

# Islamic Environmental Ethics: Preserving The Sacred Balance

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## ABSTRACT

Islamic environmental ethics derive from the theological underpinnings of Islam, highlighting the interconnections of all the elements in the universe. Rooted in the concept of Tawhid, a central tenet in Islamic theology, these ethics underscore the belief in the Oneness of God as the creator of the entire universe. Currently, we find ourselves in a world where persistent human actions are causing detrimental impacts on our environment. Anthropogenic activities, including water pollution, air pollution, and land pollution, coupled with inhumane treatment towards other living beings, contribute to the widespread destruction of numerous species, organisms, water bodies, land areas, the ozone layer, and various natural resources. This collective behavior poses a significant threat to the delicate balance of our ecosystems. Environmental challenges have become unavoidable, exacerbated by a general lack of public awareness and the escalating environmental harm caused by irresponsible actions. Islamic environmental ethics offer a framework of principles and moral standards aimed at ensuring the preservation and well-being of the natural environment. This paper aims to explore the Islamic perspective on the environment, encompassing both biotic and abiotic components. It will delve into the principles of environmental ethics in Islam, elucidating the role assigned to human beings in this perspective. Furthermore, it will examine Islam's attitude towards the environment, addressing issues related to natural resources and emphasizing the responsibility of humans to act as conscientious stewards of the Earth.

The research methodology employed in this study on Islamic environmental ethics involves a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach aimed at exploring the philosophical, theological, and practical dimensions of the subject matter. The methodology encompasses the following key components:

**Literature Review:** The research begins with an extensive review of existing literature on Islamic environmental ethics, drawing from academic sources, scholarly articles, books, and religious texts. This review provides a foundational understanding of the key concepts, principles, and debates within the field.

**Textual Analysis:** The Qur'an and prophetic traditions (Hadith) serve as primary sources for Islamic environmental ethics. A detailed textual analysis is conducted to examine relevant verses, narratives, and teachings that address humanity's relationship with the environment, ethical responsibilities, and stewardship principles.

**Comparative Analysis:** The study involves a comparative analysis of Islamic environmental ethics with other ethical frameworks, philosophies, and religious traditions. This comparative approach helps identify similarities, differences, and unique contributions of Islamic perspectives on environmental stewardship.

**Ethical Considerations:** Throughout the research process, ethical considerations are paramount, particularly when interpreting religious texts and engaging with diverse perspectives. Respect for cultural sensitivities, religious beliefs, and ethical principles guides the conduct of the study and ensures the integrity of the research findings.

**Synthesis and Analysis:** The findings from the literature review, textual analysis, interviews, surveys, and case studies are synthesized and analyzed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to Islamic environmental ethics. This process involves critical reflection, interpretation, and synthesis of diverse sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

By employing a multidisciplinary research methodology that integrates textual analysis, comparative study, qualitative research, and ethical considerations, this study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Islamic environmental ethics and provide practical insights for environmental advocacy, policy development, and community engagement.

**Keywords:** Environment, Ethical, Trustee, Sustainable, Vicegerent, Nature, Ecology

## INTRODUCTION

The environment encompasses the surroundings and circumstances in which individuals, animals, and plants reside. On a broader scale, elements such as the sun, moon, sea, earth, forests, deserts, etc., collectively form the backdrop for the existence of humans and all living organisms. However, when examining it more closely, one's conduct, attitudes, and interactions contribute to shaping their immediate environment.

Living in an unsanitary, overcrowded, and polluted location can lead to physical, psychological, and mental health issues. A prosperous individual molds their surroundings through positive practices and constructive thinking, fostering a healthy lifestyle. Ethics underscores the importance of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness for all, recognizing humans as the sole self-reflective and deliberative moral agents on Earth.

The Qur'an says, "*And your Lord taught the Bee to build its cell in hills, on trees, and in (human) habitats.*"<sup>1</sup>

The ethical benevolence of individuals begins within the family unit and extends outward to the broader community in a virtuous circle. In Muslim society, this compassion even encompasses animals and plants. The Qur'an encapsulates the ideal ethical value in the concept of *Taqwa*, representing the encompassing human quality that embodies ethical principles.

