



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2016; 2(1): 438-441
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 12-11-2015
Accepted: 13-12-2015

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Islamic perspectives on environmental protection

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Abstract

There is a growing concern about the threats posed by environmental issues throughout the World. Global warming, freshwater depletion, biodiversity reduction, hole in the ozone layer - are all examples of such threats. How serious is it really? And what is to be done to change the direction? Many researchers have begun to look into underlying philosophical causes for man's rapacious attitude towards his environment. Part of this search involves a look at root philosophies affecting the human outlook and interaction with the world and the responsibility religion shares in creating the attitudes and philosophies that have led to the desecration of nature. Environment protection is an important aspect of Islam. Protection of the environment is essential to Islamic beliefs and mankind has the responsibility to ensure safe custody of the environment. This paper is an attempt to briefly present some aspects of the Islamic perspective on environment protection in the light of Quranic verses and Islamic narrations (*hadiths*).

Keywords: Environment, Islam, god, hadiths, quran, nature, Allah

Introduction

Human race is essentially dependent on nature or environmentally speaking on biosphere as it provides him with all the necessities for his sustenance, growth and development. But the development & progress of the human civilization has brought the biosphere – the giver of products essential for life, living space, quality-of-life, variety-of-life and national economies—to a crisis point. The biosphere is now giving us many signals that it is greatly stressed; that it is struggling to cope with natural resource depletion, ozone depletion, acid rain, ecosystem loss, polluted air, land, rivers and oceans. Yet our future depends on it.

One of the most important problems in today's world is the environmental crisis. It seems that this problem started when modern man stopped understanding himself as the vicegerent and trustee of the All-Merciful God who must channel divine mercy to everything at his disposal or within his reach, and stopped understanding nature as a sacred sign and valuable trust from God. For the same reason, it seems that the best way to protect the environment from destruction and, indeed, to improve its condition is to revive these 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.

For Muslims the Quran is the ultimate green-guide. Believed to be a sublime revelation with remarkable ideas, this divine scripture is scrupulously read by Muslims for spirituality. But it is not limited to only that. In the Islamic faith, faith in the environment is on par to good faith towards humanity and indeed God, since Muslims believe He created all. The Qur'an therefore, doesn't just link belief in One God (*Tawheed*) to being nice to plants and keeping a pet. The Qur'an glorifies nature and wildlife as an earthly heaven, a mirror to the lush forests of Paradise above.

This religious faith of the people can be better utilized for the environmental protection. Mass awareness programs can be designed based on the lines suggested in this paper.

Literature Review

- Mortazvi (2004) ^[1] pinpoints the root of the problem and states that the concern over the tragedy of the commons emanates from the fact that Western economics has become a discipline devoid of values. Exploitation of the natural environment can be abated when individuals consider intergenerational welfare & justice to be important factors in their

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economic decisions. Islamic economics, unlike its Western counterpart, is a value-driven discipline replete with moral values that limits individual's consumption & imposes significant social and religious responsibilities on individuals as guardians of the natural environment for future generations.

- Hassan (2006) ^[2] shares the same line of thought and states that in the international arena, nothing can help except realization of common danger, discipline and sacrifice for common good. Free riding can hardly be condoned. Instead of preservation and restraint, we are borrowing from the future to consume now via the credit card culture. In a word, we are jeopardizing the future of our children let alone leaving them in at least the same position as ours.
- ASTROM (2011) ^[3] explains that one of the problematic points of view of today's generation is that they have the rights of limitless ownership without taking into account the responsibilities towards society and humanity.
- Dwevedi (1990) ^[4] believes that many world religions share the perspective that the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust, immoral, and unethical. It is a historical fact that "Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists were careful to observe moral teachings regarding the treatment of nature; not only common people but also rulers and kings followed those ethical guidelines and tried to create an example for others, but sadly it remains historical"
- Iqbal (2005) ^[5] said that the Quran talks about people who are fair in speech, but make mischief on earth and destroy crops and progeny (Q2:204-5). The Prophet s.a.w. established a green belt of twelve miles around Medina, and prohibited people from cutting trees or hunting in this area. He prohibited pollution of drinking water, and Muslim jurists have deduced, therefore, that it is not permissible to dump garbage and waste products into rivers. He also encouraged revival of barren land by assigning property rights to those who did so. On the basis of these traditions, Muslim jurists in the Middle Ages legislated against industrial activities that pollute the environment.
- Muhammad Muinul Islam (2004) ^[6] said that to get back the sound environment and unharmed nature, Islamic teaching and guidelines have no alternative. Islamic ecoethics needs to be implemented at all levels – local, national, regional, global and most importantly, at individual level.
- Chapra (1993) ^[8] traces the ethical foundations for the protection of environment under the principle of 'No Injury'. According to this principle, Muslims are prohibited from harming others. He contends that the environmental degradation harms both the present and future generations. Therefore, it is an obligation of an individual and a society to protect it.
- Nasr (1990) ^[7] holds a similar viewpoint. He says that in Islam, man and cosmos are in a state of unity, harmony, and complementarity. He maintains that planting trees, treating animals gently, avoiding pollution in water are as good deeds as feeding the poor and attending the sick. Moreover, he emphasizes the spiritual significance of nature. For the solution of the environmental problem, he specifically suggests expansion of general awareness regarding *shari'ah's* teachings about the ethical treatment of the environment. He does not assign any

role to the Islamic state for the promotion of the environment.

