

AN ISLAMIC APPROACH to THE ENVIRONMENT

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Preface

An international conference was held in Chicago from 11th to 13th November 1997 to which representatives of all the major religions had been invited, and in which I myself also took part. In the course of it we were asked to note down what we considered to be the three most important problems facing the world. When the results were compiled, the following emerged as the most important problems:

1- Peace.

2- Environmental problems.

3- Education.

A decision was taken by the members of all the different religions participating in the conference to co-operate in solving these problems. For it has been stated by social scientists that moral and religious values will dominate the 21st century. In the present booklet, which I have prepared in this spirit, I have attempted to put forward the Islamic principles concerning the environment. My aim has been to set out clearly how Muslims consider the environment, or how they should consider it.

If this small work assists in the growth of environmental consciousness, all humanity will profit from it. For the environment belongs to all of us. Or more correctly, it has been given to all of us in trust by God. Our greatest responsibility should therefore be to treat this trust in the best way, and not to pollute it or destroy it. Furthermore, those things that have to be done, have to be done here and now; we must put nothing off until tomorrow.

Success is from God alone.

İbrahim ÖZDEMİR

1. What is the Environment?

We know that the problem of the environment is one of today's most serious problems. It is a problem that threatens not only ourselves, but the whole world, and future generations and their right to live in a healthy environment. It is therefore causing humanity to approach the 21st

century in a state of anxiety. This compels us to understand the environmental problems and to help in solving them. We should therefore first of all ask: what do we understand by 'the environment'? That is, what is the environment?

One scientist answered this question by saying "we have 4095 environments." By this he wanted to emphasize that when saying "environment," it is insufficient to understand only the natural environment. As a Muslim, I understand the phrase "Sustainer of All the Worlds" as meaning this. The Sustainer of all the worlds, that is, all environments; our Sustainer, Who embraces and encompasses all environments. The Qur'an expresses this truth as follows:

To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is God's countenance. For God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing. [\[1\]](#)

Another noteworthy point of the Qur'an's related to the environment is this:

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

All praise be to God, the Sustainer of all the worlds. [\[2\]](#)

This induces us to consider the environment from a broad perspective. We should not forget that the Creator and Owner of all environments is at the same time our Creator.

Thus, our environment is formed by our house, garden, and car, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the town in which we live, and the people we live with. So too, it is formed by the seas, lakes, rivers, roads, mountains, and forests, which are shared by all the members of society.

Thus, when we say "environment," we understand all these natural surroundings in which we and all living creatures live. While by "environmental pollution," we mean the dirtying and spoiling of these natural surroundings. The air is polluted, the seas are polluted, the ozone layer is diminishing, animal species are becoming extinct. Pollution of the social environment should

be added to these: poverty, deprivation, homelessness, migration problems, racism, abandoned children, drug abuse, alcohol addiction, and other problems.

Many contemporary thinkers and scientists have stated that religion has an important role to play in overcoming these problems and in the development of comprehensive and integral environmental consciousness. We shall therefore discuss the importance the religion of Islam attaches to the environment.

2. The Islamic View of the Environment

Firstly, I should say that according to Islam, everything in the universe is created by God. It is God Who adorns the skies with the sun, the moon and the stars, and the face of the earth with flowers, trees, gardens, orchards, and the various animal species. It is again God Who causes the rivers and streams to flow on the earth, Who upholds the skies (without support), causes the rain to fall, and places the boundary between night and day. The universe together with all its richness and vitality is the work and art of God, that is, of the Creator. It is again God Who creates all plants and animals as pairs, in this way causing their procreation. God created man subsequently to all these.

We are God's vicegerents on the earth; it has been given us in trust. Just as we are not the lords of nature and the world, so the world is not our property which we can dispose of as we wish or as we are able. Nature was created by God and it belongs to God. Everything in nature is a sign of God's existence; that is, a token or missive. The Qur'an expresses this truth as follows:

We shall show them our signs in the [furthest] regions [of the earth], and in their own souls. [\[3\]](#)

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 God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the

beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds subjugated between the sky and earth — [here] indeed are signs for a people who thinks. [\[4\]](#)

The above verse illustrates why Muslim scholars look on nature as a book, even calling it “the book of the universe,” in this way pointing out that just like the Qur’an, the universe makes known to us our Sustainer and Creator. And the book of the universe has been entrusted to us to preserve and protect. Should those who hold the Qur’an in respect and awe, not touching it unless purified by ablutions, not also treat the book of the universe respectfully and lovingly? Our duty, therefore, as God’s vicegerents and trustees, is to show respect for the trust, and to preserve it carefully, in no way wasting its natural resources when using or consuming them.

And you certainly know already the first form of creation: why then do you not celebrate His praises?

See you the seed that you sow in the ground?

