

Role of Religion in the Conservation of Environment: A Study of Environmental Ethics in Islam

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Abstract

Conservation of the environment has been a subject of serious attention ever since the Industrial Revolution took place. With every passing day, its importance is felt more and more. Almost every aspect of this burning issue has been thoroughly discussed by experts and scholars worldwide. As a result, very fruitful and beneficial suggestions have come up, and so many essential resolutions have been passed so far. Nevertheless, a sincere implementation of these suggestions and resolutions has been missing so far at the individual, public, governmental and international levels. Religion, a very potent factor in shaping the minds and behavioural attitudes of almost the whole human population across the globe, can play a vital role in conserving the environment. Islam is the second largest religion in the world followed by nearly two billion people across the world constituting one-fourth of the whole human population. Islam teaches that the fundamental purpose of the existence of humans on this planet is to worship the Creator. That actually means striving for the attainment of good for themselves and for other beings. The basic objectives of the Shari'ah aim to establish a society where everybody gets his due and the collective interest is fulfilled even if at the cost of the individual interest. One of the foremost objectives of the Shari'ah is to preserve life. The Qur'an states that harming a life is as if humanity has been harmed while saving a life amounts to saving the lives of the whole of humanity. It is further said that God has created this world on a balance. Anyone who disturbs this balance commits an offense. This shows that man has an essential responsibility toward the preservation of his environment. Islam guides towards a three-dimensional God—man—universe relationship. While on one hand man has been asked to worship his Creator, on the other hand worshipping the Creator is not only confined to fulfilling some set rituals but serving the creation and the environment. This paper highlights the teachings of Islam enshrined in its primary sources of the Qur'an and *Hadith* (traditions of the Prophet, peace be upon him) and the relevant literature regarding the conservation of the environment and environmental ethics. It explores how an individual Muslim can play a positive role in the conservation of the environment for the betterment of humanity at large, as every Muslim at individual and collective levels has a religious obligation to act according to the teachings of his religion.

Key Words: Islam, Qur'an, Environment, Conservation, Humanity

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Introduction

Although the word 'environment' is seldom found in the Qur'ān or the Ḥadīth, the Qur'ānic word 'ماحول' (2:17) is all that is around. Nevertheless, if the environment is understood as earth and what surrounds it, there can be found so many *āyāt* (verses) in the Qur'ān and several traditions of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which teach the people to take care of their environment. Islam teaches that conservation of the environment guarantees man's peaceful existence on the earth and that respecting the environment and preserving natural resources is a material need and a religious duty.

Islam teaches that God has created the world and has set the natural balance. Therefore, people should maintain this balance and not create mischief by disturbing the environmental balance.

Islamic Law is principally based upon the benefit of the beings.¹ That is why it holds that originally and essentially all beneficial actions are legitimate, all harmful ones illegitimate.² The primary objectives of Islamic Law constitute the prime values to preserve the beings' interests.

The *maqāsid al-Sharī'ah* constitute the prime values whose actualization is desirable to materialize the purpose of creation.³ One of the most important rules of the

Sharī'ah is that nobody should be harmed, not should harm be tolerated. From this rule, many sub-rules are deduced, of which a few are:

(i) الضرر يُرفع بقدر الامكان

Harm should be stopped as far as possible

(ii) الضرر يُزال

Harm is to be discontinued

(iii) الضرر لا يُزال بمثله

Harm should not be ended by replacing it with the same thing.

(iv) الضرر الاشد يُزال بالضرر الأخر

Greater harm can be discontinued by replacing it with smaller harm.

(v) يُتحمل الضرر الخاص لدفع ضرر عام

A limited harm can be tolerated when it stops general harm.

(vi) درء المفاسد أولى من جلب المنافع

Stopping of mischievous (harmful) things is preferable to gaining beneficial things.

(vii) القادر على اليقين لا يعمل بالظن

One who has access to confidence mustn't act on doubt

(viii) لا يثبت حكم الشيء قبل وجوده

Anything which is yet to come into existence, its nature, can not be decided.

(ix) ما حرم اخذه حرم اعطائه

Anything, the taking of which is unlawful, its giving is also unlawful.