- Husaini (1990) ^[9] provides valuable insight to the understanding of the problem. He believes that Islam is the natural religion of everyone in the universe. A Muslim grows by submitting himself to the will of Allah. The universe has been created as a necessary environment in which he might fulfill his mission. As a vicegerent of Allah on earth, man must recognize the right of all creatures to the environmental resources. He argues that the environmental disruption of any kind must be avoided for two reasons. First, it is an ethical command of *shari'ah* and second, it is essential for protecting the public interest and universal common good of all mankind and other 'people' of Allah.

Islam & Environment Protection:

The Islamic perspective on the environment rests on the belief that Allah is the Creator & Sustainer of the universe. The whole universe along with all of its factors has been created with perfect wisdom (*hikmah*). The number, quantity, and quality of these factors is precisely determined by the divine plan. Each factor plays its ordained role. Everything created by Allah has a just purpose which must be fulfilled. The Holy Quran, shedding light on this point, says:

"We created not the heavens and the earth and all between them but for just ends, and for a term appointed: but those who reject Faith turn away from that whereof they are warned."
(Quran: 46:3)

For the sustenance of His creation, Allah has placed a measured quantity of the environmental resources which matches the total demand of the resources in the universe. This implies the existence of environmental balance in the natural ecosystem. Hence, Islam looks at the environment from the standpoint of balance. The Quran describes the notion of environmental balance in various terms like 'adl', 'qadar' and 'mouzoon'.

'adl' literally means acting justly, rightly, or equitably.

'qadar' is a specified measure or amount either of quantities or qualities. This term corroborates the notion of balance in the following *ayah*:

"Verily all things We have created in proportion and measure."
(Quran: 54:59)

The above *ayah* makes a general statement about the existence of equilibrium in everything. The process of creation & growth of all things follows the principle of balance.

The term 'mouzoon' which occurs in the first of the following *ayahs*:

"And the earth We have spread out, set therein mountains firm and immovable and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance. And We have provided therein means of sustenance for you and for those whose sustenance you are not responsible."
(Quran, 15: 19-20)

According to above *ayahs*, all kinds of provisions have been made for the sustenance of human and the non-human beings in a way that the quantity demanded of these provisions

equals their supply. There is no question of relative shortage or surplus in the divine plan regulating these provisions.

Nature is a ‘Gift of God’: There are more than 750 verses in the Quran that are related to nature. It is said that nature is indeed a bounty of Allah that makes the humanity and all other living organisms survive in the earth.

“And He has made subservient to you, (as a gift) from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth: in this, behold, there are messages indeed for people who think!”
(Quran, 45:13)

Water. In Islamic culture, water is very highly regarded. The word *maa’* (water) is used in the Qur’an about 60 times. Water is introduced as the origin and the source of life. For example, the Qur’an says: *“And We have made of water everything living”*
(Quran, 21:30)

The Qur’an also states that, *“God created from water every animal that goes on its belly, on two legs and on four legs. Water is pure and purifying”*
(Quran, 25:48).

Earth. Every Muslim in his ritual prayer has to prostrate to God several times on the earth. In Islamic scriptures, the earth is introduced as an origin for the creation of human beings. The Qur’an says:

“From it (earth) We created you and into it We shall send you back and from it We will raise you a second time”.
(Quran, 20:55)

Likewise, the earth is introduced as ‘a mother’ for human beings. The Holy Prophet is quoted as saying: *Preserve the earth because it is your mother’*¹⁰

Deforestation: Islam is against the cutting or destruction of plants & trees unnecessarily as is evident in the following Hadith: Abdullah ibn Habashi reported that Prophet Muhammad said: *“He who cuts a lote-tree [without justification], Allah will send him to Hellfire.”*¹⁰

Islam highly recommends planting trees and urges people to protect them to the extent that planting a tree is considered as an act of worship, for which special prayer is recommended. The Holy Prophet said: *‘Unless you are compelled, do not cut down a tree!’*¹⁰

Preservation of Water: Water is a huge life-providing theme in the Quran. God talks about how He creates life through water then sustains it by streams, the rains, rivers and oceans that are homes for so many creatures.

“And Allah has sent down rain from the sky and given life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who listen.”
(Quran, 16:65)

Preservation of Animals/Species:

“And there is no creature on (or within) the earth or a bird that flies with its wings except that they are nations (communities) like you.”
(Quran, 6:38)

This quranic verse says that all living things are partners to man in existence and they deserve our respect. We must be

merciful toward animals and strive to ensure the preservation of different species.

Trusteeship of resources: Allah is the actual owner of all resources. Man is required to use them in right ways. After their acquisition, he is supposed to act as a trustee, benefiting from them according to the terms of the trust. He cannot waste resources in any case.