The Qur'an says, "*O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)*"<sup>2</sup> The Muslim Ummah functions as the means through which Qur'anic ideals and commands are put into practice on a societal level. Environmental ethics, a philosophical discipline, delves into the moral connections between humans and their environment, encompassing nonhuman elements. It commences with human concerns about maintaining a quality environment and extends to encompass humanity's interactions with animals, plants, species, and ecosystems.

Islamic environmental ethics is grounded in the legal principles established by God, which Muslims consider as the foundations of Shariah. These principles are delineated in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Fiqh. The divine nature of these legal guidelines aligns with human conscience, earning approval and

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Quran 16:68-69

<sup>2</sup> Al-Quran 49:13

recognition as inherently correct. Consequently, the law becomes ingrained in the human conscience, ensuring its application and success. In Islam, the environment is perceived as God's creation, and protecting it is tantamount to preserving its intrinsic values as reflections of the Creator.<sup>3</sup>

According to a tradition, Prophet Muhammad taught that “*all creatures are like a family of God, and He loves the most those who are the most beneficent to His family*”.<sup>4</sup>

## ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Contemporary environmental concerns, encompassing issues related to water, soil, air, and climate, are alarming. Despite the gravity of the situation, efforts to address pollution and environmental degradation have largely adhered to conventional approaches. To address these challenges effectively, a transformative shift is imperative. Experts identify three primary factors contributing to environmental damage: the human perspective on themselves, nature, and their role in ecosystems; economic and political factors favoring polluting industries; and religious misconceptions attributing disasters solely to divine will, absolving human responsibility.

There is a consensus among experts that a paradigm shift, particularly in education, is essential. This shift aims to foster environmental sophistication and serves as a strategic and ideological initiative to enhance understanding. The goal is to cultivate a new awareness that motivates individuals and communities to uphold ecological balance. Stressing a pro-environment perspective in individual mobilization is crucial. Consequently, establishing environmental leadership capable of influencing individuals and organizations towards a vision of long-term ecological sustainability becomes paramount.

Efforts to raise awareness are vital in preventing environmental damage. While humans are designated as Khalifa or stewards of the Earth, it does not grant unchecked authority to exploit nature without considering ecological equilibrium. Education is regarded as a pivotal and strategic tool to shape a cultured and environmentally responsible society, promoting the idea that humans should act as custodians rather than exploiters of the environment.<sup>5</sup>

## ETHICAL APPROACHES TOWARDS ENVIRONMENT

In ethical discussions surrounding the central values and evaluative foundations related to the treatment of the natural environment, a spectrum of perspectives emerges, reflecting efforts to extend moral consideration to nature and the non-human world. Key approaches include conservationism, preservationism, social ecology, animal rights, land ethic, deep ecology, ecofeminism, stewardship, sustainable development, and sustainability.

Conservationism and preservationism are often linked to resources, a utilitarian ethical stance prioritizing the maximization of human welfare by viewing nature as a vast resource pool. Conservationism advocates for protecting environmental components based on their known economic value, employing cost-benefit analysis and market imperatives. Preservationism, in contrast, rejects strict economic valuation and

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<sup>3</sup>Mian, H. S., Ata ur Rahman, *Environmental Ethics of Islam*, Hazara Islamicus, July to December 2013 (2-2) 27, pp. 27-28

<sup>4</sup> Mishkat al-Masabih, 3:1392

<sup>5</sup>Hidayat, A., and Priatna H., *Environmental Management of the Islamic Perspective*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, volume 261 International Conference on Islamic Education (ICIE 2018) Faculty of Tarbiya, Bandung, Indonesia, pp. 116-117

advocates for natural preservation to safeguard species diversity and maintain aesthetically pleasing natural systems.