إذا اجتمع الحقان قَدِمَ حق العبد لاحتياجه على حق الله لغناه بأذنه
(x)

When Allāh's and man's rights come simultaneously, man's right is prioritized, for Allah has no need, and man has need. All these rules constitute an ethical code that creates a mental attitude that nobody should be harmed by causing any imbalance in the environment and mismanaging and misusing natural resources.

Discussion

God has created the world on balance.⁴ This balance is of justice, the central virtue in Islam, entailing the avoidance of excess and defect in conduct that keeps the world balanced.⁵ The holy Qur'ān considers every component of the environment as a blessing of God and a source of reflection and has also been strongly prohibited from disturbing the natural balance. Allah says in the holy Qur'ān:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kind that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- [Here] indeed are signs for a people that are wise.⁶

All these things mentioned in the above Qur'anic *āyah* are directly related to the environment. A special kind of balance has been created between them. They have been mentioned as manifestations of divine power, Allah's creative might, His compassion, love, and benevolence toward His creation. God has created the world with perfect order and placed everything in it with a fixed proportion. That is what the Qur'ān explains in one place:

Glorify the name of thy Guardian-Lord Most High, Who hath created, and further, give order and proportion; Who hath ordained laws. And granted guidance; And Who bringeth out the [green and luscious] pasture.⁷

Understanding the divine plan of creation and maintaining its balance for the sustenance of life is the need of human beings in general and the religious responsibility of an individual Muslim. The holy Qur'an says:

The Sun and the moon follow courses [exactly] computed, and the herbs and the trees - both [alike] prostrate in adoration, and the Firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance [of Justice], so that ye may not transgress [due] balance. So, establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. It is He Who has spread out the earth for [His] creatures. Therein is fruit and date palms, producing spathes [enclosing dates]; also corn, with [its] leaves and stalk for fodder, and sweet-smelling plants. Then which of the favours of your Lord will ye deny?

How clearly the holy Qur'an explains that the motion of the Sun and moon, the lushness of the trees, fertility of the earth for every kind of plant which fulfils every need of man and animals also. Then if this whole system is polluted to render it harmful instead of being essentially beneficial, it will be the greatest mischief on the earth, which will be disastrous for the man himself. In many places, the holy Qur'an has commanded that there should be no mischief and disorder on the earth after God has established balance and harmony. it has warned in unequivocal at so many places.⁸ At one place, it has clearly stated that God does not love in any case that the earth should be corrupted and the natural balance therein should be disturbed.⁹

In light of these Qur'anic injunctions, we understand that mischief can be of two kinds: in thought and action and in moral and ethical life. Environmental degradation caused by humans is mischief in the domain of thought and action and also in the domain of moral values. There is no denying the fact that the mischief caused due to environmental degradation is threatening mankind as never before. Those people who, in one way or the other, become responsible for the degradation of the environment and spread vast mischief on the earth are disliked by their God.

Islam addresses the issue of the environment on an extensive scale. 'it includes climate and its components, plants, animals, sand, human beings, and all things found on the ground or in the atmosphere.¹⁰ In one of the mentions about the environment, the holy Qur'ān terms destroying of crops and cattle as the mischief of the earth:

There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life May dazzle thee, and he calls Allah to witness what is in his heart; yet is he the most contentious of enemies. 205. When he turns his back, His aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But Allah loveth not mischief.¹¹

One can only imagine that when the holy Qur'an was revealed, means of environmental degradation were not as abundant as we have today. For this reason, the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) laid general environmental principles.

It must be, however, noted that these principles have been laid down as religious responsibilities. The underlying spirit of these teachings is that man has been created as the custodian of the earth and its resources. Therefore, the fundamental principle of each environmentally-friendly teaching of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah is 'use according to need.' Food and water are necessary for life, but eating and drinking beyond one's genuine need lead to extravagance, which makes a man religiously hypocritical and irresponsible vis-à-vis his role as the custodian of natural resources.¹²

This teaching instructs that if a judicious use of natural resources and austerity is made the norm, so many problems related to the environment will get automatically solved.

Let's now discuss some of our environment's major and basic components and find out how Islam guides us towards their conservation to maintain the equilibrium in nature and live a sincere and honest religious life.