“Indeed, We (God) offered the Trust to the heavens & the earth and the mountains & they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant.”
(Quran, 33:72)

Being the trustee of nature, it is humans sacred duty to conserve nature & protect environment from degradation of any kind. Allah has created everything and nothing is created in vain. It is mentioned in the Quran:

“We have not created the heaven and the earth and all that lies between them in vain.”
(Quran, 38:27)

The protection of Allah’s creation is the duty of a Muslim and Allah appreciates those with rewards who takes care of environment. It is these values which led the Prophet (peace and blessing be upon him) to say,

*“Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it, until it matures and bears fruit, is rewarded.”*¹¹

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) also said:

*“If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part”*¹¹.

True environmental consciousness is born when such values are adopted and become an intrinsic part of our mantel and physical make-up. In his letter of recommendation, the First Caliph, Abu Bakr ordered his troops,

*“Do not cut down a tree, do not abuse a river, do not harm animals and be always kind and humane to God’s creation, even to your enemies.”*¹³

Al-akhira (Hereafter): *Al-akhirais* one of the fundamental beliefs of Islam. It implies Islamic doctrine of accountability. A Muslim has to believe that *every atom’s weight of good and every atom’s weight of evil will be weighed in al-akhira.* This belief broadens his vision. He evaluates the likely impact of his worldly choices on his life in the Hereafter before making decisions. Practically, this belief acts as a monitoring system inside the mind and heart of a Muslim and thus helps him to do good deeds and avoid bad deeds. These are explained in Quran: 99:7, 45:15, 53:31 verses. An Islamic society, therefore, produces environmental-friendly behavior which is quite helpful for maintaining the environmental balance.

Anti-Corruption: Corruptions are of many types- Crime, political fraud, illegal banking systems, theft, rape. Sound pretty major don’t they. Now add to that list littering, deforestation, toxic waste and pesticides. Sure, these are hardly equivalent to murdering but in the long run, these things take human lives too, a fact. That is what the Qur’an is alarming readers about.

"...And do not desire corruption in the land. Indeed, God does not like corruptors." (Quran 28:77)
 "Eat & drink from the provision of Allah And do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption." (Quran, 2:60)

Thus, Allah has stated that He made all the material objects on earth for man's use, not for his abuse.

Poverty alleviation: Various scientific studies have established that poverty & environmental degradation are directly proportional to each other. Hence, ending poverty is essential for environment protection. In Islam charity is prioritised to the most needy and the closest.

"And you do not encourage one another to feed the poor." (Quran, 89:18)
 "No! But you do not honour the orphan." (Quran, 89:17)

Simplicity: Simplicity is an important feature of Islamic life having far reaching implications for the environmental balance. The Holy Quran has ordained such a life by proscribing extravagance. It says:

"Do not be extravagant, surely Allah does not like extravagants." (Quran, 6:141)

The environmental implications of simple living are significantly favorable. These implications occur by 2 ways.

- (i) Reduced input demand for the natural resources due to the reduced consumption of the final goods. Consequently, a substantial amount of saving of the natural resources takes place which tends to augment the existing supply of these resources.
- (ii) It controls the quantity of waste material which occurs as a result of reduced consumption. The smaller amount of waste material reduces the scope for bacterial exposure. This helps improve health conditions and also saves substantial amount of expenditure incurred on recycling and garbage disposal. Both of these channels thus generate favorable implications for the environmental balance.

Preservation, not Profligation: Protecting the environment from detriments of all kinds and preserving the nature is the philosophy of Islamic environmentalism. Being the trustee of the nature, this is humans duty to take care of environmental sustainability. Along with proper care of environment, Islam also cautions not to be profligate and wasteful. Allah gives order to humankind:

"O Children of Adam! Beautify yourselves for every act of worship, and eat and drink [freely], but do not waste: verily, He does not love the wasteful!" (Quran, 7:31)

Conclusion: Environment, in Islamic worldview is a 'gift of God' to mankind. Islam is a universal religion and its concern for the environment is a universal one, cutting across national, religious and geographical barriers. Its major commandments are directed, not to the Muslims alone, but to the human race. Hence in the question of conserving the natural resources the Almighty Allah's decree is enforced upon 'people' rather than to Arab or Muslims alone. The environmental worldview in Islam is a holistic one. These Islamic values can be very helpful for ensuring environment protection.

Directions for Future Research: Almost all the religions on earth preaches for universal brotherhood & welfare of the society. The religion due to its strongest bearing on human mind has the capacity to direct the actions of its followers towards the cause of the society i.e. social welfare. The values & teachings of different religions in the area of environmental protection can be found out so that it could be made use of in designing various mass awareness campaigns of Environment protection. This paper is a small attempt in that direction. Similar research can be carried out for other religions also.

Limitations

In Islam there are so many social, cultural and religious dimensions & values which are relevant for Environmental Protection. This paper pointed out only few of them that become a limitation for this paper. Also the Literature review is not sufficient to cover this broad topic. A detailed and deep study of Quran and Hadiths are required to cover all the areas of this topic. This paper limits many other dimensions that can be picked from the same topic.

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