ISLAM AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: TRADITION RESPONDS TO CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

by Lisa Wersal

Abstract. Mounting global environmental challenges beg for cross-cultural discussions that highlight underlying cultural values regarding nature. This paper explores the insights of Islamic scholars as they examine the interaction of Islamic culture and the West. The Western worldview that separates religion and science, value and fact, in particular differs from Islamic tradition, which sees all facets of life and affairs as interconnected by virtue of their common source—the Creator. As traditional Islamic values have been abandoned to adopt modern Western technologies, environmental problems have intensified in the Muslim world. Islamic scholars urge a return to Islamic ideals that reflect a sacramental view of the physical universe, and they champion the revival of an Islamic science that synthesizes empirical study and symbolic cognition.

Keywords: East/West relations; ecotheology, Islamic; environmental ethics; Islamic science; theology, Islamic.

Since 1967, when Lynn White, Jr., pointed an accusing finger at Western Christianity as the root of our ecological crisis, scholars have examined and debated the influence of religious teachings on social mores regarding the environment. Every world religion is being challenged to address this vital issue and to reclaim and emphasize those aspects of their beliefs which promote ecological integrity and environmental quality. They are being asked, not only to guide their own membership, but to contribute to international and interfaith forums for the discussion of environmental ethics.

In this article we turn our collective ear to the voices of Islamic scholars who have addressed this crucial topic to answer the questions, What guiding principles of Islamic tradition can be brought to bear on current ecological concerns? and What unique insights does

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Islam offer the global community in addressing environmontal challenges? We shall examine scholars' interpretations of Islamic law regarding environmental ethics and their suggestions for application of Islamic principles to contemporary environmental challenges. In particular, the importance of a revitalized Islamic science will be discussed.

Islamic Views Regarding Nature

Islam provides comprehensive guidelines for all facets of life and affairs, environmental ethics notwithstanding. The Qur'an and Sunnah, as the primary and secondary sources of Islamic principles and values, provide answers for all ethical questions. It is these sacred works that Islamic scholars consult when considering the proper relationship between humankind and nature.

Islamic tradition teaches that nature is teleological and orderly. There are no accidents or gaps in creation; events have identifiable causes and predictable consequences. All creatures are interdependent, with the whole of creation operating in a perfectly harmonious ecological balance. The orderliness of nature has been created and is sustained by God. Its beauty and complexity reflect the glory and sublime craftsmanship of the Creator (Faruqi 1980, 24–31). One purpose of nature, then, is to serve as a collection of signs of the might and majesty of Allah. A creation that bears signs of God's power and grace is to be treated with care and respect, lest one show disrespect and ingratitude toward its maker (Timm 1990, 50–52).

Nature is also a gift and "proving ground" for humans. A primary tenet in Islamic belief is that Allah has entrusted humans with the stewardship of the earth. Vicegerency, the appointment of humankind as "Viceroy of God on Earth" (Zaidi 1991, 41), is a test of how responsibly humans will act as trustees of the master's property. Optimally, the earth would be returned to God in even better condition than when it was first received (Faruqi 1980, 30; Manzoor 1984, 156–57). This interpretation follows from the statement "The Prophet (God bless him and keep him in peace) says, 'On Doomsday, if anyone has a palm shoot in hand, he should plant it' " (Ba Kader et al. 1983, 14).

Scholar Iqtidar Zaidi (1991, 42) asserts that in the Muslim world, it is the duty of those in leadership positions to define appropriate human treatment of the environment. He points out that traditionally one's right to ownership of land depended on one's responsible management. If one ceased to maintain environmental quality or to use the land productively to benefit the general public, one lost the

right of ownership. This emphasis on the common good is indicative of the focus within Islam on community (*ummah*) and decision making by consensus. It would not be deemed appropriate for one person to despoil what has been provided by the Creator for the use and enjoyment of *all*. Nor is it suitable for one generation to exhaust the environment through overuse and insatiable consumption, thereby ignoring the rights of future generations (Faruqi 1980, 31).