Is it you that cause it to grow, or are We the cause?

Were it our will, We could crumble it to dry powder, and you would be left in wonderment,

[Saying], “We are indeed left with debts [for nothing];

“Indeed are we shut out [of the fruits of our labour].”

See you the water which you drink?

Do you bring it down [in rain] from the cloud or do We?

Were it our will, We could make it salt [and unpalatable]; then why do you not give thanks?

See you the fire which you kindle?

Is it you who grow the tree which feeds the fire, or do We grow it?

It is We Who make it a means to remind [you of Us], and an article of comfort and convenience for the denizens of deserts.

Then celebrate with praises the name of your Sustainer, the Supreme! [\[5\]](#)

As the final Divine message, Islam insistently draws our attention to this sacred and spiritual dimension of nature. It teaches us too that we are created by God and that we shall return to Him in order to give account for our actions. This means that we are answerable for all that we do, both the good, and the evil. As God's vicegerent on earth, at the Last Judgement man will be called to account for how he acted towards the trust, and how he treated it.

So glory to Him in Whose hands is the dominion of all things: Ant to Him will you be all brought back. [\[6\]](#)

According to Yusuf Ali the message conveyed in this verse is the core of Revelation; it explains the Hereafter: All things were created by God; are maintained by Him; and will go back to Him. But the point of special interest to man is that man will also be brought back to God and is answerable to Him, and to Him alone. [\[7\]](#)

The concept of Divine unity is the basis and essence of Islam. Divine unity is apparent in the unity of humanity and of nature. God's vicegerents on the earth, the holders of His trust, are therefore primarily responsible for preserving the unity of creatures, the integral wholeness of

the world, the flora and fauna, and wildlife and natural environment.

Thus, 'unity', 'trust', and 'responsibility' are the three basic concepts of Islam. These principles are at the same time the chief pillars of the Islamic environmental ethic. They form also the fundamental values taught by the Qur'an.

When we read the Qur'an's verses about the earth, we find that they suggest strongly that it is for man a peaceful place which he should take heed of. Thus, the Qur'an draws our attention to nature and to the events that occur in it:

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory; there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet you understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbearing, Most Forgiving! [\[8\]](#)

See you not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth — the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number of mankind? [\[9\]](#)

And do We not send down from the clouds water in abundance,

That We may produce therewith corn and vegetables,

And gardens of luxurious growth? [\[10\]](#)

For that We pour forth water in abundance,

And We split the earth in fragments,

And produce therein corn,

And grapes and nutritious plants,

And olives and dates,

And enclosed gardens, dense with lofty trees,

And fruits and fodder —

For use and convenience to you and your cattle. [\[11\]](#)

O you people! Worship your Sustainer....

Who has made the earth your couch and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto God when you know [the truth]. [\[12\]](#)

Or who has made the earth firm to live in; made rivers in its midst; set thereon mountains immovable, and made a separating bar between the bodies of flowing water? [Can there be another] god besides God? Nay, most of them know not. [\[13\]](#)

The earth is also important in regard to the concept of mutual relations. Human beings are created from two of its elements: earth and water. Thus, if man becomes alienated from the earth, he becomes alienated from his very nature. He is not the lord and ruler of the earth; he is a humble member of it. The superior qualities and faculties he possesses require not that he

irresponsibly consumes and destroys its beauties and resources, but that he acts in awareness of his great responsibility towards them.

And God has produced you from the earth, growing [gradually],

And in the end He will return you into the [earth], and raise you forth [again at the resurrection]?

And God has made the earth for you a carpet [spread out],

That you may go about therein, in spacious roads. [\[14\]](#)

The word “earth” (ard) is mentioned twice in these short verses. A clear indication of its importance is the fact that it is mentioned 485 times in the Qur’an as a whole and is portrayed as being offered for man’s convenience:

It is He Who has made the earth manageable for you, so traverse through its tracts and enjoy of the sustenance which He furnishes. [\[15\]](#)

[They will be] among Lote-trees without thorns,

Among Talh trees with flowers [or fruits] piled one above another —

In shade long-extended,

By water flowing constantly,

And fruit in abundance,

Whose season is not limited, nor [supply] forbidden. [\[16\]](#)

These verses and those similar to them have been sources of inspiration for Muslims and they have looked on nature in their light. They have regarded the universe and nature from this Qur'anic point of view. One can see the finest examples of this in the works of Muslim thinkers, and particularly the great Sufi masters. We shall suffice here with only two examples. The first is Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, a thinker of the 13th century:

“How does this lifeless cloud know when it has to pour down rain? And you see the earth, which holds this flower and produces ten in its place. Someone is doing these things. It is He that you have to see.” [\[17\]](#)

“Despite being lifeless, even the earth knows everything God has bestowed on it. How could it otherwise have accepted the rain, suckled all the plants and nurtured them?” [\[18\]](#)

“The world is being re-created and renewed at every breath, but we are unaware of this, for we see it as static.”

