-treatment of the environment has induced an acute environmental crisis that poses a danger to life on earth. Increase in population, and excessive employment of modern technology made environmental crisis a grave and complex global concern. Attrition and exhaustion of natural

resources, the decay of the ozone layer, worsening pollution are some of the severe ecological imbalances caused by environmental destruction.

Nevertheless, change in the attitude, and positive behaviour towards the environment could contain further environmental damage. World nations have come together with treaties to decrease ecosystem damage; Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, Kyoto Protocol to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, Convention of the Law of the Sea, and Convention to Combat Desertification, to name some. However, human activity as the larger responsible factor and the human's need to be ethical towards the environment is overlooked in most agreements.

Human activity is an amalgam of complex socio-economic and cultural influences. The unprecedented cultural change, unsustainable political power, and economic progression have greatly influenced people's behaviour towards the environs. The human instigated environmental crisis has deepened the production and consumption problems, exhaustion of natural resources, and extinction of wildlife, terrestrial and marine.¹ The UNEP reports (UNEP report Global Environment Outlook 2000) suggest that if the irregular economic growth, population and uneven production and consumption increase, the environmental catastrophe would be irrevocable.² The swiftly degrading ecology demands scientific but universally common ethical and value-based action to save the environment.

The attitude of human beings to behave well in their vicinity needs to be scientifically and ethically encouraged. Environmental ethics are defined norms about the human approach towards the ecosystem and its resources; the norms carry moral motivation and justification.³ Religions around the world play a significant role in defining moral norms. Though perceived indifferent to each other, all the faiths have shared perception towards nature. Religions share a close affinity with nature and carry a positive attitude towards it. Islam, one of the world's leading religions, places vital importance on conservation of the environment.

The environment has been the main topic of debate and discussion in the press as well as classrooms in each and every part of the world, and much has been discussed about the necessity to take action to protect this planet and provide awareness among people in this

¹ Chu, E. W., & Karr, J. R. (2017). Environmental impact: Concept, consequences, measurement. *Reference Module in Life Sciences*.

² Rowledge, L. (1999). Global Environment Outlook 2000: UNEP's Millenium Report on the Environment.

³ Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

regard. Promoting appreciation and admiration of the environment among people raises positive environmental behavioural change. pollution, water scarcity and crisis, air pollution, poor management of waste materials, declining groundwater levels, poor protection and conservation system of forests, loss on natural biodiversity, and land and soil degradation are some of the main environmental issues faced by the present world.⁵

Islam and the Eco-philosophy

Islam does not put forth specific environmental doctrine, yet it stresses the individual's relationship with God, fellow living beings, nature, and the universe. Islam elaborates the relevance of the environment to the civilisation and life.⁴ As the western world majorly relies on the scientific and secular approach towards the environment, Islam's outlook towards the ⁵ environment builds on the Quran's ethical traditions and Prophet Mohammad's (saw) preaching and lifestyle. Islam also perceives the crisis of environment from the lens of Quranic sermons.⁶

Quran contains verses that obligate the followers to preserve and curb the damage of the ecosystem. It also encourages believers to foster nature and only exploit it as per the necessity. The Quran, in its verses regarding the environment, maintains its primary theme of upholding the character of the universe established by Allah.⁷ The holy text mentions many incentives provided by God to those who cultivate and nurture nature. Quran regards human as the caliphate (Khalifa) or guardian of the earth and all the variety of life created by Allah; it also obligates that guardianship is the primary responsibility of human towards God.⁸

Islam also levies strict restrictions on the overexploitation and control of the ecosystem. The limitations classify into four principles, namely, 'unity principle' (Tawhid), 'creation principle' (Fitra), 'balance principle' (Mizan), and 'responsibility principle' (khalifa).⁹ The shariah, the Islamic law monitoring Muslim actions, deciphers all the principles into strict norms and refers to corruption penalties.¹⁰ The concept of Adalat (Justice) also deals with the

⁴ ibid

⁵ Alam, A. (2018). Protection and Conservation of Environment: An Important Role of Education. *i-Manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, 15(3), 1.

⁶ Khalid, F. (2010). Islam and the environment—ethics and practice an assessment. *Religion Compass*, 4(11), 707-716.

⁷ Fathil, M., Saam, Z., Sukendi, S., & Nizar, S. (2015). Islam and Environment: Education Perspective. *Al-Ta lim Journal*, 22(2), 96-106.

