

ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT:
An Overview on Recent Developments

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of environment and development are as old as Islamic thought. However, the decline of science and technology among Muslims during the last few centuries, and consequent under-development of resources and economic backwardness, have had a generally negative impact on their natural environment and human predicament. But the acceleration of Islamic self-consciousness among Muslims in recent years, and the stirrings of an Islamic intellectual upsurge, have started efforts to introduce Islamic ideology, ethics and values in environmental thought, education, and management.

The purpose of this paper is to point out the recognition accorded to environmental problems in some recent Islamic literature, higher education, and policy declarations; and to outline their possible applications in education and development.

2. RECOGNITION OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN CONTEMPORARY
ISLAMIC THOUGHT, EDUCATION, AND POLICY DECLARATIONS

2.1. Quranic Exegesis, and Prophet Muhammad's Traditions
(Sunnah)

A verse of the Quran states: "Corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste (the evil of) some of their doings, so that they might return (to the right path)"¹. The Islamic holistic concept of "environmental degradation" is brought out by the interpretation of this verse in a recent exegesis as follows: "Thus, the growing corruption and destruction of our natural environment ... is here

predicted as 'an outcome of what men's hands have wrought', i.e. of that self-destructive - because utterly materialistic - inventiveness and frenzied activity which now threatens mankind with previously unimaginable ecological disasters: ... pollution of land, air and water ... , poisoning of plant and marine life ... , genetic malformations ... , extinction of many animal species ... To all this may be added the rapid deterioration and decomposition of man's social life ... , crime and violence, with perhaps, nuclear annihilation as the ultimate state: all of which is, in the last resort, an outcome of man's oblivion of God and, hence, of all absolute moral values, and their supersession by the belief that material 'progress' is the only thing that matters"².

The Sunnah is the application of Islamic ideology and ethics in Prophet Muhammad's life, sayings, and his legal and administrative decisions. These were given in times of both war and peace during nearly 22 years (BH 13-AH 11/610-32 A.C.). There is a vast literature in the Sunnah, including case studies, concerning environmental ethics and policies, environmental health and pollution, human and wild life, population control, uses of resources and technology, water law and agriculture, economic ethics, housing and human settlements, etc.³.

The beneficial effects of Sunnah on the human environment, both socio-ethical and physical, have been very pervasive in Muslim history. However, only limited use has been made of the Quran and Sunnah in modern times in the environmental sciences and management. The Muslims are still too slow in getting over the fundamental cause of their backwardness. This, to my mind, is due to the restricted use of the Quran, and a mistaken and selective use of the Sunnah, in ways that both neglect and ignore their relevance for the "material or technological culture", and over-emphasize ritualistic religion and personal ethics.

2.2. Environmental Issues and Islamic Conferences

During the last decade a great number of international Islamic conferences have been held, and some organizations established, to promote Islamic thought and education. The patronage of the Kings and Government of Saudi Arabia and, at their behest, of Saudi Arabian universities, is most conspicuous in these efforts. The intellectual leadership came significantly from young Muslim scholars, who were self-taught in Islamic ideological disciplines, but had formal, higher secular education in Western countries.

2.3. Islamic Science and Technology, and the Environment

In March 1975 the Islamic 'Solidarity Conference in Science and Technology' was hosted by the King Saud (formerly Riyadh) University, Riyadh. A principal idea promoted here was to establish an international organization to promote

Islamic science and technology. The successive Islamic Conferences of Foreign Ministers, Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), dealt with this subject. The Islamic Foundation for Science, Technology and Development (IFSTAD), and its Islamic Science Foundation, were established in 1979. The IFSTAD is only now becoming operational. In the meantime, the OIC/IFSTAD made some significant contributions in promoting Islamic environmental concerns. The "Report of the Organization of the Islamic Conference for the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development"⁴ called upon the Muslim countries, in one of its Recommendations, to: "... require reports on 'Islamic cultural impact of science and technology'. These impact statements should incorporate the evaluation of developmental projects according to Islamic criteria, and monitor consequences of projects concerning their impact on the Muslim society".

The Third Islamic Summit Conference, OIC, 1981, approved for IFSTAD a plan of action whose first "priority program" called for the establishment of "Programs or Institutions for Studies, Research, and Publications on Islamic Ethics and Values in Science and Technology for Development". One of its six major program subjects was "Environmental Studies and Islam"⁵.

