
THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

This article is written on the premise that the state of the environment throughout the planet is now facing a crisis. The depleting resources of the world simply cannot support the present developmental models being practised. If we are to ensure that the planet is not reduced to a polluted husk there has to be a paradigm shift with regard to how we should continue. From the lawyers' point of view, this shift will be reflected in effective policies and legislation, both national and international. However, any changes require an ideological foundation upon which to build. It can be argued that religious principles are one source of ideology that can be used for this purpose. This article will concentrate only on the Islamic perspective.

Firstly, it will examine the basic divide within Islamic circles as to man's relationship with the environment. It will then look at how Quranic verses and the Surrah (sayings of the prophet Muhammad PBUH)¹ are relevant to environmental protection. This will be followed by a brief comparison with secular ideologies and end with a conclusion as to the role Islamic doctrine can play in the present day environmental protection.

The Divide

In short the two opposing camps in Islamic scholarly circles regarding the environment can be summarised as follows. One group believes that humans were put on the earth as trustees of the planet whereas the other group believes that the planet and all its resources were

¹Peace be upon him.

created in order to be exploited by mankind. The argument seems to revolve around the interpretation of the term 'khalifah' which is used to describe man's² role on the earth. Due to the complexities of the Arabic language, 'khalifah' can be defined in several ways. Abd-al-Hamid states:³

"The Arabic word 'Khalifah' has been variously translated into English as a successor, deputy, vice-regent, inheritor and trustee. Its verbal root *khalaf* means 'he came after, followed, succeeded to', and holds with, despite, be at variance with; and offend against, violate or break a rule, command or promise – a significant connotation in the light of the angels' prediction. So we may understand, by its opposite, a *khalifah* as one who inherits a position, a power, a trust, and who holds it responsibly and in harmony with its bestower – in this case Allah. He does not violate the trust".

On the other hand the role of mankind as Khalifah has been interpreted to mean that the earth is to be utilized and a man who does not work to exploit the riches of the planet is being a disobedient servant of God. In other words, he is a lord on earth and it is his duty to use it.

This divergence as to the role of man is a conundrum also experienced by Christian environmentalist who are faced with Genesis 1:28 which states: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have domain over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and all living things that move on this earth". A verse which inspired Prince Phillip, in a surprising burst of insight, to state in his book *Save the Earth*,⁴ "To me, that Old Testament story has provided Western man, accompanied by Judeo-Christian heritage, with an overbearing and domineering attitude towards God's creation."

Naturally there are many other aspects of the Christian tradition which can be used to counter the seemingly free hand given to human beings by Genesis 1:28. The Islamic scenario does not face such a serious dilemma because as pointed out by Abd-al-Hamid there is no

²The term "man" is used here to describe humanity and does not reflect any gender bias, merely laziness, on the part of the writer.

³"Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics", in *Islam and the Environment*, Ed. A.R. Agwan, Synergy Books International, Kuala Lumpur, 1997.

⁴World Watch Institute, Washington, 1991.

Quranic authority to suggest that man is any thing other than a trustee of the planet in the sense that he is a protector and not an exploiter.

Linked intimately to the concept of the *khalifah* is the concept of *amanah* or trust. Mankind had accepted the *amanah* as offered by God and therefore freewill is his for it is integral to the execution of *amanah*. He has a choice to do as he pleases and because he is a trustee who has willingly taken up the challenge of that trust he shall have to behave in a way that does not abuse the *amanah*. The hadith and Islamic traditions indicate that the duty of mankind, God's *khalifah* on earth, is to be responsible and accountable in his conduct to fellow man, other living creatures, indeed the planet itself.⁵

With this idea of a trusteeship as a basis, a study of Islamic ideology reveals a rich seam of specific principles useful to the environmental cause. What follows is a brief description of those Islamic principles. For ease of reference, different aspects of the environment shall be examined separately.

