

Aspects of Environmental Ethics: An Islamic Perspective

Mohammad Shomali

In the final part of the Faiths in Creation series, Mohammad Shomali presents the Islamic texts that teach of the value of the natural world and the importance of our respect for it. He gives an Islamic perspective on how we should interact with the environment that surrounds us, and looks at the vices that we are most likely to succumb to.

*In the Name of God, the Beneficent,
the Merciful*

Prophet Muhammad:

If Resurrection is starting and one of you has a sapling in his hand which he can plant before he stands up he must do so.¹

(d. 148/765)

Imam Sadiq:

There is no joy in life unless three things are available: clean fresh air, abundant pure water, and fertile land.²

One of the most important problems in today's world is the environmental crisis. It seems that this problem started when modern man stopped understanding himself as the vicegerent and trustee of the All-Merciful God who must channel divine mercy to everything at his disposal or within his reach, and stopped understanding nature as a sacred sign and valuable trust from God. For the same reason, it seems that the best way to protect the environment from destruction and, indeed, to improve its condition is to revive these forgotten understandings by referring back to the teachings and instructions of divine religions and reviewing and readjusting our policies regarding the application of modern technology and in using natural resources appropriately. In this paper, I will try to briefly present some aspects of the Islamic perspective on environmental ethics in the light of Qur'anic verses and Islamic narrations (*hadiths*). The paper consists of four parts: nature; governing rules in Islamic environmental ethics; virtues related to human treatment of



the environment; and vices related to human treatment of the environment.

I. Nature

Nature in general. There are more than 750 verses in the Qur'an that are related to nature. Fourteen chapters of the Qur'an are named after certain animals and natural incidents, such as: 'the Cow', 'the Cattle', 'the Thunder', 'the Bee', 'the Ant', 'the Daybreak', 'the Sun',

'the Night', 'the Fig' and 'the Elephant'. Moreover there are many cases in which God takes an oath by some natural phenomena like: 'the dawn' (89:1) and 'the fig and olive' (95:1). In numerous verses, the Qur'an states that all the natural phenomena have awareness of God and glorify God:

And We made the mountains and the birds to celebrate our praise along with David. (21:79 & 38:18)

And there is not a thing but that it glorifies Him with His praise but you do not understand their glorification.³ (17:44)

In many verses the natural phenomena are characterised as divine signs indicating the knowledge, the wisdom and the power of God, such as:

Most surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day, and the ships that run in the sea with that which profits men

and the water that God sends down from the cloud, then gives life with it to the earth after its death and spreads in it all (kinds of) animals, and the changing of the winds and the clouds that are made subservient between the heaven and the earth, there are signs for a people who understand.⁴ (2:164)

Water. In Islamic culture, water is very highly regarded. The word *maa'* (water) is used in the Qur'an about 60 times. Water is introduced as the origin and the source of life. For example, the Qur'an says: 'And We have made of water everything living' (21:30).⁵ The Qur'an (24:45) also states that God created from water every animal that goes on its belly, on two legs and on four legs. Water is pure and purifying (25:48). Imam Sadiq said: 'Surely God made the earth pure as He made the water pure'.⁶ A Muslim who wants to perform ritual prayer or to touch the Holy Qur'an or to circumambulate around the Ka'bah in Mecca must be ritually pure and to be ritually pure he needs to make ritual ablution with water. In Islamic symbolism, water normally stands for knowledge and faith or even for Imams. According to some traditions, the expression 'the abundant water' in verse (72:16) esoterically refers to abundant knowledge and faith and the expression 'the flowing water' in verse (67:30) to Imam Mahdi.

Water must be kept pure and clean. For example, Imam Baqir is quoted as saying: 'Do not urinate in water!'.⁷

Earth. Every Muslim in his ritual prayer has to prostrate to God several times on the earth (or an earthly material like soil or sands). If water is not available or using water is harmful to one's health (e.g. because of injury), one needs to use earth or earthly materials in a special way to perform ritual ablution.