Our second example is from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a contemporary scholar. The same verses are reflected as follows in his heart:

“Glory be to the One who made the garden of the earth an exhibition of His art, a gathering of His creatures, a place of manifestation of His power, the means of His wisdom, the flower-bed of His mercy, the tillage of Paradise, a place of passage of creatures, for the flood of beings, a funnel for His artefacts.

The adorned animals, decorative birds, fruit-bearing trees, and flowering plants are miracles of His knowledge, wonders of His art, gifts of His munificence, propitious signs of His grace. The blossoms smiling at the embellished fruits, the birds twittering in the breezes of the early morn, the pattering of the rain on the petals of the flowers, the tender affection of mothers for their infants and young all show to jinn and men, and spirits and living creatures, and angels and spirit beings a Loving One making Himself known, a Merciful One making Himself loved, a Tenderly Kind One bestowing His mercy, a Gracious Bestower manifesting His kindness.” [\[19\]](#)

The earth is also considered by Islam to be a place of purification and worship of God. God’s Messenger (PBUH) said: “The earth was made a place of worship and purification for me [and Muslims].” The meaning of this is that when water is not available before worship, earth may be used for canonical ablutions (tayammum) in its place. [\[20\]](#) God’s Messenger (PBUH) was emphasising this point when he said:

“God is beautiful and He loves the beautiful; He is generous and loves generosity; He is clean and loves cleanliness.”

One should not therefore be surprised at the Islamic view related to the environment, that “everyone should remind each other to conserve and protect the earth.” They should not hang back diffidently while the earth is being spoiled. They should attach the greatest importance to cleanliness and purity, physical and particularly moral and spiritual.

3. The Importance of Cleanliness

Islam considers cleanliness to be one of the fundamentals of belief. It thus makes a direct connection between belief and cleanliness. It is because of this that throughout the ages cleanliness has been one of the Muslims’ most striking characteristics. In one Hadith, God’s Messenger (PBUH) says: “Cleanliness is half of belief.” [\[21\]](#) Some of the earliest verses revealed to him by God were:

O you wrapped up [in a mantle]!

Arise and deliver your warning!

And your Sustainer magnify!

And your garments keep free from stain!

And all abomination shun! [\[22\]](#)

It may be noted here that by requiring the cleanliness of clothes, on the one hand physical cleanliness is being emphasized, and by demanding that “abomination” is shunned, on the other moral and spiritual purity are being underlined. Thus, in Islam, physical and moral and spiritual cleanliness form an indivisible whole. Muslims should neglect neither the cleanliness of their surroundings, houses, the roads they use, and parks and gardens, nor any sort of moral and spiritual cleanliness.

The clearest example of this approach in Islamic life may be seen in the Six Books of Prophetic Hadiths, the chief and most reliable source of Islamic civilization. On looking at these books, it is seen that the sections on cleanliness come at the beginning. This shows clearly the priority the religion and civilization give to cleanliness. The Qur’an says:

O you who believe! When you prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands [and arms] to the elbows; rub your heads [with water]; and [wash] your feet to the ankles. If you are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body... [\[23\]](#)

As is seen, the first condition of the obligatory prayers—which are the foundation of Islam, the support of religion, and ‘Ascension’ of the believers—is cleanliness. The Qur’an therefore commands that at least five times a day we wash those parts of the body that may become dirtied like the hands, face, nose, ears, mouth, neck, head, and feet, and that we keep them

clean. The place the prayers are to be performed also has to be clean, as well as the clothes worn.

Another dimension of the Islamic approach to cleanliness is apparent in the Divine Name of Most Holy (Quddûs), one of God's Most Beautiful Names (al-Asma al-Husna). In his explanations of this Divine Name, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi points out the cleanness of the universe, and states that the face of the earth and such beings as the clouds, rain, flies, crows, maggots, earthworms, ants, various insects, and the red and white corpuscles in the human body all manifest the Name of Most Holy in their functions, and carry out duties as "cleansing officials."

Throughout his life the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) paid the greatest attention to cleanliness of every sort. For instance, he was always careful when going to the mosque or to visit someone or when being in the company of others to wear clean and presentable clothes, to rub fragrant scents on himself, and not to eat things like onion and garlic which would be unpleasant to others. [\[24\]](#)

It is clear then that Muslims are obliged to always be clean in every respect, both physical and moral and spiritual. A Muslim who pays attention to physical cleanliness, that is, who keeps his body, house, and surroundings clean, will not neglect the purity of his heart and spirit and his moral purity—it is not possible that he neglects these. We all know that the most important condition for protecting ourselves against illness is being clean and living in a clean environment. What preventative medicine tells us is nothing different to this. Also, we should never forget this admonition of the Qur'an:

God loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean. [\[25\]](#)

4. The Cleanliness of the Social Environment

One of the most important topics that come to mind when one says “environmental health” is the cleanliness of the common environment. These are places such as roads, places of worship, schools, parks, children’s playgrounds, stadiums, excursion spots and picnic places, public lavatories, public beaches, and other such places.

