



ISLAM AND GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: AN ECO-THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

It is strongly recognized that man's hostile attitude to nature is not a new development. Humans have always seen their environment as something to be degraded, exploited and dominated. These human activities are responsible for the loss of bio-diversity and disruption of ecosystem processes which has led to the reduction and destruction of the number of species of plants and animals in the ecosystem. This work showed that Islam has the potential to situate humans in relation to both the natural and human worlds with regard to meaning and responsibility (stewardship), through its moral authority and institutional power that help effect a change in attitudes, practices and public policies in respect to addressing the urgent environmental problems of contemporary society and sustainability.

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Keywords: Ecology, Islam, Ethics and eco-theology.

1. INTRODUCTION

How we think about the world affects the way we live in it. In a particular, our understanding of nature, our cosmology, affects the way we understand ourselves, the way we relate to other people, and, of course, the way we relate to the earth and other forms of life. The world is facing ecological crisis and environmental problems with its resultant climate change. It is in this vein, that Schama observes that, "one can hardly think of a natural system that has not been considerably altered, for better or worse, by human activities. This is not the work of the industrial centuries. It is coeval with the entirety of our social existence. And it is this irreversibly modified world, from the polar caps to the equatorial forests, that is all the nature we have" (7).

These problems have become topical issues of serious concern which create an awareness that the world in which we live and labour is gradually losing its capacity and strength to sustain life. Speaking in this line, Tucker and Grim in the forward to their series, *Christianity and Ecology* opine that "ours is a period when the human community is in search of new and sustaining

relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet” (XV). It is in this light that this work seeks to find what role does religion play in shaping our attitude towards the natural world especially, in this twenty-first century when the effects of environmental problems and climate change have become more pronounced than ever before in the history of man on earth. This showcases a broad framework that justifies the operation and intrinsic value of all religions.

There is much literature on the influence of religious beliefs on a person’s attitude toward the natural environment. Most of the existing literatures however have emphasized the richness of classic religions such as Daoism, Islam, Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Judeo-Christianity on care and protection of the natural order, though the perspective of African Traditional religion is often ignored. We shall showcase Islam religious understanding of ecology since it is one of the oldest religions in the world. We shall equally show the values and attitudes of Islam religion on nature.

2. ISLAM AND ECOLOGY

Islam as the second largest fastest growing religion after Christianity has the population of Muslims around the world which is estimated between 1.3 billion to 1.8 billion followers. The countries which Islam has entered include the whole of the Arab world North Africa and parts of Africa south of the Sahara desert, major parts of Asia, China, India, Russia, Spain and the Caribbean. The largest Muslim country the world over remains Indonesia. Islam as a religion founded by Prophet Mohammed has been argued by Omoregbe that:

Orthodox Muslims do not accept that Islam was founded by Mohammed, nor do they accept that they are Mohammedans. Islam, they claim was not founded by Mohammed but by Allah himself. Mohammed was only a messenger through whom Allah made his message known to mankind. They reject the appellation “Mohammedans” because it seems to imply that they worship Mohammed—an idea which is incompatible with the rigid monotheism of Islam. To the non-Muslims however, there is no doubt that Islam as a religion was founded by Mohammed. Born in AD 570 in Mecca....(53).

The word Islam is translated peace and it also means submission, the total surrender of oneself to God. An adherent of Islam is a Muslim, meaning “one who submits” to God.

The environmental crisis is one of the major problems of the contemporary world which no doubt affects the health of individuals and society at large. Although it is commonly held that environmental crisis is mainly caused by scientific and technological misdemeanor and misapplication of resources, Lynn White, in his article “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” has alleged for the first time that world religions are the root causes of environmental problems. In his article, he stresses that what people think about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny, that is: by religion (Deuraseh 524). It is clear from the foregoing that, what individuals and communities do to their environment depends greatly upon how they see themselves in relation to nature. We can therefore infer that, the current

environmental crisis is largely as a result of man's view of life and his attitude towards nature, both of which have roots in his culture and religion.

