

Islamic Theological Teachings on Ecology

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Abstract

*Environmental crises are evident and observable in many countries such as global warming, water and air pollutions, deforestation, destruction of many core species of the seas, extinction or almost extinction of many species of animals, insects and plants, water shortage and food scarcity due to dried or flooded agricultural areas and accelerating spread of deserts. The environmental crises are caused directly or indirectly by humans living on this earth planet. Although humans are part and parcel of the ecological system, they are capable of causing the environmental crises. Their thoughts and actions have contributed to the environmental crises. Human thoughts and actions are shaped by human cultures, beliefs and values. Religions for many human beings are sources for their beliefs, values and actions. One of the world religions is Islam, the religion of Muslims and Islam has some teachings related to humans and their environments. Some of Islamic teachings on humans and environments are the concept of universe as the works and signs of God, the concept of *hasanah* (amenity) in this world, the concepts of moderation, equilibrium, greediness and wastefulness. This paper intends to elaborate and argue that these Islamic concepts are helpful and useful for human plans, efforts and actions to overcome some environmental crises.*

Introduction

From the functionalist viewpoints, any religion found in any human society has certain functions for that religious society. I agree on this point with the opinions expressed by Lawrence E. Sullivan on the roles of religion on human species. Sullivan writes, "Religion distinguishes the human species from all others, just as human present on earth distinguishes the ecology of our planet from other places in the known universe. Religious life and the earth's ecology are inextricably linked, organically related. Human belief and practice mark the earth. One can hardly think of a natural system that has not been considerably altered, for better or worse, by human culture."(2003: xi).

From the religion of Islam, human beings are responsible for the damages and destructions taking place on land and sea. No other living beings, other than human beings, can do damages and destructions on land and sea. The Koran (30: 41) identifies human beings as the sole agents responsible for the damages to the universe. "Mischievousness has appeared on land and sea because of (the deed) that the hands of men have earned. That (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil)." (Ali 1996: 1019). Since human beings are destructive agents for the universe, Islam has taught them some teachings in order to control them or to stop them from destroying and damaging the universe unceasingly. Islam explains to human beings that the harmful implications of their destructive and damaging activities to the universe are human beings themselves; they and human generations have to suffer due to their destructive and damaging activities to the universe.

This paper explains some Islamic religious concepts to overcome human thoughts and activities from destroying and damaging the universe leading to the environmental crises effecting human sustainability and human well beings in certain areas in this world. The Islamic religious concepts to be presented in this paper are the concept of universe as the works and signs of God, the concept of *hasanah* (amenity) in this world, the concepts of moderation, equilibrium, greediness and wastefulness. These Islamic religious concepts are explained from the Koranic perspectives because the Koran and the Prophetic traditions are "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 ethic." (Hope and Young 1994).

The concept of universe as the works and signs of Allah (God)

The English noun “universe” means “all existing things, including Earth and its creatures and all the heavenly bodies” according to *Oxford American Dictionary*, published in 1980. The Arabic noun *`alam* is given the meanings of universe, cosmos, world and realm. (Baalbaki 1996: 745). Since Muslims believe that the universe has been created by Allah, the creation of the universe is the work or action of Allah. The actions or works of Allah indicate the existence of Allah Himself. Therefore, the universe is the signs of Allah. The Arabic noun *ayah* in the singular form and *ayat* in the plural form means sign, mark, token, indication. (Baalbaki 1996: 212). From Islamic theological doctrines, Allah is the sole creator of all created beings including human beings. Among His attributes are alive, omnipotent, omniscient, merciful, just and benevolent to human beings who believe in Him and accept His religion named Islam. The Koran, the Muslim holy book, clearly indicates that Allah created the heavens, the earth and made light and darkness. He created human beings from clay and He is God in the Heavens and on the earth, and He knows what human beings hide and reveal and what they do (Koran 6: 1-3).

The first human being is created from clay named Adam and his spouse named Eve or Hawa and then the generations of human beings originated from human beings themselves. The Koran (4: 1) states that Allah demands reverence from human beings since He created human beings from a single person and created from the same nature his mates, and from them He created countless men and women through human wombs. In other words, human beings are created in female human wombs and they give birth to human babies.

Allah demands human beings to worship Him who created human beings and who made the earth as human couch and the heavens as human canopy, and He who sent down rain from the heavens and brought forth therewith fruits for human sustenance, and human beings should not set up rivals unto Allah (Koran 2: 21-22).