Water

Islam was founded in a desert nation and it is natural that water is deemed as a most important resource to be treasured. There are many verses in the Quran that stress this. First and foremost water is respected as the foundation of all life in verses such as the following: "And Allah has created every animal from water"⁶ and "We made from water every living thing".⁷

There are many who use these verses as evidence of the scientific nature of the Quran, seeing as how it is generally accepted in scientific circles that life on Earth would not have been possible without the formation of water. This may be a valid point, but even without delving into the scientific value of the verses they have a strong symbolic

⁵The specific hadith states; "The world is sweet and green and verily Allah has installed you as *khalifah* in it to see how you act". Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, *Dar al Arabia*, 1971, Vol4, p.1432. The tradition mentioned above is about the peoples of Ad and Thamud, who in their arrogance and misuse of their power were destroyed by environmental cataclysms.

⁶Surah 24, verse 45.

⁷Surah 21, verse 30.

meaning as they place water in an exalted place in its relationship with life itself.

There are further verses which then go on to illustrate the importance of water as the sustenance of life. A few examples include:

"Behold... in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies and the life which He gives therewith".⁸

"Thou seest the earth barren and lifeless, but when We pour down rain on it, it is stirred to life, it swells, and it puts forth every kind of beautiful growth in pairs".⁹

"And He it is who sends the winds as heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy, and We send down pure water from the sky- that with it, We may give life to a dead land, and slake the thirst of things we have created- cattle and men in great numbers".¹⁰

It is undeniable that water is viewed as a precious resource provided for by God. On a more spiritual level, Quranic verses contain imagery of a paradise that is laden with gardens and rivers that are clean and unpolluted.¹¹ The significance of water as a source of purification, as in the act of ablution, serves to reinforce its importance, especially in an unpolluted state. These examples serve to illustrate the value of water. However, it is a value not to be taken for granted, as expressed in surah 67, verse 30 which reads: "See ye? If your stream be some morning lost who then can supply you with clear flowing water".

As shall be seen later, this is a theme that is very strong in Islamic tradition. The fact that whatever we have is through the grace of God. It is imperative therefore that we do not pollute our water supply¹² and that there should be no wastage. This is expressed in a hadith that reveals an attitude of wariness when using resources. A follower was doing his ablutions in a river and the prophet Muhammad PBUH noticed that a great deal of water was being splashed and used. He chided the

⁸Surah 2, verse 164.

⁹Surah 22, verse 5.

¹⁰Surah 25, verse 48 and 49.

¹¹M Rafiq and Mohd Ajmal, "Islam and the Environmental Crisis", in *Islam and the Environment*, Ed. A.R. Agwan, Synergy Books International, Kuala Lumpur, 1997 at p135

¹²It is no accident that the verse refers to "clear" water.

man for wasting water and the man asked could there be wastage even in ablutions to which the prophet replied, "In anything there can be a waste".¹³

Air

There are no specific verses on air pollution in the Quran. However, its importance as a source of fertilization is well documented. Both as carrier of seeds as well as rain: "And we send the fecundating winds",¹⁴ and "It is He Who sendeth the winds like heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy: when they have carried the heavy laden clouds, we drive them to a land that is dead, make rain to descend thereon, and produce every kind of harvest therewith".¹⁵

Muslim tradition also indicates that polluted air is a punishment for men. Surah 44 verse 10 states: "Then watch thou for the day that the sky will bring forth a kind of smoke (or mist) plainly visible enveloping the people: This will be a penalty grievous". In other words air is seen as an important resource and conversely its corruption is seen as a harbinger of very hard times. Therefore, even without specific verses on air pollution *per se*, it can be safe to state that the air, like all other aspects of nature demands protection.

Soil

The earth, like water, is seen as necessary for the sustenance of life. Its value is in its ability to produce the necessary crops and natural growths required for living as shown in the following two verses:

"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. And We have provided therein means of

¹³Mohd Kaleemur Rahman, "Environmental Awareness in Islam" in *Islam and the Environment*, Ed. A.R. Agwan, Synergy Books International, Kuala Lumpur, 1997 at p160.

¹⁴Surah 15, verse 22.