2.4. Islamic Economics and the Environment

Islamic economics has been resurrected since the last great Islamic economic thinkers emerged about 500 years ago⁶. It is significant that Islamic economics has drawn the greatest effort in the last decade in the reconstruction of modern Islamic thought. This is largely due to the impetus provided by the First International Conference on Islamic Economics organized by the King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, 1976. This led to the establishment of the International Center for Research in Islamic Economics in this same university with a systematic program of studies, research, and publications⁷. Its major emphasis initially was on Islamic monetary and fiscal economics, but now the whole discipline is being developed through an international effort. A Department of Islamic Economics has been established in the Faculty of Shariah, Umm al-Qura University, Makkah; this was the first of its kind in an Islamic religious university. Studies and research have been initiated also in the Center for Islamic Studies, Egypt, and in the universities of Pakistan, Sudan, Jordan, Malaysia, etc. The International Association of Islamic Banks (Cairo) has started operating the International Institute of Islamic Banking and Economics at Lefkosa, Turkish Federated State of Kibris, and the Islamic Development Bank (Jeddah) is establishing (1983) an Islamic Research and Training Institute (Jeddah) for the development and application of Islamic thought in development economics, finance and banking.

These initial efforts have concentrated on understanding and clarification of basic Islamic principles, ideas and problems. The impact, particularly of Islamic economic ethics and policies, efficiency and welfare concepts, resource

allocation, etc. is bound to have decisive influence on development in conjunction with enhancement of the environment. It is just a matter of time before specialized studies and research on Islamic environmental economics are undertaken⁸.

2.5. Islamic Environmental Education

A revolutionary transformation is underway, though slowly, in the concept of "Islamic education". This is not to be restricted to a narrow "religious" sphere but is to replace all other ideologies and secularism by Islamic ideology in all disciplines. The First World Conference on Muslim Education, organized by the King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, 1977, the subsequent other World Conferences, and the establishment recently in Umm al-Qura University, Makkah, of the World Center for Islamic Education, embody this holistic concept of Islamic education⁹. The World Center is about to initiate an educational research and publications program on Islamic science and technology. One of the Center's seven major subject areas will be "Islamic environmental sciences and technology".

Four of the major Saudi Arabian universities have colleges of "environmental design" with individual departments of architecture, landscape architecture, regional and urban planning, etc. Some significant efforts are being made, on the institutional level as well as by individual professors, in their teaching and research programs to Islamize these and other environmental disciplines and programs. But very little effort has been made so far to publicize and publish such work regardless of the university or country where this has been done; the reasons for this are too numerous to be discussed here.

It might be concluded that Islamic environmental education and research most probably will be strongly developed in the coming years as present efforts bear fruit, and the new and older "Islamic universities" begin to live up to their names.

2.6. Towards Further Development of Islamic Environmental Thought

A pioneering work on Islamic environmental systems planning was published recently¹⁰. In May 1979, the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO), Cairo, proposed a project on "Islam, Environment and Development". It was abandoned as Egypt was excluded from the Arab League that year. However, in the light of the "working paper" I drafted for the project, some still ongoing research was undertaken by the author. This deals with water resources sciences and engineering (and the allied atmospheric and earth sciences), water law, wildlife, natural and man-made environmental disasters, etc.¹¹.

(In view of the systematic efforts started in recent years to develop Islamic social sciences as well as Islamic science and technology, it is proposed that a "Committee on Islamic Environmental Sciences" be formed; the respective proposal is presented in the annex to this paper).

3. ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT AND DEVELOPMENT

The dominant "cultural mentality" of Muslims during the last 600 years has been of the "ideational" or other-worldly type. A main effect of this has been Muslim relative backwardness in science, technology, and economic development. The worst impact of this has been on Muslim rural communities. The main idea behind Islamic revival today is to introduce Islamic ideology, ethics and values in all the natural and social sciences, and technology, and usher in an era of Islamic social justice and development. The application of these efforts, and the change in Muslims to bearers of "Islamic integrated cultural mentality", could lead to the growth of an "Islamic technological culture" as implied in the extract quoted at the beginning of this paper. The primary beneficiaries should be the rural and urban less-developed areas, and the people who become acquainted with this new Islamic thought. The challenge of the times is to support and accelerate these efforts, and harness them for the enhancement of the environment - the human "inner self" whose enlightenment alone can lead to a universally beneficial state of the natural environment.

