

Environmental Awareness: An Islamic Perspective

by Qazi Faez Isa¹

The first Revelation from God commanded humanity to, Read! Humanity was informed that creation is His invention, and man was also created from an insignificant clot, by Him. Reading, and its associated acquisition of knowledge, is stressed again, for our Lord is Most Generous having taught the use of the pen, and increased our comprehension about things unknown. But, we still transgress; considering ourselves self-sufficient forgetting the final reckoning, when we shall return to our Creator. Are those who prevent His adoration on the right path, or those who bid piety?

Read! In the name of your Lord Who has created.

He has created man from a clot.

Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous.

Who has taught by the pen.

He taught humanity that which he knew not.

Nay! Verily, man does transgress.

Because he considers himself self-sufficient.

Surely, unto your Lord is the return.

Have you seen him who prevents.

A slave when he prays.

Tell me if he is rightly guided.

Or enjoins piety?²

The rhetorical question at the end is not answered; however, the truth reverberates in every human heart. These opening verses of the Quran mandate reading, writing and the acquisition of knowledge. His creation, including man, is under threat because of our perceived self-importance. We embarked upon this path of destruction, the wrong path, because we think we are clever and self-sufficient, neglecting His Most Generous creation; having depleted the atmosphere's protective ozone layer by use of dangerous chemicals, poisoning water sources, burning carbon fuels at levels that exceed the permissible levels of carbon dioxide in the air resulting in global warming, contaminating the earth, deforesting

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² Holy Quran, surah 96 Al-Alaq, verses 1-12.

and denuding soil of its nutrients, emptying the seas by fishing at unsustainable levels, hunting animals into extinction, encroaching upon the habitats of other species and leaving them homeless and vulnerable.

By now, in this 21st Century, we know that our hands have wrought devastation on a massive scale but, despite being fully informed about the environmental crisis we in lemming like fashion continue on a path that will lead to destruction; so far removed from the right path.

At the heart of the Islamic faith is prayer, and the faithful in every prayer repeatedly praises not just the Lord, but the 'Lord of the worlds' (*Rab ul aalameen*), that is Lord of all creation. We know that a mother's heart gladdens with joy when her child is praised and she is beholden to anyone who protects or helps her child³. It is narrated by Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, that Allah's love is infinitely more than a mother's for her child. When a Muslim wants to praise a beautiful or well behaved child, or even after winning a cricket match, he or she invariably says *al-hamdulillah* or *subhanallah*, literally 'praise be to Allah' or 'Allah the Praiseworthy.' A mother is angered when anyone causes her child harm, similarly when we harm Allah's creation, His ozone layer, His water, His earth, His forests, His soil, His oceans, His fish, His trees, His birds and His animals we anger Him; we sin, in a religious sense.

However, even a very devout man whilst meticulously attending to the ritual of the prescribed five daily prayers may not give a second thought to the water he wasted whilst performing ablution, the unnecessary carbon fuel he burnt by leaving on lights, the purchases bought in non-essential plastic bags, which have flown away, now some plastic bags have their death-vise grip around budding plants and others found their way into the water and choking fish, the trees he cut to clear a field for his personal profit, etcetera. Ordinary people deal with religion to the extent that it concerns their daily life. They have compartmentalized it.

Fortunately, "the vast majority of the people in the world still heed authentic religion. For them, no ethics would have efficacy unless it was religious ethics. ... If it were to be told to them that pollution and destruction of the environment is a sin in the theological sense of the term they would think twice before indulging in it."⁴ However, it is the learned men and women who reach into the heart of religion and disseminate knowledge amongst the religious community. Those who "think deeply about creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): Our Lord! You have not created (all) this without purpose;"⁵ they, Allah informs us, are the most favoured by Him, but unfortunately these learned souls have been pushed to the periphery of religion.

Islamic sages have noted the rupture between the faith and practice in Islamic communities. In *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences) Imam Abu-Hamid al-Ghazali, who died 900 years ago, wrote: "I found everyone hankering after material gains. People had become forgetful of the eternal salvation, while the '*ulema* who are guides to the right path

³ Tradition reported in Bukhari and Muslim.