White argues that the dualistic nature of monotheistic religions has caused the separation of human beings from the rest of nature and thereby paved away for the beginning of environmental crisis. Arnold Toynbee in his work "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis" argues in the same lines, when he says that:

Some of the major maladies of the present day world-for instance the recklessly extravagant consumption of nature's irreplaceable treasures and the pollution of those of them that man has not already devoured-can be traced back in the last analysis to a religious cause and that this cause is the rise of monotheism (144).

The environmental crisis that confronts the world today is not insoluble. But unfortunately, the efforts applied to solve the problem are mainly through changing the existing institutional mechanisms through laws and public policy and not a change in attitudes and beliefs of man. Thus, these efforts are not proving very effective because it is only religions that have the moral authority and institutional power that are well situated to help effect a change in attitudes, practices and public policies in respect to sustainability. It is on this similar lines that many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars after observing the slow effect in solving the current environmental crisis become more increasingly interested in religious teachings, in general and Divine Law of Islam, in particular, with the intention of finding out the solution to the environmental crisis.

According to Hope and Young, most Islamic scholars see at the centre of Islam a charge to protect the natural world, a world that reflects higher reality of the transcendent God. The Qur'an and the Hadith are very rich in proverbs and precepts that speak of the Almighty's design for creation and humanity's responsibility for preserving it. For many Muslims, citing these is enough to prove that Islam has always embraced a complete environmental ethics. Other Islamic scholars have argued that there is little discussion about actually applying Islamic principles to environmental practice (1). Many advance the common argument that when we catch up with the technological superiority of the West, we have time for it. Few other Muslims see any need to move an ecological ethic to the centre of their awareness but the average citizen is only vaguely aware of the extent of the environmental crisis and degradation. Hence, it is hardly surprising that, generally speaking, there is little discussion about actually applying Islamic principles to environmental practice because some Muslims see environmentalism as still another form of western economic potential.

However, Islamic scholars have observed with keen interest that the guidelines for environmental ethics are all there in Islamic doctrine. *Tawhid* (unity), *Khilafa* (trusteeship), and *akhirah* (accountability, or literally, the hereafter), this three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of Islam's environmental ethics. To humankind is given the role of *Khalifa* (trustee): "Behold, the Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth..." (Qur'an 2:30). But it is a role that each person must perform wisely and responsibly, fully aware of human accountability to the Almighty. It is also indicated in Qur'an that God rejoices in creation; all nature declares God's bounteousness; the variety in creation points to the unity in the divine plan; and God gave

humankind spiritual insight so that it should understand nature (Hope and Young 1). Moreover, the principle of balance is fundamental to that plan. Several times in the Qur'an, humans are invited to make use of the nourishing goods that Allah has placed on earth for them, but abuse-particularly through extravagance and excess-is strictly forbidden as the following verse indicates: "O children of Adam!... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters (Qur'an 7:31).

One should learn to contemplate the world of nature as a mirror reflecting the Divine God, who is both transcendent and immanent. Trees are not only necessary to maintain life, they are a recurring symbol. The Qur'an compares them to a tree whose roots are firm in the heavens and whose branches spread to the whole of the universe, symbolizing the participation of the whole cosmos in prayer. In Islamic tradition, it is a blessed act to plant a tree even one day before the end of the world. Water has a fundamental reality which symbolizes Divine mercy. In Islamic law, to pollute the water is a sin, and according to certain jurists, the person who does so can even be called a *Kafir*, a condemnatory term for someone outside the pale of religion. The geometric patterns in Islamic art reflect the archetypal world. Traditional Islamic architecture and city planning never sought to convey a sense of defiant human power over nature (Hope and Young 8).

We can comfortably deduce that in Islamic religion, nature is sacred because it is God's creation, and God's will is present in every detail. It is also their belief that God granted to humans the privilege of using all of His creations on Earth and the responsibility of caring for them. The main message of Islamic law on human-environment relations is that people should not use more than they need, and they should not be wasteful of what they use. In Islamic religion, Land for grazing livestock or collecting wood is held in common ownership for the entire community to use. Thus, Islam teaches that humanity is an integral part of the environment; it is part of the creation of Almighty God. The power given to us by God is seen in Islam to be limited by the responsibilities we bear, not only toward God and other men, but also toward the rest of the creation.