¹⁵Surah 7, verse 57.

subsistence for you";¹⁶ and "A sign for them is that the earth that is dead. We do give it life, and produce grain therefrom, of which ye do eat. And We produce therein Orchards with date palms and vines and we cause springs to gush forth therein: That they may enjoy the fruits of this (artistry): It was not their hands that made this: Will they not then give thanks?"¹⁷

Notice once more the theme of gratitude. A gift such as soil that provides crops upon which survival depends should not be abused; as such it should be protected in order to sustain this purpose. But the Quran does not limit the appreciation of the soil merely to its ability at providing food. There are verses that indicate the importance of the earth as catchment areas. "And made therein Mountains standing firm Lofty (in stature); and provided for you water sweet and wholesome";¹⁸ and, "And the earth, moreover, hath He extended (To a wide expanse); He draweth out therefrom its moisture and its pasture; and the mountains hath he firmly fixed for use and convenience to you and your cattle".¹⁹ An interesting thought for the next time a hill is being cut for "development" purposes.

Fauna and Flora

Animals are creatures of God and are valued by the Almighty for their own sake; "There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you".²⁰ As such they deserve a certain status and respect from human beings. However this appreciation of the earth's fauna is not limited to a symbolic or spiritual level, Islamic jurisprudence has developed to give greater depth to one's obligations to animals.

In 1991, an article was published in the *American Journal of International Law* entitled "Whales: Their emerging Right to Life"²¹ where the authors tried to argue that whales as a species have certain

¹⁶Surah 15, verses 19 and 20.

¹⁷Surah 36, verses 33-35.

¹⁸Surah 77, verse 27.

¹⁹Surah 79, verses 30-33.

²⁰Surah 6, verse 38.

²¹D'Amato and Chopra, 85 *AJIL* (1991).

legal rights. Environmental activists are divided as to the issue of rights. On the one side there are those that believe it is a most important starting point in environmental protection.²² Then there are those who believe that an artificial construct such as rights merely add to the status quo without changing anything fundamental in the environmental cause.²³ The pros and cons of these two opposing arguments shall not be discussed here. It should only be stated that the writer subscribes to the former opinion. In the light of rights to non-humans, Islam has a lot to offer.

Izzad-din ibn 'Abd as-Salam, in *Qawa' id al-Ahkam fi Masalih al-Anam* wrote: "The rights of livestock and animals with regard to their treatment by man: These are that he spend on them the provision that their kind require, even if they have aged or sickened such that no benefit comes from them; that he not burden them beyond what they can bear; that he not put them together with anything by which they would be injured, whether of their own kind or other species, and whether by breaking their bones or baiting or wounding; that he slaughter them with kindness if he slaughters them, and neither flay their skins nor break their bones until their bodies have become cold and their lives have passed away; that he not slaughter their young within their sight; that he set them apart individually; that he make comfortable their resting places; that he put males and females together during the mating seasons; that he not discard those which he takes in hunting; and neither shoot them with anything that breaks their bones nor bring about their destruction by any means that renders their meat unlawful to eat."²⁴

Thus animals have certain rights, primarily not to be treated cruelly, either physically or mentally. The passage above has serious implications on practices such as animal fighting, battery farming, and hunting and practically on all of man's relationships with animals. Naturally these rights are not of the same status as rights of human beings, however

²²See Stone C, "Should Trees Have Standing?" (1972) 45 *S. Cal Rev* 450.

²³See Giagnocavo C and Goldstein H, "Law Reform or World Reform" 35 *McGill LJ* [1990] 345.

²⁴Quoted from Abubakar Ahmad Bakadar "Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment", in *Islam and the Environment*, Ed. A.R. Agwan, Synergy Books International, Kuala Lumpur, 1997, at p 83.

they are still important as they provide protection that can either be enforced through State institutions or even public action.