What has to be done to maintain the cleanliness of the social environment is to think not of ourselves but of others. We should not forget that God’s Messenger (PBUH) forbade the dirtying of the roads and paths people used, and the places they sat and rested, like shady places and under trees and walls. He said that to remove a branch or a thorn that would cause hurt to people as they passed was a part of belief. He said too that God does not love those who cause hurt and pain to believers.

Muslims should scrupulously avoid doing anything to upset or disturb others in any circumstances or in any place. To pollute or dirty the city in which one lives, or the town or village and their surrounding countryside, waters, air, or views, and to scatter rubbish and refuse is both a sin and extremely discourteous. It is lack of thought both for oneself and for others. For thoughtful people know that others will be disturbed by any place they have dirtied, and the beauties of nature spoiled. They are aware that it is an attribute of the believer and a sign of maturity not to leave scattered nutshells, bottles, cans, wrappers, and bits of paper and other refuse in the streets and picnic areas, or to do anything that will disturb other people, or even the animals.

5. The Preservation of Trees, Woodland, and Green Areas.

5.1. Trees in the Qur’an

Doubtless, one of the most important aspects of protecting the environment and ecology is the conservation of the trees, forests, woodland, countryside, and all the living creatures whose habitats are such areas. We see that the religion of Islam puts forward important principles for these too. These noteworthy principles related to the conservation of such areas may be classed as moral and legal.

If we look at the Qur’an, we see that the word “tree” is mentioned with various meanings. Despite containing no direct command to plant trees, it speaks of trees and gardens and

orchards so frequently and descriptively that it is not possible for any attentive reader of the Qur'an not to grow in awareness of them. For when creating this world, God adorned it with trees and gardens and offered them for man's use. The word "tree" is mentioned 26 times in the Qur'an, and the word "paradise" in the sense of garden around 146 times.

It is He Who sends down rain from the skies; with it We produce green [crops], out of which we produce grain, heaped up [at harvest]; out of the date-palm and its sheaths [or spathes] [come] clusters of dates hanging low and near; and [then there are] gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar [in kind] yet different [in variety]; when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! in these things there are signs for people who believe. [\[26\]](#)

It is He Who produces gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar [in kind] and different [in variety]; eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess; for God loves not the wasters. [\[27\]](#)

It is He Who sends down rain from the sky. From it you drink, and out of it [grows] the vegetation on which you feed cattle. * With it He produces for you corn, olives, date-palms, grapes, and every kind of fruit. Verily in this is a sign for those who give thought. [\[28\]](#)

These verses thus mention the rain, trees, earth, gardens, vineyards and date groves, and clouds; they point out the Divine balance between all the elements making up nature, and want us to take lessons from them. To put it another way, we are being required to raise our heads in our personal and daily lives and to look at the world about us in a different way. For through their order and systems and ecological balances, all creatures point to their Creator.

In another place, the Qur'an draws our attention to the balance of nature, then indicates that we should be careful to observe the balances and rights in the life of society. That is to say, rights and balances are universal rules that we have to observe.

The sun and the moon follow courses [exactly] computed; * And the herbs and the trees — both [alike] bow in adoration. * And the firmament He has raised high, and He has set up the balance [of justice], * In order that you may not transgress [due] balance. * So establish weight with

justice and fall not short in the balance. [\[29\]](#)

It is clear that the Islamic world view could not endorse any view of man's vicegerency of the earth which destroys and spoils the ecological balances and the order and systems of nature, which it teaches that God has created and put as signs of His own existence. For vicegerent (khalifa) means 'deputy'. And this in turn means that man is the sole being whom God holds responsible for the earth, to whom He has entrusted its preservation. Such a deputy would not betray the trust of the One who created the world with a particular order, balance, and harmony. If he was to spoil the order and harmony and destroy them, he would be known as an unreliable and perfidious deputy.

5.2. Trees and Woodlands in Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH)

Both in his practices and in various of his Hadiths, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) attached great importance to planting trees, protecting existent ones, planting forests, as well as to conserving existent ones. A'isha, one of his wives, said: "His character was the Qur'an." [\[30\]](#) His practices and conduct related to conservation of the environment should therefore be considered from the Qur'anic standpoint. For us his actions are sources of inspiration constituting his Sunna or practices, which we are obliged to follow. To put it another way, as in all matters, the exemplar of Islamic conduct related to the environment and the person who displayed it in most perfect fashion was God's Messenger (PBUH). As this, and his commands concerning it, are learnt, our weighty responsibilities become clear.