⁸ Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

⁹ Khalid, F. (2010). Islam and the environment—ethics and practice an assessment. *Religion Compass*, 4(11), 707-716.

environment. As per Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, an Islamic scholar, environmental concern is enunciated in all the arenas of Islamic culture and preaching.¹¹

Islam asserts that man's life and identity are not separate from the environment one resides in; thus, degradation of the environment is considered a sin and the safeguarding of it as virtue and justness.¹² Many verses in the Quran instruct the believers to follow a virtuous life as Allah would only be contented with the virtuous ones.

“O children of Adam, take your adornment at every masjid, and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess.” (Quran 7: 31)¹³

Corruption is one of the critical aspects that Islam constrains believers. Corruption in Islam is more comprehensive in scope and applies not just to frauds, malpractices, murder, rape, illegal activities but also to deforestation, excessive exploitation of natural resources, damaging the soil with toxic waste, and polluting resources; these are considered a grievous violation of Islamic values

“And do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption.” (Qur'an, 2:60), and elsewhere: “And do not desire corruption in the land. Indeed, God does not like corruptors.” (Quran 28:77)¹⁴

Charity is another concept that weighs in Islam; it maintains that one who performs charity is valued and rewarded by God. It is said,

“If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (*sadaqah*) for him.”¹⁵

Prophet Muhammad (saw), spent an eco-friendly and straightforward life, putting himself an example to the other followers and stressed on acting kindly with all the living creatures. He said, “Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is

¹⁰ Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

¹¹ ibid

¹² Kula, E. (2001). Islam and environmental conservation. *Environmental Conservation*, 1-9.

¹³ Ghernaout, D. (2017). Environmental principles in the Holy Koran and the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. *American Journal of Environmental Protection*, 6(3), 75-79.

¹⁴ Dehlvi, R. Ghulam. (2018). Islam and Environmental Protection: A Fresh Look at the Qur'an and Hadith. Source: <https://www.ecomena.org/islam-and-environmental-protection/>

¹⁵ Dehlvi, R. Ghulam. (2018). Islam and Environmental Protection: A Fresh Look at the Qur'an and Hadith. Source: <https://www.ecomena.org/islam-and-environmental-protection/>

rewarded”¹⁶. He further asserted on the cleanliness of environment saying, “Removing harmful things from the road is an act of charity (*sadaqah*).”¹⁷ Additionally, many chapter names in Quran, such as the Star, the Sun, the Moon, the Morning, the Dawn, the Sand Dunes, the Wind, the Smoke, the Ants, the Spider, the cattle, and the Fig, indicate the importance placed on the ecosystem by Islam.¹⁸

The eco-Islamic articulations and the inscriptions are criticised by many as superfluous citing its disintegration with the scientific approach towards the environment and being purely dealing with it in ethical terms.¹⁹ The western countries approach the environment from a secular perspective where no religious outlook is involved and is purely scientific; thus, they criticise Islamic scholars of taking an ethical, religious approach towards the ecosystem. The major environmental problems in the world, such as Aral Sea crisis, desertification of Sub-Saharan desert, biodiversity depletion in South East Asia, and excessive exploitation of oil deposits in the Arab nations, exist in the Islamic nations.²⁰ The rapid ecological destruction in the Muslim world escalates criticism.

Here it needs to be understood that the world nations, especially the third world nations face substantial economic and political issues; and the nations are in a mad race to mark a place for themselves in the international arena. The competition has made nations exploit most of the natural resources to draw economy and political power; the same is the case with the Islamic nations. Even the affluent Muslim nations, to maintain their economic strength globally, are overly abusing the environment. Some of the Islamic nations met criticism for the wasteful and careless feasting of food during Ramadan.²¹ Despite being run by the Islamic Shariah laws, the Muslim countries have parted their ways from the religious norms in practice to keep up in the race. The rapid social change sponsored by globalisation has also contributed to the Muslim nations’ diminished environmental culture and value system.²² Foltz, a prominent scholar, has cited boundless developmental measures, unawareness

¹⁶ Zafar, S. (2014). Environmental sustainability in Islam. Source: <http://www.ecomena.org/sustainability-islam>.

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ Bin Muhammad, G., Ahmed, A., & Shah-Kazemi, R. (2010). *The Holy Qur'an and the Environment*. “The” Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought.

¹⁹ Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

²⁰ Kula, E. (2001). Islam and environmental conservation. *Environmental Conservation*, 1-9.

²¹ Ismail, R., Saputra, J., & Aziz, A. A. (2019). Improving environmental performance of the Muslim world: Evidence from affluent countries. *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy*, 9(3), 301.

