

Islamic Faith Statement

"O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters."

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Humans and the Environment

Humanity's most primordial concepts of religion relate to the environment. Human history on planet Earth is, on a geological scale, very short indeed. Planet Earth itself is a mere 3,800 million years old; human beings only appeared one million or maybe two million years ago.

Most of the physical patterns of planet Earth were probably in place, broadly speaking, by the time humans evolved. Apart from what they first saw, they also probably witnessed some spectacular changes themselves. They must, at the very least, have gone through one Ice Age and seen some graphic volcanic eruptions—assuming they were able to avoid the consequences. The environment, therefore, very probably induced the first thoughts of a Super-Being—a God, if you like—whose manifestations lay in human beings' immediate surroundings.

The environment also provided another dimension in humanity's relationship with nature. To survive in a given environment, humans have to adjust what they take from that environment to what can give them sustainable yields on (at the very least) an annual basis. In effect this meant that early humans had to learn to conserve at an early age. Being largely dependent on what was available rather than on what they could cultivate, they entered into a partnership with the environment.

To take more than the regenerative capacity of the environment could lead to serious subsequent exhaustion—quite rightly seen as harsh retribution from an angry God. The converse situation of exploitation with moderation led to sustained yields, which were (again, quite rightly) taken as having pleased God.

The Industrial Revolution

e who will **make mischief therein** and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy [name]

This relationship between conservation and religion is thus not only a natural one but also probably as old as the proverbial hills. But when we quickly open most of the pages of human history on planet Earth and come to the past 300 years or so, we find the advent of the Industrial Revolution. It made possible the production of large quantities of goods in a very short time. That meant that raw materials in ever-increasing quantities had to be found to feed the hungry mills ready to convert them into finished or semi-finished goods.

The consequences were many—economic, social, and environmental. The material achievements of the human race in the past 100 or so years have overshadowed the contributions made by all past civilizations.

The Industrial Revolution that took place in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries exacted a high social and environmental cost. Now these costs are even higher and more universal, being manifestly so in the great urban centers of the world. The paradox of “progress” today is the easily perceived correlation between complex consumer societies and the degeneration of the human being. Or as John Seymour puts it:

We see men now wherever we look, so blinded by arrogance and the worship of man as God that they are doing things no one but the insane would do ... men maddened by the belief that they are both omniscient and omnipotent, that they are indeed God.

The pursuit of money

The Industrial Revolution also proclaimed a new revival of another God: Mammon. Mammon regrettably has no respect for environmental integrity—nor do his followers. The last 250 years have seen a growing decimation of ever more pristine areas of nature to feed the insatiable industrial cuckoo and its resultant consumerism. Forests—particularly tropical forests—have been systematically hewn down, the seas ransacked, the lands made totally dependent on a host of inorganic fertilizers and pesticides for food production. Wastes galore have filled the seas, the rivers, and the lakes, not to mention the landfills.

We must also take note that the “unmatched material progress” of this century that we are often fond of talking about has only been possible for the few: that is, the population of the northern hemisphere and a small minority among the peoples of the South. This is usually translated as less than 25 percent of the world’s population consuming over 75 percent of the world’s resources.

This rate of consumption by a minority of the human species has caused unparalleled climatic change, ecosystem disintegration, and species extinction. As a report by the World Wide Fund for Nature observes:

Loss of biodiversity worldwide, and the combination of global warming with other human pressures will present the greatest challenge in conservation for decades to come.

This would lead us to conclude that there is a profound and inherent contradiction in the efforts made by the “North” to keep ahead of the rest as consumers, and the push by the remaining 75 percent of the world’s population to catch up. Given this scenario, if just Eastern Europe or Russia or India or China managed to raise its standard of living by just a few percentage points, then the consequences of putting this extra load on the earth’s ecosystem, which is already under severe strain, would be catastrophic.

This is the background against which the followers of the relatively ancient, environmentally conscious (indeed environmentally concerned) God have gathered to reexamine and to restate their own commitment to environmental integrity from their own individual religion’s standpoint. We for our part will look at the underpinnings of conservation in Islam.

Islam and conservation

There are several Islamic principles that, when taken individually, seem to have little bearing on conservation. Together, however, they add up to a clear concept of the Islamic view on conservation.

Tawheed

The first Islamic principle that relates to conservation is that of the Oneness of Allah, or Tawheed. This principle is absolutely fundamental to Islam. Every Muslim must believe in this Oneness of Allah. It is said by some Ulamaa that some two-thirds of Prophet Muhammad’s (SAW) early preaching—and indeed of the Qur’an itself—were and are dedicated purely to endorsing this very Oneness of Allah. One indivisible God means to a Muslim that there is no separate deity for each of the many attributes that to Muslims belong to the One Universal God who is also God of the Universe.

Tawheed is the monotheistic principle of Islam and it begins by declaring that “there is no God but God” (the second half of this declaration asserts that “Muhammad is His Messenger”). We are for the present concerned with the first part, which affirms that there is nothing other than the Absolute, the Eternal, All Powerful Creator. This is the bedrock statement of the Oneness of

the Creator from which stems everything else.