Plants too are mentioned with reverence in the Quran. There are many verses that call upon man to appreciate them and the bounty that they provide. A particularly descriptive example is as follows:

"It is He Who sendeth down rain from the skies; with it We produce vegetation of all kinds: From some we produce green (crops), out of which We produce grain, heaped up at (harvest); out of the date palm and its sheaths (or spathes) (come) clusters of dates hanging low and near: And (then there are) gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar (in kind) yet different (in variety): When they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! In these things there are signs for people who believe".²⁵

The practice of early Muslims has also been to respect flora and fauna, even in times of war, as can be seen by the following rules laid down by Caliph Omar to his soldiers:

"No fruit bearing tree shall be cut down, no crops burned, no habitation devastated. There are ten things which the assumption of the Ibrahim make forbidden, and which one must leave undone. They include taking part in hunting free wild animals which are edible; whether killing or only injuring, and participating in any despoiling of trees or vegetation on the sacred territory, whether by cutting or by plucking".²⁶

Use of Resources

Three general themes can be strongly identified in the Quran with regard to the wise use of resources. They are firstly the need to protect resources seeing as they are entrusted to the present generation so that future generations can use them; that all things are created in measure and therefore exhaustible; and finally, that wastage is completely discouraged.

²⁵Surah 6, verse 99.

²⁶S.M. Iqbal, *Mission of Islam*, Vikas, Bombay, 1977, at p 98.

With regard to the rights of future generations, inspiration can be had from Surah 89 verse 19 that reads, "And ye devour Inheritance - All with greed". This particularly angry verse chastising, in its strong language and tone, those that abuse the inheritance of others can be read as implying that inheritance is a right and its trust is to be held sacred. Although the verse is specifically about inheritance of property, it does not take a great leap of faith to see that its principles can be used in the context of the broad concept of *amanah* mentioned above. Therefore, the sacred trust that one holds on property can be transferred to our general trusteeship of the planet.

All things created are finite, as stated in Surah 54, verse 49: "Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measure", and Surah 15, verse 21: "And there is not a thing but its (sources and) treasures (inexhaustible) are with Us; But we only send down thereof in due and ascertainable measures". As such one has to be careful and wise as to how one uses these precious resources.

Primary amongst the practice of wise use is the avoidance of wastage. As reflected in Surah 6, verse 141: "It is he who produceth gardens with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar in kind and different in variety. Eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess: for Allah loveth not the wasters".

Although there are naturally many aspects of environmental degradation that is not mentioned specifically in the Quran, and many of the existing verses are very vague and general in nature, what we can deduce from Quranic revelations is that there is a respect that has to be accorded to the environment. This is because all creation is both inherently valuable and important for survival.

Having said that, the numerous examples mentioned above (admittedly more can be found), do show that protection of the environment, be it water, air, soil flora or fauna, in the Islamic perspective is a sacred trust. It is not only a trust held for the present and future generations but also a method with which to show gratitude to God without whose blessings, life (and a sustaining environment) would not be possible. The resources we have are finite and thus should be treated as such, with caution and parsimoniously.

Other aspects of Islam: Developmental Model

This article does not hold pretensions of being able to provide a complete discussion of Islamic developmental models, however a few general points shall be made. This is because one cannot separate economic development from the environment, as the unwise use of our finite resources is certainly the result of the present developmental models in use today.

In the context of the environment, the Islamic developmental model contributes mostly in that it encourages the wise use of resources. Overall the theme is one of appreciation and value. The message is that God gave you this great planet; he can also take it away. Therefore, use it wisely and appreciate what you have been blessed with as reflected in the following verse; "And we have distributed the water amongst them in order that they may celebrate Our praises, but most men are averse (to aught) but (Rank) ingratitude".²⁷

Islam also actively discourages over consumption. This is clearly illustrated by Surah 17 verse 27 that says; "Verily, spendthrifts are brothers of the Evil Ones; and the Evil One is to his Lord (Himself) Ungrateful". This goes hand in hand with the principle of moderation and the positive discouragement of ostentatious displays of luxury and wealth. Obviously such an ethos is an anathema to blatant consumerism and the over consumption of resources which is one of the primary causes of environmental degradation today.

