

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN ISLAM (PART 1 OF 7): A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

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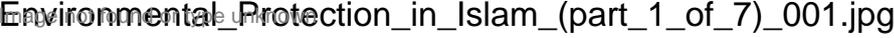
Description: A general introduction to Islam's attitude toward the universe, natural resources, and the relation between man and nature.

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Published on: 10 Apr 2006

Last modified on: 16 Oct 2011

God  has created everything in this universe in due proportion and measure both quantitatively and qualitatively. God has declared in the Quran:

“Verily, all things have We created by measure” (Quran 54:49)

“...Everything to Him is measured.” (Quran 13:8)

“And We have produced therein everything in balance.” (Quran 55:7)

In the universe there is enormous diversity and variety of form and function. The universe and its various elements fulfill human welfare and are evidence of the Creator's greatness; He it is Who determines and ordains all things, and there is not a thing He has created but celebrates and declares His praise.

“Have you not seen that God is glorified by all in the heavens and on the earth - such as the birds with wings outspread? Each knows its worship and glorification, and God is aware of what they do.” (Quran 24:41)

Each thing that God has created is a wondrous sign, full of meaning; pointing beyond itself to the glory and greatness of its Creator, His wisdom and His purposes for it.

“He Who has spread out the earth for you and threaded roads for you therein and has sent down water from the sky: With it have We brought forth diverse kinds of vegetation. Eat and pasture your cattle; verily, in this are signs for men endued with understanding.” (Quran 20:53-54)

God has not created anything in this universe in vain, without wisdom, value and purpose. God says:

“We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them carelessly. We have not created them but for truth.” (Quran 44:38-39)

Thus, the Islamic vision revealed in the Quran is of a universe imbued with value. All things in the universe are created to serve the One Lord Who sustains them all by means of one another, and Who controls the miraculous cycles of life and death:

“God it is that splits the seed and the date stone, brings the living from the dead and the dead from the living: That is your God - how are you turned away?” (Quran 6:95)

Life and death are created by God so that He might be served by means of good works.

“Blessed is He in Whose Hand is dominion, and He has power over every thing: He Who has created death and life to try you, which of you work the most good.” (Quran 67:1-2)

All created beings are created to serve the Lord of all beings and, in performing their ordained roles in a cohesively designed society, they best benefit themselves and each other in this world and the next. This leads to a cosmic symbiosis (*takaful*). The universal common good is a principle that pervades the universe, and an important implication of God's Oneness, for one can serve the Lord of all beings only by working for the common good of all.

Man is part of this universe, the elements of which are complementary to one another in an integrated whole indeed, man is a distinct part of the universe and it has a special position among its other parts. The relation between man and the universe, as defined and clarified in the Glorious Quran and the Prophetic teachings, is as follows:

- A relationship of meditation, consideration, and contemplation of the universe and what it contains.
- A relationship of sustainable utilization, development, and employment for man's benefit and for the fulfillment of his interests.
- A relationship of care and nurture for man's good works are not limited to the benefit of the human species, but rather extend to the benefit of all created beings; and “there is a reward in doing good to every living thing.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

God's wisdom has ordained stewardship (*khilafa*) on the earth to human beings.

Therefore, in addition to being part of the earth and part of the universe, man is also the executor of God's injunctions and commands. He is only a manager of the earth and not a proprietor; a beneficiary and not a disposer or ordainer. Heaven and earth and all

that they contain belong to God alone. Man has been granted stewardship to manage the earth in accordance with the purposes intended by its Creator; to utilize it for his own benefit and the benefit of other created beings, and for the fulfillment of his interests and of theirs. He is thus entrusted with its maintenance and care, and must use it as a trustee, within the limits dictated by his trust. The Prophet declared,

“The world is beautiful and verdant, and verily God, be He exalted, has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.” (Saheeh Muslim)

All of the resources upon which life depends have been created by God as a trust in our care. He has ordained sustenance for all people and for all living beings.

“ And He has set within it mountains standing firm, and blessed it, and ordained in it its diverse sustenance in four days, alike for all that seek.” (Quran41:10)

Thus, in Islam the utilization of these resources is the right and privilege of all people and all species. Hence, man should take every precaution to ensure the interests and rights of all others since they are equal partners on earth. Similarly, he should not regard such as restricted to one generation above all other generations. It is, rather, a joint responsibility in which each generation uses and makes the best use of nature, according to its need, without disrupting or adversely affecting the interests of future generations. Therefore, man should not abuse, misuse, or distort the natural resources as each generation is entitled to benefit from them but is not entitled to “own” them in an absolute sense.

The right to utilize and harness natural resources, which God has granted man, necessarily involves an obligation on man’s part to conserve them both quantitatively and qualitatively. God has created all the sources of life for man and all resources of nature that he requires, so that he may realize objectives such as contemplation and worship, inhabitation and construction, sustainable utilization, and enjoyment and appreciation of beauty. It follows that man has no right to cause the degradation of the environment and distort its intrinsic suitability for human life and settlement. Nor has he the right to exploit or use natural resources unwisely in such a way as to spoil the food bases and other sources of subsistence for living beings, or expose them to destruction and defilement.

While the attitude of Islam to the environment, the sources of life, and the resources of nature is based in part on prohibition of abuse, it is also based on construction and sustainable development. This integration of the development and conservation of natural resources is clear in the idea of bringing life to the land and causing it to flourish through agriculture, cultivation, and construction. God says:

“...It is He Who has produced you from the earth and settled you therein...” (Quran 11:61)

The Prophet declared:

“If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

“If anyone plants a tree, neither human being nor any of God’s creatures will eat from it without its being reckoned as charity from him.”^[1]

“If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has a seedling in hand, let him plant it.”^[2]

The approach of Islam toward the use and development of the earth’s resources was put thus by Ali ibn Abi-Talib, the fourth Caliph, to a man who had developed and reclaimed abandoned land:

“Partake of it gladly, so long as you are a benefactor, not a despoiler; a cultivator, not a destroyer.”^[3]

This positive attitude involves taking measures to improve all aspects of life: health, nutrition, and the psychological and spiritual dimensions, for man’s benefit and the maintenance of his welfare, as well as for the betterment of life for all future generations. As is shown in the Prophetic declarations above, the aim of both the conservation and development of the environment in Islam is for the universal good of all created beings.

Footnotes:

^[1] Sound report related by Imam Ahmad in the Musnad and by Tabarani in al-Mu’jam al-Kabir.

^[2] Sound report reported by Imam Ahmad in Musnad, by Bukhari in al-Adab al-Mufrad, and by Abu Dawud at-Tayalisi in h Musnad.

^[3] Related by Yahya ibn Adam al-Qurashi in Kitab al-Kharaj on the authority of Sa’id ad-Dabbi.

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