The ideas mentioned in the foregoing paragraph, that humans have rights to the use and enjoyment, or usufruct, of nature, are held by many Muslims. Hussein Ateshin (1989, 172), Zaidi (1991, 35, 41–42), Abou Bakr Ahmed Ba Kader (1983, 14–17), and Ismail Faruqi (1980, 30–31) all maintain that the earth was designed malleable for the utility, pleasure, and comfort of humans. Its disposal is totally at human discretion. Yet, as God's vicegerents, humans are enjoined to act morally and moderately. Extravagant and wasteful consumption, wanton destruction, hoarding, and exploitation of natural resources are actions certainly not attuned to divine purpose. Humans would be wise not to risk so displeasing God and jeopardizing their worthiness to participate in the final paradise.

This traditional view of the world's being created for human use has, however, been challenged and modified in recent years, with a number of scholars expanding the interpretation of usufruct and affirming that the world was created for the use of *all* creatures, not only humans (Timm 1990, 50). Support for this view can be found in the works of Gulzar Haider and Al-Hafiz Masri. In "Habitat and Values in Islam: A Conceptual Formulation of an Islamic City," Haider suggests that just as "man has expectations from and rights over nature, nature must be given due *rights over man*" (1984, 204; emphasis added). Masri does not even mention the exalted human status of vicegerency in his article "Islam and Ecology." Rather, he sees all species on more equal footing, with rights and privileges awarded by God to all:

> We cannot escape the fact that the human species is just one of the millions of species inhabiting the planet. Each individual and each species is a part of life as a whole.
>
> [Animals] are loved by God in the same way as human beings are loved; they were created the same way as we were.
>
> According to Islamic law the elements of nature such as land, water, air, fire, forests, sunlight, etc. were considered to be the common property of all—not only of all human beings, but of all creatures. (Masri 1992, 20, 17–18, 6)

Another area of some difference of opinion is the question of God's *presence in* his creation. Faruqi describes God as a being completely

other than nature, totally transcendent, and he supports his position by quoting the Qur'an (42:11): "Nothing is like unto Him." He elaborates further with these statements: "Creator and creature are two distinct realities, neither of which is the other in any sense whatever. The Creator may not be confused with, diffused or in-fused into the creature. . . . Each is ontologically distinct, ultimately disparate from the other" (1980, 11). Faruqi delineates clearly between the eternal, absolute, and unchanging One (God) and the transitory, fluctuating, and unstable creation, which will eventually return to the nothingness from which it came.

Seyyed Nasr, on the other hand, has been profoundly influenced by the mystical dimension of Islam, Sufism. For Nasr, the invisible spirit, the divine environment, permeates the visible world of nature and humanity (1992, 89–92). He, too, finds foundation for his view in the Qur'an: "But to God belong all things in the heavens and on the earth: And He it is who encompasseth [*muhit*] all things" and "Whithersoever ye turn, there is the Face of God" (4:126, 2:115). Nasr states that the term *muhit* means *environment* and *all-encompassing*. Therefore, God is the divine environment which surrounds, sustains, and imbues creation with the sacredness of divine presence. Furthermore, he asserts, "the visible or manifested world is not an independent order of reality but a manifestation of a vastly greater world which transcends it and from which it issues. . . . Not only is the invisible an infinite ocean compared to which the visible is like a speck of dust, but the invisible permeates the visible itself. It is in this way that the Divine Environment, the Spirit, [is] at once the origin (*al-mabda'*) and entelechy or end (*al-ma'ad*) of the manifested order" (1992, 89–90). Here we encounter that quality of mysticism that allows for God to be both above and beyond (transcendent) and immanent within all creation.

Whether viewing God as transcendent or immanent, however, Islamic scholars all hold a sacramental view of the physical universe, as is here summed up by Manzoor: "A transcendent god does not necessitate debased creation: *de-divinisation* need not imply *de-sacralisation*. Indeed, Islam holds that there is no such thing as a profane world. . . . All is holy ground. As the Prophet so beautifully puts it: 'the whole of this earth is a mosque' " (1984, 161). The sovereignty and beneficence of Allah are in any case held as present realities, with the creative power of God continuing to be expressed in the ongoing re-creation and sustenance of the world. As the Qur'an states, "God originates creation, then repeats it" (Timm 1990, 49, citing Sura 10:4, 29:19f., 30:11 and 27, 85:13). Islam defines a "this-worldly, life-affirming social order" in which all of

creation is subject to the universal scheme designed by God (Manzoor 1984, 168).