In Islamic scriptures, the earth is introduced as an origin for the creation of human beings. The Qur'an says:

From it (earth) We created you and into it We shall send you back and from it We will raise you a second time. (20:55)

Likewise, the earth is introduced as 'a mother' for human beings. The Holy Prophet is quoted as saying:

Preserve the earth because it is your *mother*.⁸

God created the earth and laid it out for humanity.⁹ He also made the earth manageable and tractable.¹⁰ God has made for people a means of their livelihood in the earth.¹¹ Human beings should utilise the earth and construct upon it. The Holy Qur'an says: 'He is the one who created you from the earth and settled you upon it, so that you might cultivate the land and construct towns and cities in which to live.' (11:61) Imam Ali says: 'God has sent Adam to make the earth flourish by the help of his offspring'.¹² Imam Ali in a letter to his governor said: 'You should be more concerned with the construction (physical development) of the land than collecting the land tax'.¹³ Elsewhere, he said: 'Fear God regarding His servants and lands! You are responsible for the lands and the animals'.¹⁴

Plants. Islam highly recommends planting trees and urges people to protect them to the extent that planting a tree is considered as an act of worship, for which special prayer is recommended. The Holy Prophet said: 'Unless you are compelled, do not cut down a tree!'¹⁵ Before battles, the Prophet always gave instruction to his soldiers not to harm women, children, the elderly, and those who surrendered and not to destroy or burn farms and gardens.¹⁶

In addition to protection of plants, there are many *hadiths* that recommend Muslims to plant and farm. For example, the Prophet said:

Whoever plants a tree and then a human or a creature of God eats its fruit, it will be considered as an act of charity for him.¹⁷

Whoever waters a date or lote tree it is as if he has given a drink to a thirsty believer.¹⁸

Imam Sadiq said:

Farm and plant! By God, there is no occupation more lawful and pleasant than this.¹⁹
The best occupation is farming.²⁰
The greatest alchemy is farming.²¹

Animals. According to Islamic teachings, animals have numerous rights, for which human beings are held responsible. In addition to the above-mentioned *hadith* from Imam Ali (in which he says, 'You are responsible for the lands and the animals'), one may refer to a *hadith* from Imam Sadiq: 'There are six

rights for the beasts that their owners should observe: they should not be forced to carry what they do not have the strength to bear, they should not be ridden while the rider is speaking, they should be given their provisions when they stop, they should not be branded (imprinted) or burnt, they must not be stricken at their face because they glorify God and they should be allowed to drink when they pass by water'.²² Imam Ali condemned urinating in the water because there are animate creatures in it.²³ A fundamental right for animals is the right to life. According to a well-known *hadith*, the Holy Prophet said: 'A woman will be put in the hell because she imprisoned a cat until the cat died'.²⁴ The Prophet also said: 'Whoever kills a sparrow without any reason will be questioned by God on the Day of Judgment'.²⁵ Hunting birds or animals for fun is prohibited.²⁶ A very eminent scholar, 'Allamah Mohammad Taqi Ja'fari concludes his discussion about animals in this way:

Consideration of whole sources of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) leads to the conclusion that animals must not be killed unless there is a legal permission (by God) like benefiting from them or being safe from their harm. There are adequate reasons for prohibiting hunting animals for fun and one can argue from these reasons for prohibition of killing animals without having a permitting cause.²⁷

According to Islamic *hadiths*, not only must animals' life not be taken unjustifiably, but also their life must be protected. The great Shi'a jurist, Zayn al-Din al-'Amili, known the Second Martyr (*shahid-e thaani*), in his *Masaalik al-Afhaam* writes:

In the same way that spending money for saving a human being is compulsory, spending money to save a respected animal is compulsory, even if that animal belongs to another person.²⁸

Elsewhere he stresses the necessity of buying medicine for animals when they become ill.²⁹ One of the greatest contemporary Shi'a jurists, Mohammad Hasan al-Najafi, writes:

If by using water for making ritual ablution one is worried that an animal whose life is respected may become thirsty he must make *tayammum* (that is, ablution with soil instead of water), even though that animal is a dog.³⁰

Elsewhere he declares that amongst animal rights is the right to a house, a place for rest. He says:

It is compulsory to provide animals with what they need like food, water and a place.³¹

Animals must also be loved and respected. It is reported that Imam Ali said: 'Whoever curses an animal he himself will be cursed by God'.³² An animal like a sheep or camel must not be slaughtered in front of another one.³³

2. Governing rules in Islamic environmental ethics

Some of the major instructions on how to treat the environment and natural resources can be formulated as follows:

Benefit from natural resources in a responsible way! The emphasis of the Qur'an and *hadiths* on nature and natural phenomena does not imply that we cannot benefit from them. Indeed, the Qur'an clearly suggests that God has created them such that that man can dominate and benefit from them.