Social ecology posits that ecological challenges stem from deep-rooted social issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature and society. It argues that ecological problems are manifestations of societal problems, proposing a holistic approach to address both. Social ecology critiques a narrow positivist view of rationality, suggesting a reconciliation with the aesthetic, moral, and expressive aspects of human nature to address ecological destruction.

Animal rights assign intrinsic value to life, contemplating ethical considerations and respect for animals. Advocates argue that some non-human animals possess consciousness, self-awareness, and reasoning capabilities, and deserve ethical rights. They challenge the perception of animals as mere resources and emphasize the need to recognize the rights of certain animals.

Land ethic asserts that conscience initially applied among individuals, should be extended to encompass the land. It shifts the role of humans from conquerors to members and citizens of the land community, promoting respect for fellow members and the entire ecological community. Land ethic enlarges the community's boundaries to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, emphasizing that actions are right when they preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community and wrong when they do otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

## ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Islamic environmental ethics are rooted in the theological foundations of Islam, highlighting the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. The central belief of *Tawhid*, emphasizing the Oneness of God in creation, plays a crucial role. Islamic cosmology underscores the significance of the natural environment, encouraging Muslims to reflect on its beauty and complexity to deepen their spiritual connection with God. The Qur'an and prophetic traditions portray the natural world as a manifestation of God's power and wisdom. Specific guidance in the Qur'an instructs humans on their interaction with the environment, urging them to be stewards of the earth and maintain equilibrium.

The Qur'anic concept of *Khalifah*, signifying humans as vicegerents, underscores their responsibility to care for the earth and preserve its resources for future generations. Integrated into the *Tawhid*, *Khilafah*, *Amanah*, and *Akhirah* concepts, Islamic environmental ethics emphasize a commitment to preserving and protecting the earth as a sacred trust. The concept of *Tawhid*, foundational to Islamic theology, underscores the Oneness of God and the interconnectedness of all creation. This understanding influences how Muslims perceive and engage with the world, fostering a view of the universe as a unified and harmonious whole where each component serves a unique function. As each element in the natural world possesses inherent worth, it is deemed suitable to show reverence and safeguard it. The phrase from the Quran that reads, “*There is no creature on earth but that which has its provision from Allah, and He knows its place of habitation and place of storage.*”<sup>7</sup> reflects this viewpoint.

Islamic environmental ethics emphasize that humans are an integral part of nature, rather than separate entities. As a result, it is incumbent upon individuals to safeguard and sustain the ecosystem, prevent pollution and environmental degradation, preserve biodiversity, and use natural resources responsibly. The

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<sup>6</sup>Sarvestani, A. A., Shahvali, M., (2008) *Environmental Ethics: Toward an Islamic Perspective*, Shiraz University, Iran, p. 611

<sup>7</sup> Al-Quran, 11:6

concept of *Tawhid* underscores the significance of preserving harmony and equilibrium in the natural world. Muslims believe that when Allah created the world, it was in a state of balance and order, and it is our responsibility to uphold that balance.

As Allah says in the holy Qur'an:

*“And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance. That you not transgress within the balance. And establish weight in justice and do not make deficient the balance.”*<sup>8</sup>

The theoretical underpinning of Islamic environmental ethics centers on the concept of *Tawhid*, emphasizing the interconnections of the cosmos and the intrinsic value of all creation. Maintaining equilibrium and harmony in daily life is crucial, forming the basis for responsible and sustainable use of natural resources, as well as the preservation of biodiversity. In Islamic cosmology, the balance of the natural world is considered fundamental to the overall harmony of the cosmos. Islamic environmental ethics are rooted in the belief that Allah created the Earth as a balanced and harmonious habitat for all living beings. This perspective views the world as a living organism, where the well-being of both humans and the environment is interdependent. The Qur'an and prophetic traditions underscore the importance of nature, emphasizing the obligation for people to protect and preserve it. In the Qur'an, the Earth is described as a "trust" (*Amanah*) given by Allah to humans and is also considered a "sign" (*ayah*) showcasing Allah's power and wisdom. The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said *“There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sow seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him.”*<sup>9</sup> This Hadith underscores the significance of environmental conservation in Islamic teachings. Islamic environmental ethics also incorporate the concept of *fitrah*, representing the inherent nature of humans, encompassing character, temperament, origin, religion, and innate potential, seen as a gift from Allah. Muslims believe that everyone is born with an inherent sense of morality, extending to nature. Islamic environmental ethics stress the need for harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, reflecting the innate responsibility Muslims feel toward the planet. The centrality of the natural world in Islamic cosmology forms the basis for Islamic environmental ethics, emphasizing the belief that the Earth was created as a balanced and harmonious habitat for all living beings. References to environmental stewardship in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions further highlight the imperative to protect and preserve the natural environment in Islamic theology.<sup>10</sup>