The Koran (12: 105-106) tells about the existence of many signs in the heavens and the earth but many human beings still do not ponder and think of those signs and they do not believe in Allah who has created those signs. The Koran (12: 105-106) says, “And how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn (their faces) away from them and most of them believe not in Allah without associating (others as partners) with Him.” (Ali 1996: 582). Ali further explains, “Not only can we learn through Scripture of the working of Allah’s providence in human history and the history of individual souls, but also His signs are scattered literally throughout nature --- throughout Creation --- for all who have eyes to see. And yet man is so arrogant that he turns away his very eyes from them.” (Ali 1996: 582, the footnote 1788).

The signs created by Allah for human beings to think, to remember, to reflect and to ponder as mentioned in the Koran (16: 11, 12, 13, 67, 69). The Koranic terms in those verses are *la-ayah li-qawm yatafakkarun, ya`qilun yadhakkarun, ya`aqilun, yatafakkarun* Muslim modernists such as Jamaluddin Afghani (d. 1897) in Turkey, Iran and Egypt, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) in India, Muhammad `Abduh (d. 1905) in Egypt, and Sayid Syekh al-Hadi (d.1934) in Malaya explained to Muslims that Allah has given them two clear holy books; they are the works and words of Allah. The works of Allah are found in the universe and its natural and universal laws. The words of Allah are found in the Koran. Both the universe and the Koran point to the existence of Allah since the universe is the signs of Allah in the physical forms and the Koran is in the word forms. According to these Muslim modernists, both the Koran and the universe do not contradict and they indicate the existence of Allah who is alive, omniscient, omnipotent, just, one, eternal and etc. These Muslim modernists demanded Muslims to study and understand both the Koran and the universe if they wish to overcome their backwardness and weaknesses since the Koran contains the religious, moral and social laws while the universe contains the physical and biological laws. Both kinds of laws are created by Allah for human beings. (Ibrahim 1994: 40-42).

The concept of universe as the works and signs of Allah is found in the Koran in many chapters and verses. The Koran (15: 16 and 19-22) stresses that Allah has set out the zodiacal signs in the heavens and made them fair seeming to all beholders, and Allah has spread out the earth and set thereon mountains firm and immovable and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance; Allah has provided therein means of subsistence for human beings, and Allah has the treasures to be granted to human beings following Allah’s ascertainable measures; Allah sends the fecundating winds that cause the rain to descend from the sky, therewith providing human beings with water.

Dr. Ahmad Shafaat stated that “The phenomena in the universe are signs of Allah on which human beings must reflect.

The Qur'an refers to the stars which decorate the sky (50: 6-8), to the majestic mountains which stabilize the earth (31: 10-11), to the sun and moon and their movements on their well-defined courses (36: 38-40), to the fecundating role of winds (15: 22), to plants that produce fruits and grains, each with a different taste (13: 4, 36: 32-35), to cattle out of whose bellies comes healthy milk from between blood and refuse (16: 66), and to the bees and their production of honey, in which there is healing for human beings (16: 69).”(Shafaat 1999) The Koran (16: 4-8) explains that Allah has created man from a sperm-drop and Allah has created cattle for human beings to drive warm and numerous benefits from the cattle including to eat cattle meat, to have a sense of pride and beauty in the cattle when you lead them forth to pasture in the morning and when you drive them home in the evening, and the cattle carry your heavy loads to lands that you could not reach except with souls distressed; Allah has created horses, mules and donkeys for human beings to ride and use for show and He has created other things of which human beings have no knowledge.

The Koran (16: 10-12) clearly indicates that Allah has sent down rain from the sky for human beings to drink the water and the rain also grows the vegetation for human beings to feed their cattle, and Allah has produced for human beings corn, olives, date palms, grapes and every kind of fruit as His signs for human beings to think about them. Allah has made subject to human beings the night and the day, the sun and the moon and the stars are in subjection by His command as the signs for human beings to think about them. The people or men of understanding, the *ulu al-bab* in Arabic, in the Koran are people who reflect on the universe and remember Allah in their standing, sitting and reclining.(3: 190-191). According to the Koran, not only the people of understanding who remember and praise Allah, but the seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein glorify Allah, and every existing creature praises Allah although human beings do not understand their praises to Allah (17: 44; 57:1, 59:1, 61: 1, 62: 1, and 64: 1).

Allah has created the night and the day to follow each other for anyone who wishes to remember Allah and to show his gratitude to Him(25: 62). “The scenes of the phenomenal world are Signs of Self-Revelation of Allah, for those who understand and who have the will to merge their wills with His. This they do (1) by praising Him, which means understanding something of His nature, and (2) by gratitude to Him, which means carrying out His Will, and doing good to their fellow creatures.”(Ali 1996: 904, footnote 3122).