It is the primordial testimony of the unity of all creation and the interlocking grid of the natural order of which man is intrinsically a part.

God says in the Qur'an:

Say: He is Allah the One and Only; Allah the Eternal Absolute; He begetteth not nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him. (112.001-4)

God is Real, not an abstract idea or concept; He is One, the Everlasting Refuge for all creation.

Man's relation to God

The emphasis on Tawheed is significant in itself but it is even more relevant to the present discussion by virtue of defining a Muslim's relationship to Allah. The Omniscience and Omnipotence of Allah means, by definition, that a Muslim's relationship to Allah is total. To Him—and to Him only—should humans refer for all their needs: physical, mental, and spiritual. Indeed, Allah would not have it any other way. As He says in the Qur'an:

Allah forgiveth not that partners should be set up with him; but He forgiveth anything else to whom He pleaseth; to set up partners with Allah is to devise a sin most heinous in deed. 004.048.

But Allah is not only the One Indivisible God. He is also the Universal God as well as the Lord of the Universe:

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds. 001.002.

And again:

Say: "Allah's guidance is the [only] guidance and we have been directed to submit ourselves to the Lord of the worlds.

To establish regular prayers and to fear Allah; for it is to Him that we shall be gathered together.

It is He Who created the heavens and the earth in true [proportions]: the day He saith "Be" Behold! it is. His Word is the truth. His will be the dominion the day the trumpet will be blown. He knoweth the Unseen as well as that which is open. For He is the Wise well acquainted [with all things]. 006.071-3.

To Allah belongs the earth and the heavens

Yet another principle that underpins Islamic commitment to the conservation of nature and natural resources is the principle of divine ownership of all that exists on earth and in the heavens—animate and inanimate. There are countless verses in the Holy Qur'an that state this. A few are given below.

In the celebrated Ayatul Kursiyy:

Allah! There is no Allah but He the living the Self subsisting Eternal. No slumber can seize him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what [appeareth to his creatures as] before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of his knowledge except as He willeth. His throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. For He is the Most High the Supreme [in glory]. 002.255.

And again:

To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs. 004.171

To Him belongeth all that dwelleth [or lurketh] in the night and the day. For He is the One Who heareth and knoweth all things. 006.013.

To Him belongs what is in the heavens and on earth and all between them and all beneath the soil. 020.006.

To Him belong all [creatures] in the heavens and on earth: even those who are in His [very] Presence are not too proud to serve Him nor are they [ever] weary [of His service)]. 021.019.

But we are reminded that all things animate and inanimate, in their own ways, submit themselves to the Glory of Allah. There are many verses in the Qur'an about this:

To Him belongs every being that is in the heavens and on earth: all are devoutly obedient to Him. 030.026.

And again:

Whatever is in the heavens and on earth doth declare the Praises and Glory of Allah the Sovereign the Holy One the Exalted in Might the Wise.062.001.

Thus Allah, the One Indivisible God, the Universal God and the Lord of the Universe is the Owner also of all that is in the universe, including man. After all, we are reminded to say constantly:

Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger some loss in goods or lives or the fruits [of your toil] but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.

Who say when afflicted with calamity: "To Allah we belong and to Him is our return." 002.155-6

The above set of principles — all taken from Islam's ultimate authority, the Holy Qu'ran — define the perspectives of the relationship of humanity to God and of God to the environment in its totality. A second set of principles that the Holy Qur'an enunciates prescribe man's relationship to the environment after, of course, humanity has accepted the preceding principles.

Man and the Khalifa

The most important of this second set of principles is that which defines the human role and responsibilities in the natural order that Allah provided. The appointment of people as Khalifa, or guardians, is the sacred duty God has given to the human race. The appointment of humanity to this elevated position gives rise to the one occasion when the Angels actually questioned Allah's decision as seen in the following verses:

Behold thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vice-regent on earth." They said "Wilt thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy [name]?" He said: "I know what ye know not."

And He taught Adam the nature of all things; then He placed them before the angels and said: "Tell Me the nature of these if ye are right."

They said: "Glory to Thee of knowledge we have none save that Thou hast taught us: in truth it is Thou who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom."

He said: "O Adam I tell them their natures." When he had told them Allah said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?"

And behold We said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam"; and they bowed down, not so Iblis he refused and was haughty he was of those who reject Faith.002.030-34

Clearly Allah preferred unprogrammed free will of humanity to the pre-programmed goodness of Angels!

And again:

It is He who hath made you [His] agents inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks some above others: that he may try you in the gifts He hath given you: for thy Lord is quick in punishment: yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful. 006.165.

The exercise of the vice regency is defined in the Qur'an by another set of principles in which man's privileges as well as his responsibilities are clearly defined.