2.1. The Islamic Environmental Ethics and Ecotheology

In the environmental debate it has often been argued that what is really needed to solve the present ecological crisis is environmental ethics. Such ecoethics would provide guidelines towards "right" and "wrong" actions and attitudes toward nature. In general, most ecoethics presented are extensions of social ethics, i.e. ethics that also include nature and the organisms inhabiting it as moral objects. These ethics aim at giving nature some "intrinsic" value, independent of human utility and appreciation. Ambitions to create environmental ethics tend to prefer the view of a nature inhabited with spirits or the notion that nature itself becomes God. Such pantheistic views are controversial among Muslims, for instance Nasri, relying on Sufi traditions, argues on the basis of the verse 4:126: "But to Allah belong all things in the heavens and on earth, and He it is that encompasses all things (*Muhit*), that God is the Ultimate environment (131).

On a more general basis it is agreed upon that the Islamic ethical social principles such as *adl* (Justice), *Istihlan* (preference to the better), *maslaha* (public interest), *Shura* (consultation), *Urf* (custom), *istislah* (reform) and *Itidal* (harmony) can be applied to human-environmental relations. Nature plays a cognitive role in Islam as the word *aya* means both a natural phenomenon and a verse in the Qur'an, i.e. the word of God is a natural sign and the natural sign a word from God in nature, which can be exemplified with the following verses:

And Allah sends down rain from the skies, and gives therewith life to the earth after its death: verily in this is a sign (aya) for those who listen. And verily cattle too will ye find an instructive sign. From what is within their bodies, between excretions and blood, we produce, for your drink, milk, pure and agreeable to those who drink it. And from the fruit of the date-palm and the vine, ye get out wholesome drink and food: behold, in this also a sign for those who are wise. And thy Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees, and in men's habitation; then to eat of all the produce of the earth, and find with skill the spacious paths of its Lord;..., wherein is healing for men. Verily in this is a sign for those who give thought. 16:65-69 (Ouis 2)

Mawil Y. Izzi Deen says in his essay, "Islamic Environmental Ethics, Law and Society", in Islam, the conservation of the environment is based on the principle that all individual components of the environment were created by God, and that all living things were created by the Almighty Creator. Although the various components of the natural environment serve humanity as one of their functions, this does not imply that human use is the sole reason for their creation (Islam and Ecology 2). This principle of divine ownership of all that exists on earth and in the heavens-animate and inanimate is the principle that underpins Islamic commitment to the conservation of nature and natural resources.

Another important aspect in the Islamic ecoethics is the view of the primordial nature of man (*fitra*). The Qur'an says: so set thou thy face-steadily and truly to the faith: establish Allah's handiwork (*fitra*) according to the pattern on which he has made mankind: no change let there be in the work wrought by Allah: that is the Standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not.30:30.

Fitra can be taken as the most direct injunction by Allah to humans to conserve the environment and not to change the balance of His creation. *Fitra* is considered to be the natural state of man in harmony with nature, according to the Islamic ecotheology. The argument that people must "return" to another way of living with an understanding of the interconnectedness of everything in nature, has been proposed by environmentalists. *Fitra* is an idea compatible with this argument. Islamic ecological ethics are derived from the belief that all of creation belongs to God, and not to man and to assume that non-human animals and plants exist to benefit man leads to environmental degradation and misuse. If, as in Islamic belief, the component parts of nature are in continuous praise to God, then human destruction of these parts prevent the earth's natural and subtle means for praising God.

3. CONCLUSION

Islam religion see nature as sacred because it is God's creation and that God granted to humans the privilege of using all of His creations on Earth and the responsibility of caring for them. Religion offer moral codes and guidelines that define what is right and wrong, and rules of behaviour – that are particularly effective because they are reinforced by emotionally compelling

beliefs, symbols and rituals . Islam religion has all it takes to shape our attitude towards the natural world especially, in the twenty-first century when the effects of environmental problems and climate change have become more glaring than ever before in the history of man.

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