Islam admits business development and profit rates but it is to be conducive to social development rather than individual prosperity.²⁸ Towards this end, trade has to be done in a fair manner; "O Ye who believe! Eat not up your property among yourselves in vanities: But let there be amongst you traffic and trade by mutual good will".²⁹ Therefore, trading done under unfair abuse of position or monopolistic practices is forbidden. Ultimately, the Islamic economic model is designed in order to achieve a more economically balanced society with a small disparity of wealth.

²⁷Surah 25, verse 50.

²⁸Salahuddin Qureshi, "Resources, Environment, Ecology and Islam", *MASS Journal of Islamic Science*, 9:1&2, Jan-Dec, 1993, p81.

²⁹Surah 4, verse 29.

This disparity is one of the major causes of environmental degradation, as pointed out in Paragraph 4 of the Preamble to the Stockholm Declaration:³⁰ "In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development. Millions continue to live far below the minimum levels required for a decent human existence, deprived of food and clothing, shelter and education, health and sanitation."

The Secular View

It has to be mentioned that many, if not all of the principles raised in this essay above can be found in the secular world. Most obviously in Declarations such as the Stockholm Declaration (mentioned above), The Brundtland Report,³¹ The World Charter for Nature³² and the Rio Declaration.³³ These are all non-binding international documents signed by a large majority of the sovereign nations of the world.

Because of their non-binding nature, they are known as soft law. But soft things, like water, can slowly but surely still change the world around them. These documents establish a foundation upon which more solid treaties can be built. They also provide the impetus for action, both domestic and international.³⁴ In all these documents there is a call for sustainable development; the protection of flora and fauna, both for their uses to mankind as well as for their own sake; the reduction of pollution; the fair distribution of resources; and the protection of the rights of future generations, amongst other things.

In fact, the right of future generations have been accepted in the Filipino Courts as a ground for action and *locus standi*.³⁵ The spiritual element of environmentalism can also be found in the secular "deep

³⁰11 ILM 1416 (1972).

³¹United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 42/187 and 42/186.

³²22 ILM 455 (1983).

³³<http://www.igc.apc.org/habitat/agenda21/rio-dec.html>.

³⁴See Koester V, "From Stockholm to Brundtland", *Environmental Policy and Law*, 20/1/2 (1990).

³⁵See *Minors Opasa et al v Secretary of State of the Environment and Natural Resources Fulgencio Factoran*, G.R. 30 July 1993.

ecology" movement.³⁶ This being the case, where does the Islamic perspective on the environment fit in?

Conclusion

It is submitted that Islamic teachings is rich with authorities encouraging, in fact, obliging, man to preserve and protect the environment which he has been entrusted with. However, environmentalism has reached a level where similar principles can be found in purely secular thinking as well. It must be remembered that Islam is a religion and religions require a degree of faith for it to have any value. Without the faith, for example, in the divinity of the Quran, how can it be possible that one is moved by its verses? This is a problem not only for established religions, be it from the Abrahamic traditions or from other world faiths like Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism etc,³⁷ it is also a problem for ideologies such as "deep ecology". Fundamentally, they all require an inward or a spiritual change. With regard to the environment, and the problems being faced today, such an approach, as attractive as it may be, is still overly idealistic. Action has to be taken now for personal spirituality is simply too slow to come by.

It is submitted that taking Islamic principles as a foundation for environmental action is a positive move, but two things must be remembered. Firstly that it would have only true value to those who believe completely, or in Islamic terms, those who "submit"; and secondly that any ideological framework must not in any way be a barrier to co-operation with those who share separate belief systems.

For example, Akhtaruddin Ahmad in his book *Islam and the Environmental Crisis*,³⁸ says:

"So we have to rely on His mercy and try to find the best human solution to meet the catastrophe. With that intention and objective in

³⁶For a description of "deep ecology" see Sutton P.W, *Explaining Environmentalism: In Search of a New Social Movement*, Ashgate, Vermont, 2000.

³⁷For a brief explanation of the views of other religions on the environment see Chee Yoke Ling, *Humanity Must Protect Nature: What Islam, Taoism, Hinduism & Christianity Have to Say About Environmental Protection*, Third World Science Movement/CAP, Penang, 1987.