For example, the Qur'an says:

And the earth, He has set it for people. (55:10)

He it is who created for you all that is in the earth. (2:29; 45:13; 31:20; 16:10-14; 22:65; 14:32-34)

The benefits that we take from the environment are not limited to material or physical ones. They also include mental and psychological benefits as well:

And He created the cattle for you, you have in them warm clothing and many (uses) advantages, and of them you can eat. And there is beauty in them for you when you drive them back home and when you send them forth to pasture. (16:5 & 6)

There are some Qur'anic verses and Islamic *hadiths* which state the spiritual or psychological benefits of plants:

And send down for you water from the cloud; then we cause to grow thereby beautiful and delightful gardens. (27:60; 50:7; 22:5)

The Holy Prophet said:

There are three things which cause brightness of the eyes: to look at greenery, running water and a beautiful face.³⁴

As said before, nature and natural phenomena are also signs of God, on which we should reflect to come to a better understanding of God and a closer relationship with Him. We also need some of the natural materials for performance of some acts of worship. Therefore, we can benefit from them theologically and spiritually as well.

Behave towards nature as a guardian! Not only must man use natural resources in a responsible way, but also, as the vicegerent of God on the earth (2:30; 6:165; 35:39), he must feel responsible for their maintenance and improvement of their condition. The Holy Qur'an says:

He is the one who created you from the earth and settled you upon it so that you might cultivate it and construct towns. (11:61)

Failure to observe divine pleasure and carry out his responsibilities towards himself and the world certainly leads to man's dissatisfaction as well as the destruction of the world. To make the case theologically clearer, I can briefly say that God is the True and the whole creation is based on the Truth. Following the True leads to tranquillity of the heart and ultimate satisfaction as well as an abundance of divine blessings including both material and spiritual ones.

For example, the Holy Qur'an says:

And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (against evil) We would certainly have opened up for them blessings from the heaven and the earth, but they rejected, so we overtook them for what they had earned. (7:96)

On the other hand, arrogance before the True and selfishness leads to confusion, forgetting one's self, breakdown of human relations and even severe damage to the physical world. This is against the laws of the creation and, as a result, the world would resist such people and finally would rebel and save itself from ultimate corruption. This may be one way of understanding the following verse:

And should the truth follow their low (carnal) desires surely the heavens and the earth and all those who are therein would have perished and been corrupted.

(23:71)

Recognise your role as a trustee! The Holy Qur'an states: 'We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it' (33:72). This means that human beings have been given the responsibility of stewardship and trust (*al-amaanah*) by God in order to care for and serve as a channel for the blessings of God to all creation. Humans are invested with special status and responsibility as trustees on earth and must fulfil the requirements of that trust.³⁵ According to Islamic thought, nature is a divine trust and man is the trustee. It can also be argued that since future generations also have rights to benefit from it, nature is also a trust for them.

Plan for the improvement of your life and the whole world! It is possible that religious people who believe in the eternal life and its superiority over the material life may underestimate the worldly life and its affairs. They may think this is a transient state which expires very quickly and therefore they should concentrate only on spiritual life and the Hereafter. It is true that the eternal life is to occupy the central place in our attention and actions. However, Islam teaches that we must do our best for the improvement and development of this world as well. For example, Imam Hasan is quoted as saying: 'In respect to your worldly affairs, act as if you are going to live here forever, and in respect to your afterlife act as if you are going to die tomorrow!'³⁶ This *hadith* indicates that we need to be fully prepared for our eternal journey and must make the greatest possible provision for that, because there is a realistic possibility that we may die tomorrow and we may not have any further opportunities. Moreover, for our eternal journey we need so many provisions that even if we work hard day by day it will still be insufficient, even if we are given, so to speak, a very long life. On the other hand, we must work hard for this world, as if we are going to live here forever. But a very important point is that this is not a realistic possibility; no one is going to remain in this world. This is given maximum emphasis because people may tend to undervalue working for the improvement of this world when they know that they live here temporarily. To overcome this problem they are asked to suppose that they would live in this world forever.