Muslim theologians and philosophers have used the universe in their efforts to prove the existence of Allah and their proofs are known as the cosmological proofs or arguments. “The Qur'an employs the perfect order of the universe as the proof not only of God's existence, but also of His unity, which is known as the 'cosmological evidence of God's existence' in the philosophy of Islamic theology (*kalam*).”(Ozdemir 2003: 9). According to Ozdemir, “A careful examination of the early verses of the Qur'an reveals an invitation to examine and investigate the heavens and the earth, and everything that can be seen in the environment: birds, sheep, clouds, seas, grapes, dates, olives, flies, the moon, the sun, fish, camels, bees, mountains, rain, wind --- in short all natural phenomena.”(Ozdemir 2003: 7) This concept of universe as the works and signs of Allah can guide human beings especially Muslims to preserve the universe as it is as far as they can in order to maintain the universe as the signs of Allah. If they destroy the universe, they directly or indirectly destroy the signs of Allah.

The concept of *hasanah* in this world

The Arabic noun *hasanah* has many meanings namely charity, alms, benefaction, handout, dole, good deed, good turn, favor, kind act, advantage, merit, virtue, amenity, good quality, good point, good feature. The Arabic verb *hassana* has many meanings namely to improve, ameliorate, better, upgrade, make better, to beautify, pretty up, to adorn, embellish, decorate and garnish.(Baalbaki 1996: 470). The Koran demands human beings to seek the *hasanah* in this world and in the hereafter through their good deeds to themselves and other created beings or creatures. The Koran (16: 30) stresses that for those who do good, there is good in this world and in the hereafter there is better for them.

Allah has provided human beings with many benefits derived from the universe created by Allah. The Koran (40: 64) explains, “It is Allah who has made for you the earth as a resting place, and the sky as a canopy, and has given you shape -- and made your shapes beautiful and has provided for you sustenance of things pure and good—Such as Allah your Lord. So Glory to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.”(Ali 1996: 1222-1223). The Arabic terms in the Koran (40: 64) are *fa ahsana suwarakum wa-razaqakum min al-tayyibat* literally mean Allah has improved or beautified your shapes and provided you with pure and good sustenance. The pure and good sustenance from the universe includes pure fruits, river water, fountain water, vegetables, animal and fish meats, and etc.

However, if human beings have polluted the water and the air, they get the polluted water, fruits, meats etc for their food and drink. The Koran (17: 7) states the fixed law for reward and punishment for human beings based on their actions. If they do good actions, they receive good rewards and if they do evil actions, they receive punishments or evil rewards for themselves. This law is clear from the Koran (17: 7) indicating, "If ye did well, ye did well for yourselves; if ye did evil, (ye did it) against yourselves..." (Ali 1996: 675). The Koranic terms for this are *in ahsantum ahsantum li-anfusikum wa-in-asa'tum falaha*. In short, what man does goes back to himself. In relation with the environmental crises, they surely originate from human beings. Human beings have done the bad or evil actions to the universe, therefore they face the environmental crises.

The Koran (28: 77) commands human beings to do *ihsan* as Allah has done *ihsan* to them and they should not do harm or damage in this world because Allah does not love the mischievous persons. The Prophetic traditions recorded and reported by two Muslim traditionists Bukhari and Muslim on the authority of Abu Hurayrah who said that the Prophet Muhammad said, "Allah appreciated the act of this man and forgave his sins... There is recompensation for kindness to every living thing." The living thing in this case was a thirsty dog and the man gave some water to the dog. (<http://www.islam4all.com/kindness.htm> (accessed on 19 Oct. 2010)). The Koran (30: 41) identifies human beings as the agents responsible for the damages to the universe. "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of men have earned. That (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil)." (Ali 1996: 1019).

However, there are human beings who do not admit that they have done damages and destructions to the universe. They claim that they have improved the universe. The Koran (2: 11-12) identifies these attitudes of human beings saying, "When it is said to them: 'Make not mischief on the earth,' They say: 'Why, we only want to make peace!' Of a surety, they are the ones who make mischief, but they realize (it) not." (Ali 1996: 19). The Koranic terms are *la tufsidu fi al-ard*, *al-mufsidun* and *al-muslihun*. The Arabic verb *fasad* means to decay, rot, decompose, spoil, corrupt, deteriorate, putrefy (Baalbaki 1996: 825). The Arabic verb *salaha* or *saluha* means to be good, right, to be virtuous, righteous, upright, to be pious, dutiful, to be fit, suitable, appropriate, adequate, to suit, fit, to serve (for), to be serviceable, usable, practicable, useful, to be competent, qualified. (Baalbaki 1996: 699).