Mizaan

One of the most important attributes conferred on human beings is the faculty of reasoning. This, above all, might well be the deciding fact in their appointment as God's vice regents on earth. Here are the relevant verses:

[Allah] Most Gracious!

It is He Who has taught the Qur'an.

He has created man:

He has taught him speech [and Intelligence]

The sun and the moon follow courses [exactly] computed;

And the herbs and the trees—both [alike] bow in adoration.

And the firmament has He raised high and He has set up the balance [of Justice]

In order that ye may not transgress [due] balance.

So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.

It is He Who has spread out the earth for [His] creatures:

Therein is fruit and date-palms producing spathes [enclosing dates]:

Also corn with [its] leaves and stalk for fodder and sweet-smelling plants.

Then which of the favors of your Lord will ye deny? (055.001-013)

Humans were not created to function exclusively on instinct. The “explanation” was taught to us because we had the capacity to reason and understand.

There is order and purpose in the whole pattern of creation. The Sun and Moon following stable orbits make life possible. The whole universe is in submission to the Creator—the stars that enable us to steer courses and the trees that give us sustenance, shelter and other uses. The world functions only because creation follows a preordained pattern. Man then has a responsibility by virtue of being able to reason, to behave justly, “to transgress not in the balance.” We owe this to ourselves as much as for the rest of creation.

Justice

The capacity to reason and to balance intellectual judgment would in itself be insufficient without the additional moral commitment to Justice. And this is what the Qur'an prescribes for Muslims:

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to Allah even as against yourselves or your parents or your kin and whether it be [against] rich or poor: for Allah can best protect

both. Follow not the lusts [of your hearts] lest ye swerve and if ye distort [justice] or decline to do justice verily Allah is well acquainted with all that ye do. 004.135.

And again:

Whoever recommends and helps a good cause becomes a partner therein: and whoever recommends and helps an evil cause shares in its burden: and Allah hath power over all things. 004.085.

Allah doth command you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when ye judge between man and man that ye judge with justice: verily how excellent is the teaching which He giveth you! for Allah is He who heareth and seeth all things. 004.058

And again:

O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah as witnesses to fair dealing and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to Piety: and fear Allah for Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.005.009.

[They are fond of] listening to falsehood of devouring anything forbidden. If they do come to thee either judge between them or decline to interfere. If thou decline they cannot hurt thee in the least. If thou judge judge in equity between them; for Allah loveth those who judge in equity.005.045.

Use but do not abuse

Several times in the Qur'an, man is invited to make use of the nourishing goods that Allah has placed on earth for him, but abuse—particularly through extravagance and excess—is strictly forbidden. Sometimes these principles are stated in one breath, so to speak. Sometimes they are stated separately. But the message is the same, as the following verse indicates:

O children of Adam! ... eat and drink: but waste not by excess for Allah loveth not the wasters. 07.031.

There are as many invitations to partake of nature as provided for man and for other creatures of the earth as there are for the avoidance of wasteful extravagance. Time and again, Allah reminds us that He loveth not wasters.

It is He who produceth 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 Allah loveth not the wasters. 006.141.

Fitra

Fitra can be taken as perhaps the most direct injunction by Allah to man to conserve the environment and not to change the balance of His creation. This is specifically contained in the verse below:

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: [Establish] Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change [let there be] in the work [wrought] by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not. 030.030.

Thus, Islam teaches that humanity is an integral part of the environment; it is part of the creation of Almighty God. We remain deeply locked into the natural domain despite the fact that there is talk of bringing the environment to the people as though we were independent of it.

The power given to man by God is seen in Islam to be limited by the responsibilities he bears, not only toward God and other men and women, but also toward the rest of creation.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr says: *"The Divine Law (al shariah) is explicit in extending the religious duties of man to the natural order and the environment."*

Conclusion

As we indicated at the beginning, there are several Qur'anic principles that, taken separately, do not have an obvious connection with conservation. But taken in their totality, they state in clear terms that Allah, the One True God is the Universal God and the Creator of the Universe and indeed, the Owner of the Universe. To Him belong all the animate and inanimate objects, all of whom should or do submit themselves to Him.

Allah, in His Wisdom, appointed humans, the creatures that He has conferred with the faculty of reason and with free will, to be His vice regents on earth. And while Allah has invited people to partake of the fruits of the earth for their rightful nourishment and enjoyment, He has also directed them not to waste that which Allah has provided for him—for He loveth not wasters.

Furthermore, Allah has also ordered humans to administer his responsibilities with Justice. Above all, people should conserve the balance of Allah's creation on Earth. By virtue of their intelligence, humanity (when it believes in the One Universal Allah, the Creator of the Universe) is the only creation of Allah to be entrusted with the overall responsibility of maintaining planet Earth in the overall balanced ecology that man found.

If biologists believe that humans are the greatest agents of ecological change on the surface of the earth, is it not humans who, drawn from the brink, will—for their own good—abandon

Mammon and listen to the prescriptions of God on the conservation of their environment and the environment of all the creatures on earth? The Islamic answer to this question is decisively in the affirmative.

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