Water

Considering the importance and usefulness of water, Islam has given clear instructions for its judicious use and for keeping it free from pollutants. According to the holy Qur'an, everything has been created from water. Water is as important for the existence of life as air. So, life is unimaginable without it.

Today we are fully aware of the importance of water in our life. Thanks to modern scientific research. But fifteen hundred years back, the Qur'an taught savage people that water conservation is not only their need but also a religious obligation. The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) enjoined his followers to keep water pure and clean lest their ablution, which they necessarily perform before offering prayers, stands invalid.

It is mentioned in the *ḥadīth* literature that the Prophet (peace be upon him) would not waste even a drop of water. He would instruct his followers not to misuse water even if they had a river available to them.

He would strictly prohibit people to urinate in the water. A Muslim is prohibited from even dipping his hand in the water container without washing it (hand) when he wakes up.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) once said to his companions that they should refrain from three acts that invite the curse of God. When asked about those acts, he replied: defecating on roadways, under fruit-bearing trees, and in water.

Water must be kept clean. the Prophet (peace be upon him) has given special guidance about it. It has been said in a *ḥadīth* that one should never urinate in stationary water.¹³ It does not mean urinating in running water was allowed, but the intention was to stress keeping water clean. Since stationary water can easily get impure, even by significantly fewer impurities, that is why it has been especially mentioned; otherwise, urinating in running water is also abominable as it is against human nature. In case the quantity of impurity is to such an extent that it can change either of the three basic qualities (colour, smell, taste) of pure water, then it is prohibited, and the water, in that case, will become impure. Similarly, urinating in the washroom has also been prohibited.

Atmosphere

Our atmosphere is composed of many gases. There is a naturally maintained well-defined ratio between these gases. Today due to industrial progress highly toxic wastes which are very dangerous for life are continuously being added up to the atmosphere. Although there were no such poisonous pollutants present during the holy Prophet's time yet he instructed the Muslims by so many ways that if adopted today, can save our environment to a large extent. He said:

"Fire is your enemy, so put it out before going to bed."¹⁴

Today so many people die of suffocation due to gas leakage. Similarly, huge properties burn to ashes due carelessness regarding electricity and burning furnaces and candles. If the prophetic teaching is followed, the atmosphere will be saved from poisonous pollutants as a result of which so many lives and properties can be saved.

Forests

Trees are of great importance especially in combating climate change,

conserving energy and reducing violence. Since Islam essentially stands for peace and peaceful coexistence, it strongly promotes conservation of forests and prohibits indiscriminate cutting down of trees. The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) has said:

"Whoever cut a tree under whose shade people used to take respite and wild animals used to rest, and he cut that tree for no genuine purpose, he will be thrown into hell."¹⁵

Polluting the atmosphere is considered a sin because it harms others. Contrarily, doing an action that purifies the atmosphere is rewardable, enabling other beings to live a peaceful and comfortable life. That is why planting a tree is a highly commendable act.

Even a person will be rewarded for planting a tree even after death.

Land

Land is a crucial natural resource for agriculture, forestry, building houses, industries, and roads. Islam has prohibited leaving the land unused. In Islam, agriculture, along with plantation, is considered the best way of earning a livelihood. From land, human beings get food, animal fodder, plant nutrients, atmosphere oxygen, and birds grain. Therefore, indiscriminate cutting of forests, converting agricultural land into residential and industrial land, and thereby turning vicinities into garbage heaps is considered a heinous crime and an offense against divine Compassion and Mercy. Besides, keeping surroundings clean and comfortable is so important that the whole community that keeps its roads and pathways clean and comfortable is considered a virtuous community. The Prophet (peace be upon him) has said:

"My community's good and bad actions were presented before me. Among the good actions was picking up a harmful thing from the road, and among the bad actions was dropping a harmful thing on the road."¹⁶

Allah has commanded people to keep houses and surroundings clean. That is why some Islamic scholars, for many environmentally friendly reasons, consider cigarette smoking prohibited in Islam. It creates a bad smell in the smoker's mouth; it is more harmful to the passive smokers and pollutes the atmosphere; it wastes money; it is injurious to health. Islam abhors all these things. Let cigarette smoking be strictly banned, especially in public places.

Those people who throw dirt on roads and pollute public places are cursed.