Some Hadiths of the Prophet connected with planting trees and protecting them:

"If you have a sapling, if you have the time, be certain to plant it, even if Doomsday starts to break forth." [\[31\]](#)

"Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit." [\[32\]](#)

“Whoever reclaims and cultivates dry, barren land will be rewarded by God for the act. So long as men and animals benefit from it He will record it for him as almsgiving.” [\[33\]](#)

“Whoever plants a tree, reward will be recorded for him so long as it produces fruit.” [\[34\]](#)

If a Muslim plants a tree, that part of its produce consumed by men will be as almsgiving for him. Any fruit stolen from the tree will also be as almsgiving for him. That which the birds eat will also be as almsgiving for him. Any of its produce which people may eat thus diminishing it, will be as almsgiving for the Muslims who planted it. [\[35\]](#)

The reward accruing from seven things continue to reach the person concerned even if he is in his grave: knowledge he has taught, water he has provided for the public benefit, any well he has dug, any tree he has planted, a mosque he has built, recitations of the Qur’an bequeathed to him, and children who pray for him after his death. [\[36\]](#)

On migrating to Medina, God’s Messenger (PBUH) organized the planting of trees and of date groves. He made the forests and green spaces conservation areas, where every sort of living creature lived. These were called sanctuaries (hima). For example, a strip of land approximately twelve miles wide around Medina was proclaimed a sanctuary and made a conservation area. We know that he proclaimed other areas, similar to this, sanctuaries. All these show the paramount importance —as a religion— Islam gives to nature conservancy and protection of all nature’s living creatures.

Following these commands of the Qur’an and the exemplary practices of God’s Messenger (PBUH), throughout history Muslims have given importance to planting trees and protecting existing one’s. Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, for example, when sending an expedition for a battle to Muta, gave some instructions and underlines that: "Do not cut down trees and do not kill animals except food (in the enemy territory)."

Green is the colour of Islamic civilization, so too the dome of Prophet’s tomb is green. These are not mere coincidence; they should be seen as reflecting the importance Islam gives to greenery, nature, and trees.

6. The Protection of Animals

Another important question related to the environment is the good treatment of the animals in our lives, and the protection of them; or more correctly, extending our kindness and compassion to them. However, today many animal species are becoming extinct. Other animals stray abandoned and hungry in the streets. Taken as a whole, therefore, it cannot be said that we treat animals well and carry out our duties towards them. In my view, one of the most important reasons for this is our indifference towards Islamic values. For Islam regulates not only relations between individuals and between individuals and society and the state, it also regulates relations between man and nature and man and the environment. A natural consequence of this is that man is answerable to God for his attitude and actions towards nature and animals. This may be seen in the following Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH):

If without good reason anyone kills a sparrow, or a creature lesser than that even, the living creature will put his plaint to God on the Day of Judgement, saying: 'So-and-so killed me for no purpose. [\[37\]](#)

It is thus stressed that the purposeless and arbitrary killing of the living creatures of nature, whether large or small, is prohibited, and that those who do so will be called to account by God on the Last Day.

6.1. Animals in the Qur'an

On looking at the Qur'an, the prominent place given animals, the key members of the eco system, is immediately apparent. A number of its Suras bear animals' names: al-Baqara (The Cow); al-Nahl (The Bee), al-Anqabut (The Spider), al-Naml (The Ant).

One of the striking expressions the Qur'an uses about animals is that they are a "community" (umma). It is especially noteworthy that this concept, which is a significant concept in Islamic tradition and literature, should also be used for animals:

There is not an animal [that lives] on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but [forms part of] communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they [all] shall be gathered to their Lord in the end. [\[38\]](#)

The Qur'an also portrays animals as works of art displaying the Maker's skill and perfection:

And verily in cattle [too] will you find an instructive sign. For what is within their bodies, between excretions and blood, we produce, for your drink, milk, pure and agreeable to those who drink it. [\[39\]](#)

Do they not look at the Camels how they are made?

And at the Sky how it is raised high?

And at the Mountains How they are fixed firm?

And at the Earth how it is spread out? [\[40\]](#)

These verses invite man to contemplate four things, which they can see in every-day life, and which are full of meaning, high design, and the goodness of God to man. As we know camel is a domesticated animal, which for Arab countries is par excellence the Camel. What a wonderful structure has this Ship of the Desert? He can store water in his stomach for days. He can live on dry and thorny desert shrubs. His limbs are adapted to his life. And withal, he is so gentle! Who can sign his praises enough?