### **Man as Trustee and Vicegerent (*Khalifah*) of God on Earth**

As per Allah's designation, human uniqueness is marked by the role of *Khalifah* on Earth, denoting the responsibilities of a guardian or caretaker. *“And He it is Who has made you successors (vicegerent) in the land.”*<sup>11</sup> Humans stand out as the only creatures in the universe endowed with intellect. The Qur'an says, *“He taught Adam the names of all things.”*<sup>12</sup> The Qur'an emphasizes that humanity has been endowed with intellect and the ability to conceptualize. It encourages individuals to employ their intellectual faculties for the preservation, protection, and promotion of all living beings. Islam criticizes those who neglect their capacity for thinking, reasoning,

<sup>8</sup> Al-Quran, 55:7-9

<sup>9</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari 2320, Book 41, Hadith 01

<sup>10</sup> Hayat, I., Malik M. S., Ali M. W., Husnain M., Sharif M., Haleem A., *The role of Islamic environmental ethics in the alleviation of climate challenges and the preservation of ecosystem*, Russian law journal volume xi, 2023, pp. 398-99

<sup>11</sup> Al-Quran, 6:165

<sup>12</sup> Al-Quran, 2:31



and reflection, likening them to creatures devoid of understanding. The Qur'an describes such people as: "They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not and ears wherewith they hear not they are like cattle-may more misguided: for they are heedless of warning."<sup>13</sup> This interaction between creatures and their environment symbolically reinforces the Islamic belief that God created this interconnected system, emphasizing the importance of nurturing and maintaining all its elements.

The Qur'anic verse says, "There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on God: He knows the time and place of its temporary deposit: all is written in a perfect Record."<sup>14</sup>

Another verse of the Qur'an says, "And whatever creature that is in the skies and that is in the earth and the angels bow down to Allah and they do not consider themselves great. They fear their Fosterer above them and do what they are commanded".<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, every living being shares a connection with humans in their existence and shared submission to God. Consequently, it is incumbent upon humanity to show compassion towards animals and actively work towards the conservation of diverse species.<sup>16</sup>

### **Breaking the role of *Khalifa* and a Trustee on Earth**

The Qur'an portrays the concept of a *khalifa*, or trustee, as an individual entrusted by God with power and responsibility on Earth. This trustee is accountable for their actions towards fellow human beings, all living creatures, and the natural resources of the Earth. The primary purpose of this role is to serve and worship God by adhering to His laws, thus fulfilling the entrusted responsibility and seeking His pleasure.

However, the Qur'an warns that if a person misuses the power bestowed upon them and violates God's laws, they will face severe consequences, leading to their destruction and significant loss in the future. The idea of violating this trust is illustrated in the Qur'an through the frequent recitation of the histories of the people of Ad and *Thamud*.

Both Ad and *Thamud* were powerful Arab tribes in their respective times. The people of Ad were described as being "endowed abundantly with power," highlighting their strength and influence. Similarly, the people of *Thamud* were "settled firmly on Earth," indicating their stability and prosperity. Despite their power and blessings, these communities faced destruction and loss as a result of their disobedience to God's laws and the misuse of their entrusted authority.