Even when there were no flush points and washrooms as we have today, the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to go to a faraway place outside the residential area to respond to the natural call. Tradition tells us that he would go so far that no one could see him further. People who harm others have been cursed.

Noise

Noise pollution is another factor responsible for causing a nuisance in the environment. Islam took serious note of noise pollution even when people had little idea of it. The holy Qur'an dislikes the raising of the voice.¹⁷ At another place, people have been commanded to keep their voices low, while it has been said that the most disliked voice is that of the donkey, for it has a high pitch.¹⁸ Even raising a voice in prayer is not allowed.

For an ordinary Muslim, it is a matter of immense caution that the Prophet

(peace be upon him) invokes Allah's wrath for a person who harms others. He said:

"May Allah harm him who harms others."¹⁹

Cleanliness

Keeping oneself neat and clean is in the nature of man. Cleanliness not only affects the human body and health but also influences the human mind and psyche. In addition, it lets the surroundings remain neat and clean. This fact can be well understood by witnessing the moral and mental degradation of those communities which are habitual of remaining untidy, eating unclean food, and doing dirty actions.

Islam, at every step, commands people to remain neat and clean. For five times *ṣalāh* and touching of the Qur'an, it makes *wuḍū* (ablution) obligatory. *Wuḍū* has also been prescribed for optional *ṣalāh*. A Muslim repeatedly washes his hands, arms, nose, and mouth and cleans his teeth in *wuḍū*. He is commanded to wash his hands after waking up, for he does not know where his hand has fallen during sleep.²⁰

Similarly, a full bath has been stressed weekly to keep the whole body clean. Hence Friday's bath is considered Sunnah.²¹

Young people who work during the day and, as a result, sweat a lot, due to which their clothes become unclean and very often dirt collects on their body, are made to bathe at least after natural sexual discharge or intercourse. Wearing clean clothes, combing the hair, using perfume, and removing the underarm and pubic hair is also regarded as Sunnah. If anything, unclean and impure contaminates one's clothes, he must wash them before offering *ṣalāh*, for the *ṣalāh* offered while wearing dirty clothes is invalid.

In this way, Islam has not only commanded to remain clean but has devised a complete system for this which has further been explained and simplified by the Prophet (peace be upon him) through his practice.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) taught people how to behave while relieving. In this regard, the manners he taught encompass three essential things:

- (i) Cleanliness and purity, (ii) Modesty and shyness, and (iii) Health and wellbeing.

Regarding modesty and shyness, the Arabs of that time were so ignoble that they would consider relieving at a covered place while keeping clothes on as a laughable practice. The Prophet (peace be upon him) declared relieving under cover compulsory, so much so that if a person does not find anything to cover himself, he should at least make a sand dune to relieve behind it.²²

His habit was going far away for relief, and he wanted to sit between a dense bunch of date trees²³. He would lift his clothes only when closer to the ground.²⁴ Latrines near residential houses were also found in those days.²⁵

One must save his clothes from getting contaminated while urinating. That is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) disliked urinating while standing. A'ishah narrates that if anyone tells you that the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to urinate while standing, do not accept his report.²⁶ However, for a valid excuse urinating while standing is allowed. In a hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) urinated on a few occasions while standing.²⁷ If relieving in the open, one should choose soft ground to save his body and clothes from impurities.²⁸

For the same reason of saving clothes from getting contaminated, one should not urinate against the direction of the wind.²⁹ Today we can see such urinals where one cannot relieve without standing. Since, in certain situations, there is no other alternative to it. Therefore, one can use such urinals. However, we must remember that the authentic Sunnah is to relieve in a sitting position.

One should not relieve at places where others get harmed and are compelled to use foul language. For example, under the shade, where people rest, ponds of fresh water, wells, and water reservoirs, where people fetch water, and where people generally sit and talk to each other, are places where if one relieves, the general public gets harmed. This practice is detestable in Islamic Law.³⁰

The general compassion and mercy of the Prophet (peace be upon him) has not ignored even the animals. Hence, urinating into a hole is prohibited, for it may cause harm to insects. It can also be dangerous for the man who commits the act because poisonous creatures can come out and sting him.³¹ Similarly, urination under a fruitbearing tree, in a graveyard, and in places of worship like a *masjid* is prohibited.

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