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimension of the Environmental Crisis, A Sacred Trust, Ecology and Spiritual Vision* published by The Temenos Academy, 2002.

⁵ Holy Quran, surah 3 Al-Imran, verse 191.

were not to be found any longer. There remained only those who had lost their soul to worldly temptations. These people had led everyone to suppose that knowledge consists in the debates and arguments by which they spread their fame; or else ornate sermons, by which they held the people spell-bound; or else legal opinion, by which they sat in judgment to settle the disputes of others. The knowledge that was required to illuminate the path leading to the world-to-come had thus completely disappeared. I could not endure this state of affairs and ultimately decided to sound the alarm.”⁶

“We now live in a world similar to that of al-Ghazali’s time and stand all the more in need of his inspired guidance than the people of his time.”⁷ The environmental crisis cannot be redressed by a scientific approach alone, we need to return to religious tradition and the virtues inherent therein, that enabled mankind to live in equilibrium, at peace, with nature over many millennia. “It requires a very radical transformation in our consciousness, and this means not discovering a completely new state of consciousness, but returning to the state of consciousness which traditional humanity always had. It means to rediscover the traditional way of looking at the world of nature as a sacred presence.”⁸

We need to open our eyes, ears and heart to all of creation, its importance and how we and all other species, the air, earth and water are inter-dependent.

There is no moving [living] creature on earth
and no bird that flies with its two wings,
but are communities like you.⁹

Everything in creation is in perfect balance. Responsible and sustainable use of natural resources must be made. We must not transgress the balance:

And He has set the Balance
In order that ye may not transgress (due) balance ...
It is He who has spread out the earth for creatures ...
Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?¹⁰

But, not only is importance not being given to what science is telling us about the state of the environment, religion too has been boxed in, and interaction between the two is missing. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who has written extensively on Islam and its environmental dimension, similar to a modern day al-Ghazali has pointed out the complete disconnect. “The unifying vision which related knowledge to love and faith, religion to science, and theology to all departments of intellectual concern is finally completely lost, leaving a world

⁶ Al-Ghazali Wonders of the Heart, translated by Walter James Skellie, published by the Islamic Book Trust 2007, Kuala Lumpur.

⁷ Ibid, from the Publisher’s Note.

⁸ Footnote 3 above.

⁹ Holy Quran, surah 6 Al-An’am, verse 38.

¹⁰ Holy Quran, surah 55 Ar-Rahman, verses 5-13.

of compartmentalization where there is no wholeness because holiness has ceased to be of central concern, or is at best reduced to sentimentality.”¹¹

All religious traditions, Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Christian, Islamic and others, teach us about the interconnectedness of things. Religion was never just about performing ritual, it was a worldview, providing a doctrine about God, understanding about human being’s inherent nature and knowledge and understanding of the natural world and the environment. It would be offensive to genuine religion to state that the natural world was there simply to serve man’s desires, to be his plaything. God created everything with wisdom, value and purpose. Allah says:

We have not created the heavens and the earth
and all that is between them for mere play.
We have created them but for truth.¹²

Anyone who cannot comprehend His theophanies is ignorant; and the ignorant are castigated. “Verily, the worst of living creatures with Allah are the deaf and dumb, who understand not.”¹³ “Be not one of those who are ignorant (*jahilun*).”¹⁴ “Follow not the path of those who know not.”¹⁵

The Holy Book expounds what God set out to achieve and instructs man. The reality or essence of creation is revealed:

Have you not seen that Allah is glorified
by all in the heavens and on the earth
such as birds with wings outspread?
Each knows its worship and glorification.¹⁶
There is not a thing but hymneth His praise.¹⁷

“So every time we destroy a species, we are destroying a prayerful being. It is like murdering someone while he is praying. It is as abominable as that.”¹⁸

We must start living harmoniously with our surroundings and not treat the earth with conceit and arrogance.

And walk not on earth with conceit and arrogance.