Human beings are permitted to eat and drink provided by Allah to them but they should not destroy their sources of sustenance. The Koran (2: 60) says, "So eat and drink of the sustenance provided by Allah and do no evil and nor mischief on the (face of the) earth." (Ali 1996: 52). If human beings especially Muslims who believe in Islam continue their destructive and damaging activities to the universe, they have no other choice but to lose the *hasanah* in this world and they have to suffer badly from their destructive and damaging activities to the universe. (Ibrahim 2009:94).

The concepts of moderation and equilibrium

The Koran demands Muslims to uphold the concepts of moderation and equilibrium in their beliefs, thoughts and actions. The Koran (2: 143) says: "Thus have We made of you an *ummah* justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the messenger a witness over yourselves..." (Ali 1996: 55). The Arabic term *wast* in the Koran (2: 143) is interpreted by the Muslim exegeses and Arabic language experts such as Ibn Abbas, al-Tabari, Ibn Qutaybah and Ibn Manzur to mean *'adala* and *al-'adl* (just, balanced or moderate). (al-Shamari 2005: 26-27).

The Koran (28: 77) commands Muslims to balance their efforts for the hereafter and this world and commands them to do good deeds in this world since Allah has done good to you and prohibit them from doing mischief in the world since Allah hates those who do mischief. The Koran (15: 19-21) explains on the natural or ecological balance and every thing is created in due balance and ascertainable measures. These two concepts contribute to the concept of *hasanah* in this world for human beings either they are Muslims or non-Muslims. They need to live in the states and modes of moderation and equilibrium if they strongly desire to maintain the *hasanah* in this world.

The concepts of greediness and wastefulness

The Koran clearly prohibits all Muslims from greediness and wastefulness in their actions and activities. The Koran (25: 67) describes Muslims or believers are those who do not spend extravagantly nor niggardly but they hold a just balance between these extremes.

The Koran classifies the wasteful human beings into the same group with the Satan. "And render to the kindred their due rights, as (also) to those in want, and to the wayfarer; but squander not (your wealth) in the manner of spendthrift. Verily spendthrifts are brothers of the evil ones and the evil one is to his Lord (Himself) ungrateful." (Ali 1996: 681). The children of Adam or human beings are demanded to wear beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer, to eat and drink and they should not waste since Allah does not love the wasters. (7: 31). The Arabic term *zinah* in the Koran (7: 31) means "adornments or apparel for beautiful living: construed to mean not only clothes that add grace to the wearer, but toilet and cleanliness, attention to hair, and other small personal details which no self-respecting man or woman ought to neglect when going solemnly even before a great human dignitary, if only out of respect for the dignity of the occasion. How much more important it is to attend to these details when solemnly apply our minds to the Presence of Allah." (Ali 1996: 351, footnote 1013).

Muslims and Christians agreed on seven blameworthy values namely lust, gluttony, greed, wrath, envy, envy and pride. The human actions or activities motivated by these seven values are also blameworthy. Muslims and Christians also agreed on seven praiseworthy values namely chastity, moderation, generosity, zeal, meekness, charity and humility. The human actions motivated by these seven values are also praiseworthy. (Ibrahim 2007: 4). Therefore, the concept of greediness is abhorred by Islam and Muslims as well as by Christianity and Christians; Muslims are exhorted not to become greedy and wasteful human beings in their activities during their lifetimes in this world.

Concluding notes

I strongly believe that the Islamic religious concepts briefly explained in this paper based first on some verses from the Koran and second on some scholars' opinions are very useful, helpful and practicable to overcome some of the environmental crises originating from human thoughts and actions toward the universe, nature or environment.

Allah has created the universe to invite or incite human beings to rationally and intellectually prove His existence and other attributes through the studies of His created creatures. Moreover, He has created the universe to provide the physical, material, psychological, spiritual and social aids and supports for human beings. Take, for examples, from the land and forest areas, seas, rivers, hills, mountains, valleys on the earth planet human beings are able to find their sustenance directly or indirectly from fruits, vegetables, plants, animals, fish, insects, air and water. Therefore, the Islamic religious concepts explained here are helpful for sustaining and securing human living needs. No doubt, human beings will indeed suffer deeper and deeper if they all disregard the Islamic religious concepts that aiming to overcome their destructive, greedy, wasteful thoughts and activities leading to or causing some environment crises involving land, water, air, vegetable, seas, rivers, forest, agricultural land and etc.

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