From the Islamic perspective, it is God and not humans who established our earthly values, and these values are eternal and unchanging. The challenge faced by Muslims today is how to integrate the ideals of an ancient faith into life in the modern world. The remaining sections of this paper will address how Islamic scholars apply their traditional values to contemporary environmental concerns.

Applying Ancient Traditions to Modern Times

To meet the environmental challenges of modern societies, Anwar Ibrahim draws on Islamic ideals of the emphasis on the community (*ummah*) and decision making by consensus (1989, 21–22). He suggests systematic, long-range planning in pursuit of goals established by the consensus of the community and operating within well-defined values and norms. He further recommends that the local, regional, and global dimensions of environmental problems be addressed simultaneously and comprehensively with an emphasis on holistic and integrative reasoning. This emphasis is echoed by other scholars as well, and will be discussed further in the next section of this article.

S. Parvez Manzoor sends a very strong message to Muslim nations for the revitalization of Islamic consciousness in addressing environmental concerns (1989, 60). He urges the Muslim world to "end its debilitating fascination with the West and make a genuine rediscovery of its authentic self." He points out that nearly all Islamic discourse, including that about environmental ethics, is "a pathetic exercise in apology"; it is reactionary to Western ideas. Manzoor calls the Muslim thinkers' preoccupation with the West "obsessional and neurotic" and points to what he believes to be a deleterious overemphasis of Western ideas in Muslim societies, particularly in the form of scientific and technological development. He charges, "The rapid deterioration of human environment is one of the most striking manifestations of the crisis of Western science and technology' (1984, 150).

Until recently, the achievements of Western science so mesmerized Muslim nations that advanced technologies were welcomed enthusiastically, without adequate regard for their environmental impact. But technologies that work in the West may not be the most appropriate ecological match for use in Muslim nations. What's more, Western science and technology, born out of Western civilization,

express a perspective that differs from the ideological foundation of Muslim society. Tensions mount as the Muslim social structure interacts with foreign ideologies (in the form of technological inventions) that reflect values and goals in conflict with Islamic tradition.

In the last two decades, a group of Muslim intellectuals have distinguished themselves by examining the growing strain between modern science and technology and the Islamic cultural base. Among them are Nasr, Manzoor, Osman B. Bakar, W. A. Husaini, A.O. Naseef, Ziauddin Sardar, Munawar A. Anees, Z.R. El-Nejjar, and Mohammad Kirmani. They indicate in their writings that a necessary precondition for the rebirth of Islamic civilization is the development of science and technology in line with Islamic social norms. As Sardar writes, "Western science cannot meet the physical, cultural and spiritual needs and requirements of Muslim societies" (1984, 31). The next segment of this paper will be devoted to discussing the unique characteristics of a reviving Islamic science and its historical base.

ISLAMIC SCIENCE

Islamic science possesses a religious and spiritual character. There is no separation of secular and religious realms as in the West. The Qur'an, being the knowledge of the divine principle, is the fountainhead of all knowledge. It is considered a necessity to study the metaphysical and spiritual concepts of the Qur'an in order to have a legitimate foundation on which to build scientific knowledge. Ultimately, all knowledge comes from God, who is all-knowing (Bakar 1991, 88–89).

The first priority in any intellectual pursuit is to relate the transient knowledge acquired by humans to the eternal and unchanging knowledge of the divine principle. Knowledge obtained by direct revelation (as from the Qur'an or from pure observation of God's creation) is irrefutable. Knowledge obtained by reasoning, inference, and manipulation of nature is tentative, subject to change (Kirmani 1989, 161). Because nature bears within it the imprint of God, it is considered divine revelation and the counterpart of the Qur'an; both are called the *ayat* (signs) of God. In addition, the unity of nature is regarded as an image of the unity of divine principle. The divine unity (*al-tawhid*) is thus what Islamic science observes when it studies the interrelatedness of all of nature's parts and aspects.