³⁸Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 1997, at p 162-163.

mind, we have to develop a common strategy to fight the burning fire for the sake of humanity. In the light of the above let us accept the following three principles irrespective of our nation, colour, language, or our religious, political or economic differences as we have seen that mankind is potentially one, the earth is one and the supreme law of the universe is one:

1. That our earth and the universe and all things and beings in it are creations of One Power who in His infinite wisdom has set in a well-measured balance for their existence.
2. And the man of the planet earth being His finest creation is a creature interdependent with the rest of creation, but gifted with certain obligations and trusts (amanat) to his Lord, and to himself and to all others as a representative and trustee of his Lord. The creation, the creatures, its benefits and its balance must not be violated by any trustee or his institutions to the detriment of others. We all must educate ourselves in this ethical responsibility and preserve it at all costs. There is no possibility of global action, which the impending environmental catastrophe demands, unless there is a common understanding. It is unthinkable that this should be on the merely secular and utilitarian base of modern scientific and sceptical agnosticism”.

Akhtaruddin Ahmad appreciates the need for co-operation but he appears to insist on certain ideological concessions first. Such an approach is probably counter-productive and aggravating. The environmental crisis is far too severe for people to spend precious time debating as to whose ideology is better and whether or not one believes in a supreme being/power.

In Malaysia especially, due to Islam being the official religion of the nation, it may be tempting to focus primarily on Islamic principles and ignore other viewpoints. But in a multi-cultural society one must be careful not to isolate those who do not share the same belief system. One has to be careful of pushing forward all things with Islam as a prefix for its own sake. In the end, it does not matter what the label is, so long as it achieves the same objective. The paradigm shift from a way of thinking that puts economic development first to one that places environmentalism as a priority is the most important thing here.

It is submitted that the role of Islamic thought on the environment is still of pertinence. Used properly, it could be very influential in convincing Muslims that the environment is an important issue and that it should be protected. This is especially so in countries with large Muslim populations. Towards this end, the Islamic perspective on the environment should be explored and disseminated further. More research also needs to be done, in particular other aspects of Islam such as principles of justice and social equity, and their relationship to environmental protection.³⁹ A holistic approach is vital for an all-encompassing problem.

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³⁹In the light of recent cases such as *Tan Tek Seng v Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Pendidikan & Anor* [[1996] 1 MLJ 261, where it was held that the constitutional right to life as stated in Article 5(1) includes a right to a pollution free environment, it may be useful to turn to certain Islamic principles as a guide towards incorporating greater constitutional protection for the environment.

A CRITIQUE ON THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

As we look to the world today, one factor stands out glaringly, be it in the developed country or in a developing country, it is that, most of the current economic activities are not sustainable. Demands of a growing human population and an expanding global economy are placing increasing stresses on natural systems such as the forests, grasslands, wetlands and river systems which in turn threaten the very existence of diversity of species.

It has been commented that despite efforts for conservation, recycling and forms of socially responsible business, the end result falls far short of sustainability.¹ Nelder went on succinctly to say that in our current market dynamics and resource utilisation, we are by definition seeing to our own demise. The challenge facing the world presently is to generate individual economic opportunities and national wealth necessary for economically healthy societies while at the same time lessening the environmental risks and social inequities that have accompanied past economic development.² The very continuation of the existence of human life on the planet depends on the continued existence of its physical and biological systems within a relatively narrow range of parameters.³ Thus it is no longer an excuse for states to assert that they may do whatever they please within their own territory or on the high seas when we know that certain types of activity may well cause damage to the environment globally and thus affect other states.⁴

¹Chris Nelder, *Envisioning a Sustainable Future*.

²The NCSD Sustainable Development Report on United States, <http://ncsdnetwork.org/global>.

³ Alan Boyle and David Freestone, *International Law and Sustainable Development*.

⁴However, the concept of state sovereignty by no means does away with the emergence of sustainability as can be noted in the Rio Declaration.