Notes:

- 1) Quran, 30:4.
- 2) The Message of the Quran, translated and explained by Muhammad Asad. Gibraltar: Dar al Andalus Ltd., 1980, pp.623 f, n. 39.
- 3) The most famous collection of the attributed sayings of the Prophet is The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari, 9 Volumes, translated by M.M.Khan, Gujranwala, Pakistan: Sethi Straw Mills Ltd., 1971, and Chicago: Kazi Publications, 4th ed., 1979.

On environmental subjects see specific "Books", "Chapters", and their parts dealing with agriculture and water (Vol.3, Books 39, 40), wildlife (Vol.7, Books 67, 78), etc.

An Arabic concordance that can be used as a source of information on environmental topics and key words occurring in fourteen principal works on the Sunnah and the Prophet's biography is M.M.Fuad Abdul Baqi: Miftāh Kunūz al-Sunnah, Lahore: Idarah Tarjuman al-Sunnah, reprint of 1353

A.H. / 1934 A.C. edition.

- 4) OIC document: Annex II to ICFM / 10-79/CS/D.7, same as the document of the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development, A/CONF. 81/BP/IGO/14, p.42.
The Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) is an intergovernmental organization of 42 Muslim states (including Palestine), the headquarters of which are at P.O. Box 178, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. It has developed into a virtual "Muslim United Nations Organization" with many subsidiary bodies concerned also with environmental subjects.
- 5) OIC: Explanatory Note on the Islamic Science Foundation, IFSTAD, Third Islamic Summit Conference, Makkah, Saudi Arabia, 25-28 January 1981 (Doc.IS/3-81/CS/D.2). This document had been approved by the 11th Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers, OIC, 17-21 May, 1980 (Doc. IS/3-81/FM/CS/D.2).
- 6) Except perhaps for Shah Waliullah of Delhi (d.1176 H/1762 A.D.) no Islamic economic thinkers of great calibre emerged since Taqiuddin al-Maqrizi (d. 845 H/1441 A.D.) and his teacher, Ibn Khaldun (d.808 H/1404 A.D.). See M.N.Siddiqi: *Recent Works on History of Economic Thought in Islam*, Jeddah: International Center for Research in Islamic Economics, 1982.
- 7) The major English publications of the Center (King Abdul Aziz University, P.O.Box 1540, Jeddah) are: K.Ahmad (ed.): *Studies in Islamic Economics*, 1976; M.Iqbal and F.Kahn: *A Survey of Issues and a Programme for Research in Monetary and Fiscal Economics of Islam*, 1981; M.N.Siddiqi: *Muslim Economic Thinking*, 1981; M.Ariff (ed.): *Monetary and Fiscal Economics of Islam: Selected Papers*, 1982.
- 8) For example, see S.A.West and S.W.A.Husaini: *Evaluation and Sensitivity Analysis Program: Pilot Application to Saudi-Islamic Environmental Assessment*, in: *Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences*, 1:237-49 (1981).
- 9) See the seven volumes: *Crisis in Muslim Education*; *Aims and Objectives of Islamic Education*; *Social and Natural Sciences: The Islamic Perspective*; *Curriculum and Teacher Education*; *Education and Society in the Muslim World*; *Philosophy, Literature and Fine Arts*; and *Muslim Education in the Modern World* (Islamic Education Series, Syed Ali Ashraf, General Editor); Sevenoaks, Kent: Hodder and Staughton, and Jeddah: King Abdul Aziz University, 1977-83. Also see other publications of the World Center for Islamic Education, Umm al-Qura University, P.O.Box 1034, Makkah.
- 10) Husaini, S.W.A.: *Islamic Environmental Systems Engineering*, London: Macmillan, and Indianapolis: Amer Trust Publ., 1980; also the translation into Malaysian, etc.
- 11) The planned publications (English-Arabic versions) are: "Water Resources Sciences and Engineering and the Quran"; "Shariah of Water Resources Sciences and Engineering"; "Environmental Disasters in the Quran"; "Economics in the Quran"; "Shariah of Economics"; "Wildlife in the Quran"; "Shariah of Wildlife"; and "Shariah of Water Law".

ANNEX

Proposal for Developing the Islamic Environmental Sciences

Introduction

Modern sciences and technology have enabled man, vis-à-vis the natural environment, to become the dominant element capable of both ultimate destruction or supreme benefit. The limited resources of the earth, its fragile ecology, and the capacity of modern industrial man have made thoughtful men realize, at last, that it may not be possible to sustain for too long the current patterns of production and consumption of the goods and services that the industrialized world has enjoyed so far. These may never be provided to the growing number of humans among the industrially backward nations and the economically poor peoples. However, further growth is possible to achieve and sustain for each individual and every nation on the earth only in the realms of intellectual culture.