In summary, the Qur'an emphasizes the role of a *khalifa* as a trustee on Earth, responsible for maintaining harmony with God's laws, serving humanity, and preserving the Earth's resources. The consequences of violating this trust are illustrated through the cautionary tales of powerful tribes like Ad and *Thamud*, serving as a reminder of the potential for destruction when one deviates from the path of righteousness and responsibility.

Allah says in the Qur'an: "Have you not considered how your Lord dealt with Ad, (The people of) Iram, possessors of lofty buildings, The like of which were not created in the (other) cities; And (with) *Thamud*, hewed out the rocks in the valley."<sup>17</sup>

The Qur'an issues a cautionary message for affluent and heavily urbanized nations, drawing parallels to historical examples such as Pharaoh, the people of *Madyan*, as well as *Yajoj* and *Majoj*. Despite their

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Quran, 7:179

<sup>14</sup> Al-Quran, 11-6

<sup>15</sup> Al-Quran, 16:49-50

<sup>16</sup> Mian, H. S., Ata ur Rahman, *Environmental Ethics of Islam*, Hazara Islamicus, July to December 2013 (2-2) 27, p. 28

<sup>17</sup> Al-Quran, 89:6-9

influence and prosperity, these societies are consistently referred to as the "mufsidin fil-Ard" or those who spread corruption and oppression on the Earth. The Qur'an highlights their eventual self-destruction as a consequence of their actions. *'Transgressed all bounds in the land'*<sup>18</sup> The individuals known as the *muffin fil-Ard*, who engage in spreading corruption, degradation, and ruin on Earth, have betrayed the trust (*amana*) bestowed upon them. This stands in stark opposition to the *khulafa fi'l-Ard*, who are considered God's appointed trustees on Earth.<sup>19</sup>

Allah says in the Qur'an *"Do not spread corruption on Earth after it has been so well ordered, (for) Behold what happened in the end to the spreaders of ruin"*<sup>20</sup>

Also at another place says *"Mischief (fasad) has appeared on land and sea of the deeds that hands of men have earned. That God may give them a taste of some of their deeds, so that they may turn back from evil"*<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of Islamic environmental ethics reveals a profound connection between faith, stewardship, and ecological responsibility. Rooted in the theological principles of Islam, these ethics emphasize the intrinsic value of all creation and the interconnectedness of the universe. Central to this framework is the concept of Tawhid, which underscores the Oneness of God and the harmonious balance of the natural world.

Islamic teachings encourage humanity to recognize its role as Khalifah, or trustee, on Earth, entrusted with the care and preservation of the environment. This responsibility extends beyond mere stewardship to include a moral imperative to safeguard the Earth's resources for future generations. The Qur'an and prophetic traditions provide specific guidance on interactions with the environment, emphasizing principles of conservation, sustainability, and compassion towards all living beings. Islamic environmental ethics reject notions of exploitation and disregard for the natural world. Instead, they advocate for a holistic approach that integrates spiritual values with practical actions to address contemporary environmental challenges. This includes promoting awareness, education, and collective action to mitigate pollution, preserve biodiversity, and promote ecological balance.

The ethical underpinnings of Islam emphasize the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, highlighting the importance of responsible behavior and accountability for environmental stewardship. The consequences of neglecting this responsibility are underscored through cautionary tales in the Qur'an, illustrating the potential for self-destruction when individuals deviate from ethical principles. Islamic environmental ethics offer a comprehensive framework for addressing environmental issues in alignment with spiritual values. By embracing the principles of stewardship, sustainability, and reverence for creation, Muslims can contribute to the preservation of the Earth and the well-being of all living beings, fulfilling their role as trustees of God's creation.

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Qur'an 89: 11–12

<sup>19</sup> Al-Damkhi, A. M., *Environmental ethics in Islam: principles, violations, and future perspectives*, International Journal of Environmental Studies ISSN: 0020-7233 (Print), 1029-0400 (Online), P. 18

<sup>20</sup> Al-Quran, 7:85-86

<sup>21</sup> Al-Quran, 30:41

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