²² ibid

towards environmental concerns and fail to follow Islamic beliefs, values, and prophetic custom as causes of increasing environmental degradation in Islamic nations.²³

Indeed, Islam commands a state to consider public welfare as a primary responsibility of which environmental conservation is an essential measure.²⁴ In recent decades, the Islamic nations have come together to contain environmental degradation; one such instance is the Global environmental forum in partnership with UNEP at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in 2000.²⁵ The forum looked into the environmental issue from the Islamic perspective; it adopted a declaration named Jeddah declaration which sustains that the sustainable development according to the Islamic understanding is the suitable form to conserve the ecosystem and preserve the equilibrium on earth. It also stressed on the need of environment conservancy along with economic development. Besides, most of the Muslims nations are signatories of the international climate and environment conservations pacts. Islam necessitates the states to preserve the natural resources and environment alongside economic development for the future generations and setup protected areas (Haram);²⁶ the land and the living beings of a protected area are not exploited.

Nomanul Haq (2001), and Deuraseh (2009) have elaborated on environmental destruction as a crime against God and explored the Eco-philosophy within Islam's idea of the environment.²⁷ In Islam, humankind's activities against the environment are referred to as self-destructive (Dhulm Al-Nafs) and destructive to humanity and a grievous crime against Allah.²⁸

Conclusion

Islamic eco-philosophy is unique and resilient, yet is dubious in today's world even in the Islamic realms. Environmentalism is deep-rooted in the Islamic thought and possesses different perceptions from Western secular ideas. The globalised modernity influenced most of the Islamic community, exposing them to the materialist lifestyle. The quest to modernise

²³ ibid

²⁴ Khalid, F. (2010). Islam and the environment—ethics and practice an assessment. *Religion Compass*, 4(11), 707-716.

²⁵ Abumoghli, I., & McCartney, E. (2020). The role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Galvanizing Nature Based Solutions.

²⁶ Al-Damkhi, A. M. (2008). Environmental ethics in Islam: principles, violations, and future perspectives. *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 65(1), 11-31.

²⁷ Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).

²⁸ ibid

and develop economically led humans to neglect the basic ideas expounded by Islam, especially regarding the environment. The new scientific knowledge of the environmental issues is different from that of the Islamic ethical dialect about the environment. The ethical attitude towards the environment is as necessary as that of the scientific approach. Without the collective moral approach towards the conservation of the environment, scientific approach alone would not cultivate.

Moreover, environmental destruction is not just a problem of Islamic nations; all the world nations contribute to the rapid destruction ecosystem. With the increasing Islamophobia in the world, Muslim countries are made scapegoats and are blamed for most of the environmental issues; where the ruthless exploitation all over the world in the name of economic development is the primary cause of the environmental crisis. The world nations need to come together irrespective of the ideologies and recognise the necessity of promoting ethical behaviour.

References:

1. Abumoghli, I., & McCartney, E. (2020). The role of Environmental and Spiritual Ethics in Galvanising Nature Based Solutions.
2. Alam, A. (2018). Protection and Conservation of Environment: An Important Role of Education. *i-Manager's Journal of Educational Technology*, 15(3), 1.
3. Al Damkhi, A. M. (2008). Environmental ethics in Islam: principles, violations, and future perspectives. *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 65(1), 11-31.
4. Bin Muhammad, G., Ahmed, A., & Shah-Kazemi, R. (2010). *The Holy Qur'an and the Environment*. "The" Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought.
5. Chu, E. W., & Karr, J. R. (2017). Environmental impact: Concept, consequences, measurement. *Reference Module in Life Sciences*.
6. Fathil, M., Saam, Z., Sukendi, S., & Nizar, S. (2015). Islam and Environment: Education Perspective. *Al-Talim Journal*, 22(2), 96-106.
7. Ghernaout, D. (2017). Environmental principles in the Holy Koran and the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. *American Journal of Environmental Protection*, 6(3), 75-79.
8. Ismail, R., Saputra, J., & Aziz, A. A. (2019). Improving environmental performance of the Muslim world: Evidence from affluent countries. *International Journal of Energy Economics and Policy*, 9(3), 301.
9. Khalid, F. (2010). Islam and the environment—ethics and practice an assessment. *Religion Compass*, 4(11), 707-716.
10. Kula, E. (2001). Islam and environmental conservation. *Environmental Conservation*, 1-9.
11. Mohamed, N. (2012). *Revitalising an eco-justice ethic of Islam by way of environmental education: Implications for Islamic education* (Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University).
12. Rowledge, L. (1999). Global Environment Outlook 2000: UNEP's Millenium Report on the Environment.

13. Zafar, S. (2014). Environmental sustainability in Islam. *Source: http://www.ecomena.org/sustainability_islam.*