Moreover, the *hadith* suggests that you must not only be concerned with yourselves and your immediate children. You must suppose that there will be a kind of continuity of your presence in this world through your offspring and through your fellow human beings. I should like to finish this section with a *hadith* from the Holy Prophet:

There are six things that will be beneficial for a believer even after his death: a child who asks God's forgiveness for him, a book that remains from him, a tree that he plants, a well that he digs, a charity which he gives, and a good conduct that he establishes and is practiced by others after him.³⁷

3. Some virtues related to human treatment of the environment

Cleanliness. Tidiness and cleanliness are very important in Islam. In respect to cleanliness, the Prophet said: 'Surely God is clean and loves the clean, so clean your courtyard'.³⁸ He also said: 'Be clean as you can'.³⁹ He also said: 'Cleanliness is next to godliness'.⁴⁰ He also said: 'Surely Islam is clean so be clean, because nobody can enter Paradise except he who is clean'.⁴¹ The Prophet told his wife: 'Surely the clothes glorify, (but) when they are dirty and unclean they do not glorify'.⁴² Imam Ali (a.s.) said: 'Tidy (clean) clothes eliminate grief and sorrow'.⁴³ These *hadiths* show that cleanliness has effects on the soul as well.

Moderation and balance. A believer should be moderate in all aspects of his life including his use of nature. The Holy Prophet said: 'The best of affairs is the medium one'.⁴⁴ He also said: 'Whoever is moderate he will not become poor'.⁴⁵ Indeed, the whole world is based on order and harmony (*mizaan*).⁴⁶ Exceeding limits in using nature or natural resources is extravagance, which is considered as a major sin in Islam. For example, the Qur'an says:

And eat and drink and be not extravagant, surely He does not love the extravagant; And do not squander wastefully. Surely the squanderers are friends of satans and Satan is ever ungrateful to his Lord.

(7:31), (17:26–27)

Thankfulness. Another important quality of a believer is thankfulness, not only in words, but also by deeds. Thankfulness by deeds means to use divine blessings in the way which is right and, therefore, pleasing to

God. To misuse divine blessings or harm them, for example by destroying jungles and polluting water, are signs of ungratefulness which is severely condemned in Islam. For example, the Qur'an says: 'Have you not seen those who have changed God's favour for ungratefulness and made their people to alight in the abode of perdition?' (14:28)

4. Some vices related to human treatment of the environment

Extravagance. One of the great threats for human society and the environment is extravagance. The origins of this are greed and negligence. This character is controlled by religious teachings. In Islamic sources, two sins are distinguished. One is *israaf* or wasteful consumption. Another sin is *tabdhir* or squandering. These two concepts are brought into play to adjust human behaviour.⁴⁷

Vandalism. According to a well-established rule in Shi'ite jurisprudence, nobody can cause harm or loss to others. This is a general rule which is supported by many verses and *hadiths* and, in particular, by the well-known prophetic *hadith*: 'La darar-a wa la dirar-a fi'l-Islam'. This *hadith*, about which tens of books and essays have been written, means that there is no place in Islam for inflicting any harm on one's self or on others.

Corruption. Islam opposes mischief and corruption in all forms. Any act of mischief is condemned, whether it be in respect to human beings or living beings or even non-living beings. The Holy Qur'an says:

When he turns his back, his aim is to spread mischief on the earth and destroy crops and progeny. But God does not love corruption. (2:205)

Do no mischief on the earth, after it has been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of God is (always) near to those who do good.⁴⁸ (7:56)

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to address some aspects of environmental ethics from an Islamic perspective. We saw that great emphasis is put in the Qur'an on nature and natural phenomena as divine signs indicating the knowledge, the wisdom and the power of God. Then

we focused on four major parts of the environment i.e. water, earth, plants and animals. In Islamic scriptures, water is introduced as the origin and the source of life and the earth is introduced as an origin for the creation of human beings and as our 'mother'. In Islam, planting trees is considered as an act of worship, for which special prayer is recommended and people are urged to protect them. Animals have numerous rights, including the right to life, food and water, a home and medicine. An animal's life can only be taken with the permission of God. Not only must an animal's not be taken unjustifiably, but it must also be protected. Animals must also be loved and respected.