Muslims cannot and should not accept material destitution as a virtue of necessity reserved only for them. Muslims have a responsibility towards themselves, mankind, and all creatures of the biosphere; they have to re-discover, and present for modern times, an Islamic program for development and environment.

Scope

The terms "environment" and "development" have different meanings in the Islamic concepts of God, man and the universe. "Environment" is both the inner self (al-nafs) and universe. The common term for "purity" and "growth" in the Quran is zakāh (tazkiyyah). Thus development is selective production of goods and services as well as growth and self-purification of individuals and society in ethical quality. Development, therefore, is a holistic concept in the Quran whose practical elucidation is obtained from the sayings and life of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah).

The application of Islamic science and technology should be guided by the Islamic concept of "welfare" (falāḥ) or "universal common good" (al-maṣlaḥah al-kāffah). This is defined as the enhancement of six universal values or principles (kullīyyāt): Islamic ideology and ethics, life, reason, dignity, posterity, and wealth (al-dīn, ḥayāt, 'aql, 'irḍ, naṣl, māl). Economic development must be based on an approved ranking of human wants. These were described by Al-Ghazali (d.505 A.H./1111 A.D.) and Al-Shatibi (d.790 A.H./1388 A.D.) as "necessities", "conveniences", and "refinements" (darūriyyāt, ḥājiyyāt, takmīliyyāt).

The normative scope and content of environmental sciences are determined

by the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah), and the Islamic intellectual heritage from the earliest to contemporary times. The functional scope could be defined by both Islamic perspectives and by the subjects and problem areas identified by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

Methodology

A project on Islamic environmental sciences should be conceived as a "studies" and "research" project, aiming at publications and dissemination of results in many languages. The ultimate goal should be to continuously channel the product of these studies and research into educational curricula and instructional materials, communication media, and public policies and activities.

A "Committee on Islamic Environmental Sciences" to be formed could comprise specialists from the two traditional divisions, the Islamic normative and ideological sciences (al-'ulūm al-shar'iyyah), and the universally common rational sciences (al-'ulūm al-'aqliyyah). As a first priority, based on a detailed outline of the "normative" and "functional" scopes, potential contributors should produce an anthology on "Islam, Environment and Development". Besides the "specialists", there should be also "specialists-generalists" who can contribute on the Islamic philosophy of "environment" and "development" as a framework for subsequent chapters on specific issues and problem areas.

It might be proper to limit a "Volume I" to only the Quran and the Sunnah as sources of facts, values and ideology both to conserve effort and develop a methodology of creative and original interpretation of these two basic sources of Islamic thought. This volume should be considered "a creative interpretation of Islamic fundamental ideas" (ijtihad fi al-Sharī'ah) concerning environmental sciences.

A "Volume II" could deal with the Islamic human understanding (fiqh) of environmental sciences, but cover the same ground as "Volume I". It could be a history of Islamic environmental thought. It should summarize the writings of the great Islamic thinkers of the last 1400 years on Islam, environment and development. This "Volume" could actually consist of a series of monographs, starting with the works of the earliest Islamic scholars. This series could be entitled: "Great Ideas on Islamic Environmental Sciences and Development".

As a prelude to the above "Volumes", and as an essential part of the work in that direction, work should begin to prepare and publish "Source Books" and "An Annotated Bibliography" on Islam, environment, and development.

Program of Action

1. The proposed "Committee on Islamic Environmental Sciences" should determine its own organization, scope, and work.

2. The Committee should seek cooperation and collaboration with the Islamic and Arab international organizations and universities as well as other international organizations. The former should include, for example, the Arab League Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ALESCO); the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (IESCO); the Islamic Foundation for Science, Technology, and Development (IFSTAD), their parent body being the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, Jeddah); International Center for Research and Studies in Islamic Economics (King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah); and the World Center for Islamic Education (Umm al-Qura University, Makkah). The latter could include, for example, the relevant UN agencies and organizations such as the UNEP, UNESCO, UN Financing System for Science and Technology for Development, and the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU).
3. The Committee should explore the possibility of becoming a sub-committee of the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment (SCOPE).
4. The Committee could consider adoption of the proposed studies and research program described in this proposal in collaboration with the above mentioned organizations.