¹¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹² Holy Quran, surah Ad-Dukhan 44, verses 38-39.

¹³ Holy Quran, surah 8 Al-Anfal, verse 22.

¹⁴ Holy Quran, surah 6 Al-An’am, verse 35.

¹⁵ Holy Quran, surah 10 Yunus, verse 89.

¹⁶ Holy Quran, surah 24 An-Nur, verse 41.

¹⁷ Holy Quran, surah 17 Al-Isra, verse 44.

¹⁸ Footnote 3 above, page 134.

Verily, you can neither rend nor penetrate the earth,
nor can you attain a stature like mountains in height.¹⁹

We must not “follow the path of those who know not”²⁰ those who have been led astray by Satan (*Iblis*). Whosoever follows Satan, “surely, Hell will be the recompense of you,”²¹ and Satan promises nothing but deceit.²²

A tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, reveals that even during times of war certain natural resources could not be defiled. For instance, it was forbidden to poison a well by salt or other means, even though the well was used by the enemy. The World Commission on Environment and Development, constituted under Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the then Norwegian Prime Minister, in its report²³ recognized that, “competitive arms’ races breed insecurity among nations through spirals of reciprocal fears. Nations need to muster resources to combat environmental degradation and mass poverty. By misdirecting scarce resources, arms’ races contribute further to insecurity.”

The political heirs of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who propounded the philosophy of *ahimsa* or total non-violence, were the first to detonate the atom in this South Asia region, and now have atom bombs, breeding insecurity and propelling Pakistan on the same path. The nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan should be a matter of grave concern to believers in both countries, but surprisingly it is not so and we live in fear of mutually assured destruction.

With the abandonment of the teachings of faith, common sense too seems to have taken flight. It would be apt to quote Shah Abdul Latif, our sufi poet:

The birds in flocks fly;
Comradeship they do not decry
Behold, among the birds there is more loyalty
Than among us, who call ourselves humanity.²⁴

The environmental message can most effectively be conveyed through a religious medium, because the people heed their respective religions. Ethics anchored in religion would convince them quickly that they must not waste, consume more than their needs, pollute, contaminate, defile, degrade or destroy the environment. The believers need to be reminded that our Creator wants us to live in harmony with all species, with nature, and by granting us stewardship on earth (*khalifah fil ard*) He has placed upon us a great responsibility. Unfortunately, even *madrassas* and religious schools do not teach Islam’s powerful environment message, which is a crucial pillar of the Faith; having spoken at length

¹⁹ Holy Quran, surah 17 Al-Isra, verse 37.

²⁰ Holy Quran, surah 10 Yunus, verse 89.

²¹ Holy Quran, surah 17 Al-Isra, verse 62.

²² Holy Quran, surah 17 Al-Isra, verse 63.

²³ <www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm>

²⁴ “*Wagar keo watan pirtj na channan paanmein,
passoo pakhay run maruhaan meath ghannu.*”
From Sur Dharou, Risalo

to those who have attained high religious degrees I came away with the sad realization that the topic did not even feature in their curriculum, nor had they considered the same.

We need to start working on environmental curricula that is anchored in Faith for schools, colleges, universities and also for the religious schools. We need to propagate the message that environmental degradation is also sinful. We need to remind and bring to the forefront the primary principle, there is “no god but Allah,” that the idol of perpetual material development is unsustainable, and false. We must resuscitate the religious view of nature, to live at peace with God, with ourselves and with His creation, with all of His creation both animate and inanimate, that by His Mercy sustains and nourishes us even if in our ignorance we are unworthy of all His blessings. The attainment of this peace alone can ameliorate the critical condition of the world about us.”²⁵

“In good time we shall see

God and his light,” ye say.

Fools! Ye shall never see

What ye see not today!²⁶

²⁵ Footnote 3 above, page 148.

²⁶ J. Bilger, *Alexandrines*, Translated from the *Cherubischer Wandermann* [The Cherubic Wanderer] of Angelus Silesius 1657, North Montpelier, N.Y., 1994, page 60.