Thus, it becomes clear that in Islam the environment is sacred and has an intrinsic value. Even if there is no threat or shortage, we must still look after natural resources, protect animals and plants and, more generally, improve and develop the environment. As the vicegerent of God, we have to channel the mercy of God to everything within our reach.

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*This article is part of a series, **Faiths in Creation**, published earlier this year by the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, IBN 978-1-905566-07-5. It is available as a booklet from HIREPL, Heythrop College, Kensington Square, London W8 5HQ, at £4 per copy.*

¹ Nahj al-Fasahah, Volume 2, p. 713.

² Bihaar al-Anwaar, Volume 75, p. 234.

³ See also verses 13:13, 17:44, 24:41, 59:1, 61:1, 57:1, 59:24, 64:1 & 62:1.

⁴ See also verses 3:191–192, 6:97, 6:99, 14:32–34, 16:10–16, 31:31, 35:12 & 13, 42:32–35, 45:3–6, 51:20 & 55:19–25.

⁵ See also verses 56:68–70 and 22:5.

⁶ Hurr Amili, Wasaa'il al-Shi'ah, Volume 1, p. 133.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 240, 241.

⁸ Nahj al-Fasahah, No. 1130.

⁹ See e.g. verse 55:10.

¹⁰ Verse 67:15 says: 'It is He Who has made the earth manageable for you...'

¹¹ Verse 7:10 says: 'God has given you (mankind) power on earth and appointed therein a livelihood for you.'

¹² Nahj al-Balaaghah.

¹³ Ibid., Letter No.53.

¹⁴ Ibid., Sermon 167. Also cited in Bihaar al-Anwaar, Vol. 32, p. 9.

¹⁵ Wasaa'il al-Shi'a, Volume 11, pp. 43, 44.

¹⁶ See e.g. Al-Kaafi, Volume 5, pp. 29, 30.

¹⁷ Nahj al-Fasahah, Volume 2, p. 563.

¹⁸ Hurr Amili, Wasaa'il al-Shi'a, Volume 17, p. 42.

¹⁹ Al-Kaafi, Volume 5, p. 260.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Al-Kaafi, Volume 6, p. 537.

²³ Wasaa'il al-Shi'ah, Volume 1 p. 240.

²⁴ Nahj al-Fasahah, No. 1559.

²⁵ Nahj al-Fasahah, No. 2224 & No. 2610.

²⁶ See e.g. Wasaa'il al-Shi'a, Volume 8, p.481.

²⁷ Rasaa'il-e Fiqhi, p. 250. Elsewhere he writes: 'Hunting animals for amusement and without need is prohibited.

Therefore, if someone makes a trip for such kind of hunting his trip is a sinful trip'. (Ibid, p. 118)

²⁸ Masaalik al-Afhaam, Volume 2, p. 250.

²⁹ Ibid., Volume 1, p. 305.

³⁰ Jawaahir al-Kalaam, Volume 5, p. 114.

³¹ Ibid., Volume 31, p. 395.

³² Wasaa'il al-Shi'ah, Volume 8, p. 356.

³³ Ibid., Volume 16, p. 258.

³⁴ Nahj al-Fasaahah, No. 1291 and Bihaar al-Anwaar, Volume 3, p.129.

³⁵ For example, see verses (23:8) and (4:58).

³⁶ Hurr Amili, Wasaa'il al-Shi'a, Volume 17, p. 28.

³⁷ Ibid., Volume 2, p. 44.

³⁸ Nahj al-Fasaaha, No. 703.

³⁹ Ibid, No. 1182.

⁴⁰ Ibid. No. 3161.

⁴¹ Ibid. No. 612.

⁴² Mizaan al-Hikmah, Volume 10, No. 3898.

⁴³ Wasaa'il al-Shi'ah, Volume 3, p. 346.

⁴⁴ Nahj al-Fasaahah, No. 1481.

⁴⁵ Ibid, No. 2509.

⁴⁶ For the significance of the concept of mizaan, see commentaries of the Qur'an on the verse 55:7–9.

⁴⁷ See also section 3 above, 'Moderation and Balance'.

⁴⁸ See also the verses 7:85; 13:25; 16:88; 26:152; 27:48; 47:22.