There is said to exist an inner metaphysical nexus between the symbol (the natural world) and the symbolized (divine principle). Natural phenomena are the symbols or the reflection in a lower order

of existence of a spiritual reality belonging to a higher ontological status. Therefore, natural phenomena are not to be regarded as mere value-free sources of fact but as insights into the wisdom of God. The reality of a natural object is not exhausted by its scientific and mathematical content. Rather, a harmonious relationship exists between the scientific and symbolic aspects of all things. In "The Unity of Science and Spiritual Knowledge," Bakar elucidates:

> Symbolic knowledge of natural objects is not only possible but also is no less real than the corresponding scientific or mathematical knowledge. . . . In fact, symbolic knowledge of nature helps to reveal the metascientific or metaphysical significance of scientific facts, theories, and laws discovered through empirical study of the natural world. And in a number of known cases, it was that symbolic knowledge itself which inspired Muslim scientists to embark upon new areas of scientific study leading to original discoveries in those areas. (1991, 93)

Prominent examples of the interaction of scientific and symbolic cognition are the thirteenth-century accomplishments in the field of optics by Qutb al-Din al-Shirazi and his student Kamal al-Din al-Farsi. Al-Shirazi and al-Farsi based their scientific inquiries on Suhrawardi's twelfth-century metaphysics of light symbolism and cosmology.

Other examples can be found in Muslim scientists' study of zoology. The most famous Arabic work on zoology, *The Book of Animals,* was written by al-Jahiz in the ninth century. Al-Jahiz's work was a combination of scientific, moral, literary, and religious studies. For him, the primary goal of studying the anatomies, habitats, and social organizations of animals was the demonstration of the existence of God and the wisdom inherent in his creation. Later, in the fourteenth century, Kamal al-Din al-Damiri also engaged in multidisciplinary study of animals. His book, *The Great Book of the Life of Animals*, included spiritual, moral, juridical, literary, scientific, and medical perspectives on studying animals. Inspired by religious dietary laws, al-Damiri sought to uncover their scientific justification. He also studied the significance of animals' presence in human dreams. In his dream interpretations he relied heavily on the spiritual understanding that animals are symbols of cosmic qualities and attitudes (Bakar 1991, 88–95).

In stark contrast to the fact/value synthesis of the Islamic perspective is the Western reductionist viewpoint of the Cartesian paradigm. In the Cartesian ideology the world consists of matter and motion only. The best way to "know" a thing is by breaking it down into its smallest components. A thing is nothing more than the sum of its parts. God (Descartes did acknowledge the existence of a Creator) is far removed from the reality of this world. Spirit hovers in the ether

with no direct involvement in the world. This worldview shows no appreciation for symbolic quality, only measurable quantity (Berman 1984, 19–21).

It might seem from these vastly disparate worldviews that Islamic and Western science are irreconcilable. However, Nasr, Anees, and Bakar do not reject reductionism in toto. Rather, they advise that reductionism not be viewed as the *only* valid method. They remind us that the various civilizations have cultivated a diversity of ways of studying and knowing the natural world. They encourage appreciation of all modes of inquiry to enrich the collective consciousness of humankind (Kirmani 1989, 151–57; Bakar 1991, 100).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

All of the contemporary Islamic scholars whose writings have been highlighted in this article are people impassioned in their solid belief that a return to authentic or fundamental Islamic traditions and values is a requisite foundation for the Muslim world's development of ethical environmental practices and a revitalized Islamic science. Their views are drawn from the richness of Islamic tradition and substantiated by passages from the sacred Qur'an and Sunnah. These scholars contend that the Islamic traditions have much to offer the global community. However, whether their message will be embraced at home or abroad, and, if embraced, be successful, only time will reveal. Certainly their appeal is ardent, and their concerns heartfelt. Perhaps none states the case more eloquently than Nasr in these closing remarks:

> The solution of the environmental crisis can come about only when the modern spiritual malaise is cured and there is a rediscovery of the world of the Spirit, which, being compassionate, always gives of Itself to those open and receptive to Its vivifying rays. The bounties of nature and its generosity to the human race are there as proofs of this reality, for despite all that we have done to destroy nature, she is still alive and reflects on her own ontological level the love and compassion, the wisdom and the power, which belong ultimately to the realm of the Spirit. And in this crisis of unprecedented proportions, it is nature as God's primordial creation that will have the final say. (1992, 106)

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