6.2. Animals in Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH)

As with the important place given to animals by the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also insisted on the protection of animals and the kind treatment of them. His concern that they should be well treated, protected, and not abused or degraded is truly noteworthy. While at the present time torture and oppression of every sort are meted out to man, whom God created as the noblest of creatures, the Prophet prohibited torture and abuse of animals even.

Thus, God's Messenger (PBUH) taught that Muslims should act kindly not only towards human beings but to all living beings:

The Most Merciful One is merciful towards those who are merciful. Act kindly to those on the earth so that those in the heavens [the angels] will be merciful to you. [\[41\]](#)

And as given above: "Anyone who kills a sparrow without good reason will be called to account by God at the Last Judgement." [\[42\]](#) God's Messenger (PBUH) also commanded that birds' nests should not be disturbed, or the eggs or chicks stolen.

[\[43\]](#)

On one occasion he ordered someone who had filled his bag with fledglings stolen from nests and brought them to the town to return them to their nests immediately. The young birds were thus able to grow to maturity in natural surroundings in their mothers' nests.

We learn of another example which reflects clearly the essence of Islamic civilization and how it regards animals from 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, one of the Prophet's close Companions:

"We were on a journey with God's Messenger when we came across a bird the size of a sparrow with two chicks. We seized the chicks, whereupon the hen started beating its wings and screeching. God's Messenger turned and when he saw what we had done, asked: 'Who

separated those chicks from their mother? Return them at once!’ So we left them free.” [\[44\]](#)

The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) thus enjoined the protection of animals and birds, that they should not be ill-treated, but should be well looked after and kept clean, and employed in work suitable to their natures, and should not be loaded with burdens greater than they can bear. He put a ban on hunting, forbidding the arbitrary hunting of animals for pleasure.

He one day related the following story to those sitting by him:

“A traveller felt a great thirst as he went on his way, so stopped at well and drank of its water. As he came up from the well he saw a dog licking the damp soil with its thirsty, lolling tongue. Saying to himself: ‘This animal is thirsty like I was,’ he went back down to the well and filled his shoe with water. Then holding it firm returned and held it for the dog to drink. God praised that servant of His for his act and forgave all his sins.” His Companions then asked him: “So are we rewarded for watering animals?” God’s Messenger replied: “There is a reward for giving any living creature to drink.” [\[45\]](#)

God’s Messenger (PBUH) prohibited the ill-treatment of animals, and warned us concerning this question when he said:

A woman was sent to Hell because she tied up her cat and neither gave it food nor allowed it free to hunt the cockroaches. [\[46\]](#)

God’s Messenger stated that like men, animals employed in various tasks had the right to rest, and when stopping to rest on journeys, in particular insisted that the animals’ needs should be met and that they should be rested. Anas ibn Malik, one of the Companions, related:

“Whenever we arrived at a stopping-place, we would never start the prayers until we had removed the loads from the pack-animals [and left them free to rest].” [\[47\]](#)

Reynold A. Nicholson, for example, is very impressed by Muslims treatment of animals. In his book *The Mystic of Islam* we find the following story:

Bayazid [ninetieth century Muslim mystic] purchased some cardamom seed at Hamadhan, and before departing put into his gabardine a small quantity which was left over. On reaching Bistam and recollecting what he had done, he took out the seed and found out that it contained a number of ants. Saying, "I have carried the poor creatures away from their home" he immediately set off and journeyed back to Hamadhan-a distance of several hundred miles.

We see then that the religion of Islam permits that no living creature is tormented or abused. Whether man or beast, all living creatures have rights. Those who violate their rights or disregard them will be punished in the hereafter by God if it not possible for them to be punished by the authorities here. God's Messenger (PBUH) expressed this in the following way:

"It is a fact that in the next life you will render their rights to those to whom they are due. The hornless sheep even will receive its right by way of retaliation from a horned sheep that butted it." [\[48\]](#)

This stance of the Prophet, and his admonitions, have had a powerful effect on Muslims down the ages. Being imbued with the Prophet's attitude, Muslims have always looked kindly and tolerantly on people. They have never tortured their enemies even. Members of other religions and faiths have lived in security amongst them. Animals too have received their share of this loving, compassionate, and tolerant civilization.

'Izz ad-Din ibn 'Abd as-Salam , the thirteenth century Muslim legal scholar, formulated the following principles of animal rights which appears to be based on the very teaching of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet (S):

that he spend on them the provision that their kinds require, even if they have aged or sickened such that no benefit comes from them;

that he not burden them beyond what they can bear;

that he not put them together with anything by which they would be injured, whether of their own kind or other species, whether by breaking their bones or butting or wounding;

that he slaughter them with kindness;

that when he slaughters them he neither flay their skins nor break their bones until their bodies have become cold and their lives he passed away;

that he not slaughter their young within their sight but that he isolate them;

that he make comfortable their resting places and watering places;

that he put their males and females together during their mating seasons;

that he not discard those which he takes as game; and neither shoot them with anything that breaks their bones nor bring about their destruction by any means that renders their meat unlawful to eat. [\[49\]](#)

We saw, moreover, from the Prophet's Hadiths that treating animals well is a means of a person entering Paradise, while ill-treatment of them may be the cause of a person going to Hell.

7. Some Examples From Islamic History

If one studies the histories of the Muslim peoples, one sees that they lived in harmony with nature and its creatures. The most reliable witnesses to this were Western travellers who visited the Muslim lands.

The famous French writer Montaigne touched on this subject when he said: "The Muslim Turks found hospitals and pious foundations for animals even."

The French lawyer Guer, who travelled in the Ottoman Empire in the 17th century, mentioned a hospital in Damascus where sick cats and dogs were treated. While Prof. M. Sibai gives the following details about the pious foundations for animals.

In the old tradition of pious foundations, areas were allotted for the grazing and treatment of sick animals. The 'Green Mar'a' (the area now covered by Damascus sports stadium) was a place that at one time had been made over to the grazing of helpless animals, which were no longer fed by their owners since they had lost the power to work. Such animals grazed here till their deaths. Among the pious foundations of Damascus there were also places where cats could eat and sleep and wander about. There were hundreds of cats here which, having no difficulties in finding their daily provender, were like the permanent fixtures of the place.

Birds have always had a special place in Muslims' lives. They have felt particular affection not only for songbirds like nightingale, but for others such as chiefly the pigeon, and storks, doves, and swallows. This affection has been manifested in various ways: the defence of birds' rights, establishing pious foundations for the feeding of birds, founding hospitals to tend to sick birds, the taming of some species and keeping them in cages, as well as the opposite of this, setting them free from captivity. Just as many people have released them from their cages out of love for them, so many others have kept them in cages.

The famous French poet Lamartine recorded the following observations:

Muslims have good relations with all creatures, animate and inanimate: trees, birds, dogs, in short, they respect all the things God has created. They extend their compassion and kindness to all the species of wretched animals which in our countries are abandoned or ill-treated. In all the streets at specific intervals they leave bowls of water for the dogs of the district. Some Muslims found pious foundations at their deaths for the pigeons they have fed throughout their

lives, thus ensuring that grain will be scattered for [the birds] after they have departed.

Thus, the religion of Islam attaches the greatest importance to the conservation of the environment as a whole. For the environment and all the living beings within it are created by God. As human beings, we have been entrusted with conserving and developing it. The conservation of the environment is therefore not only a human obligation but also a religious obligation. Indeed, believers should undertake this responsibility more than anyone. It is understandable if someone who does not believe in God and the Last Judgement is unconcerned with it, but for a believer to be unconcerned is both incomprehensible and unforgivable. How profound are Yunus Emre's, the Turkish poet of 13th century, words:

“We love creatures for the sake of their Creator”!

No concerned and believing Muslim individual will forget that he is answerable for how he treats not only men but all creatures, or that one day he will be called to account for how he acted. With the following verse, the Qur'an warns all Muslims: Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it, And whoever does an atom's weight of evil, shall see it. [\[50\]](#)

8. Not Wasting the Earth's Resources

A further important Islamic principle related to the environment is the Islamic prohibition concerning thoughtless consumption; that is, wastefulness and extravagance. Wastefulness is not only the thoughtless consumption of natural resources; it is at the same time disrespectful towards God, the Creator and Owner of all the bounties. For this reason, in Islam, eating and drinking of licit food is lawful, but wastefulness is forbidden. At this time we know better than at any other that the world's resources are limited. Extravagance and over-consumption will affect not only ourselves, but forthcoming generations. We are therefore compelled to be aware and sensitive concerning this matter. In the Holy Qur'an, God says:

Verily We have created all things in proportion and measure. [\[51\]](#)

If we keep this in mind, we see that carefully preserving the balance and measure is a human

obligation. The science of ecology shows us that the universe contains extremely sensitive eco systems and balances, and that man has therefore to maintain these ecological systems.

Modern man only came to realize the environmental problems with the help of ecology when the problems became apparent, whereas the Qur'an draws our attention to this balance in particular, which now everyone is trying to maintain. The obligation of maintaining this balance, which is God's work, is man's, whom God created on "the best of patterns," and who is His vicegerent or deputy on earth. No Muslim therefore will spoil the universe's balance, nor will any Muslim look on indifferently while other's spoil it. For the natural balance is at the same time a mirror reflecting Almighty God's Most Beautiful Names.

Islam permits utilization of the environment, but this should not be arbitrary. Wastefulness and extravagance are prohibited by God:

O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer; eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for God loves not the wasters. [\[52\]](#)

The eating and drinking in this verse refer to utilizing the resources necessary for the continuation of our lives. This should not be uncontrolled. The elements that support life should be conserved so that they can be utilized continuously. More than this, such conservation should be unselfish. That is, it should not only have human interests in view.

Thus, while utilizing the world's bounties, the Muslim should not do so with an unconstrained and irresponsible approach to consumption. On the contrary, he is obliged to base all such actions and the measure of his consumption on Islamic economic principles. Every passing day it is becoming better understood that the world's resources are limited. The following commands of the Qur'an are striking at a time feasible development and economic models are being widely discussed:

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 a spendthrift.

Verily spendthrifts are brothers of the Evil Ones and the Evil One is to his Lord [Himself] ungrateful. [\[53\]](#)

Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just [balance] between those extremes. [\[54\]](#)

The Qur'an commands us to eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for God loves not the wasters [\[55\]](#) so that we become accustomed to avoiding wastefulness and extravagance in our daily consumption of food and drink. It frequently points out that frugality and consuming what one has without being over-lavish is the measure of what God loves.

In some verses, Almighty God states that He "created every animal from water," showing in a most interesting and meaningful way that water is the basis of life and living. [\[56\]](#)

God's Messenger (PBUH) also attached great importance to water, and forbade the excessive use of it even when taking the ablutions, saying that to do so was 'detestable' (makruh). He thus prevented people using too much water even for something like ablutions, when they are preparing to enter the Divine presence and court. A Hadith about this is the following: "God's Messenger (PBUH) appeared while Sa'd was taking the ablutions. When he saw that Sa'd was using a lot of water, he intervened saying: 'What is this? You are wasting water.'" Sa'd replied asking: "Can there be wastefulness while taking the ablutions?" To which God's Messenger replied: "Yes, even if you take them on the bank of a rushing river." [\[57\]](#)

While interpreting this Hadith, scholars have pointed out that it does not refer only to using less water while taking the ablutions, but to a basic principle of Islam. They have emphasized the following points in connection with it:

- God's Messenger is stating an important prohibition.
- The prohibition concerns something for which no effort was exerted in obtaining it, nor money spent, but is free: the water of a flowing river.

- Moreover, the excessive use of water causes no deficiency to nature, nor does it cause pollution, nor spoil the ecological balance.

- It causes no harm to living beings.

- Furthermore, the matter in question, that is, taking the ablutions, is not some trivial matter; it is a necessary condition for the obligatory prayers.

If then, despite all the above, it is 'detestable' to use excessive water from a river while taking the ablutions and it was prohibited by the Prophet, how much stronger is the proscription on being wasteful and extravagant in some matter in which the above statements are not applicable? That is, if wastefulness

- is in something that required the expending of effort, expense, or at least time;

- if it caused deficiency to or pollution of nature, thus spoiling the ecological balance;

- if it harmed living beings;

- if it violated the rights of forthcoming generations to live in a healthy environment;

- if it was arbitrary and meaningless, and merely for enjoyment;

- if it was contrary to the basic aim; then what would the situation be?

The Qur'an and Sunna stipulating that water is the basis of life lays a number of obligations and responsibilities on Muslims: the conserving of existent water supplies in the best possible way; the prevention of any activity that might lead to the pollution of water sources or spoil the purity and characteristics of the water; never adopting an extravagant and irresponsible attitude in the consumption of water; rational and regular utilization of water and water sources.

There are very good reasons for Islam prohibiting wastefulness and prodigality so forcefully. We may put it this way: there are between five and six thousand million people living in the world today. Just think of each individual person cutting down a tree or killing an animal just for the fun of it. Six thousand million trees or six thousand million animals would perish. Or think of the water they would waste, or the bread or other foodstuffs they would throw away. The serious consequences of those apparently insignificant actions are clear. Moreover, for the greater part it is not possible to reclaim the resources we have polluted, destroyed, or annihilated. It is in this light that we may understand how meaningful was the point God's Messenger (PBUH) was emphasizing when he said: "Even if you take the ablutions in a flowing river, do not waste the water," and how important it is for the preservation of the ecological balance.

The world belongs to all of us. We are all obliged to conserve and protect. We must co-operate and work together for a better world, a better future, and a better environment. We must love and preserve our environment and all the living creatures within it in the name of our Sustainer, Who created them and entrusted them to us. In this way, the 21st century will be the century of peace, happiness, tolerance, and brotherhood. Not only for men, but for all creatures, animate and inanimate.

I conclude this work with the following prayer which Muslims say many times during five daily prayers:

Our Lord! Give us the best of this world as well as the best in the Hereafter.

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