

Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust Inviting Balanced Stewardship

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Introduction

The Qur'an, Islam's primary authority in all matters of individual and communal life, as well as theology and worship, tells of an offer of global trusteeship that was presented by God to the Heavens, the Earth, and the Mountains (Sura 33:72), but they refused to shoulder the responsibility out of fear. Humankind seized the opportunity and bore the "trust" (*amana*), but they were "unjust and very ignorant." Even so, God through mercy has guided and enabled humankind in bearing the responsibility of the *amana*, although they have in the process also been subjected to punishment for their hypocrisy and unbelief. The Qur'an, however, is clear that God is the ultimate holder of dominion over the creation (e.g., Sura 2:107, 5:120), and that all things return to Him (Sura 24:42) and are thus accountable each in their own ways. There is, in the Qur'an and in the teachings and example of the Prophet Muhammad, preserved in a literary form known as Hadith, much with which to construct an authentic Islamic environmental ethic that both sustains what Muslims have achieved traditionally in this direction and leaves open a wide avenue for creative and innovative solutions in the contemporary context.

With respect to humankind's stewardship of the earth, the privilege entails a profound responsibility. Other living species are also considered by the Qur'an to be "peoples or communities" (*ummas*; Sura 6:38). The creation

itself, in all its myriad diversity and complexity, may be thought of as a vast universe of “signs” of God’s power, wisdom, beneficence, and majesty. The whole creation praises God by its very being (Sura 59:24; compare with 64:1).

“With Him are the keys (to the treasures) of the Unseen that no one knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the earth’s shadows, not a thing, freshly green or withered, but it is (inscribed) in a clear record” (Sura 6:59).

According to the Qur’an, the creation of the cosmos is a greater reality than the creation of humankind (Sura 40:57), but human beings have been privileged to occupy a position even higher than the angels as vicegerents of God on the earth. Even so, they share with all animals an origin in the common substance, water (Sura 24:45), and they will return to the earth from which they came. The idea of human vicegerency on earth has drawn much criticism in environmental ethics, principally since the publication of an influential article by historian Lynn White some thirty years ago (1). Muslims, as well as Jews and Christians, have had to face the intrinsic problems of such a position, historically as well as in contemporary global economic, political, and social life. But Muslims are reflecting on their fundamental and enduring religious teachings and discovering theological and moral bases for an environmental ethics that have been present, whether explicitly or implicitly, both in their sacred textual traditions and in their habits of heart, thinking, public administration, and daily life since Islam’s founding (2). A common conviction among Muslims in this discourse is that nature is not independently worthwhile but derives its value from God.

The earth is mentioned some 453 times in the Qur’an, whereas sky and the heavens are mentioned only about 320 times. Islam does understand the earth to be subservient to humankind but it should not be administered and exploited irresponsibly. There is a strong sense of the goodness and purity of the earth. Clean dust may be used for ablutions before prayer if clean water is not available. The Prophet Muhammad said that: “The earth has been created for me as a mosque and as a means of purification.” So there is a sacrality to the earth which is a fit place for human’s service of God, whether in formal ceremonies or in daily life. A former United States Secretary of the Interior said stewardship of the

environment was not really such an urgent matter in light of the prophesied destruction of the natural order on doomsday. In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad said, “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand he should plant it” (3).

Muslims envision heaven as a beautiful garden which the Qur’an describes in many places. If life on earth is preparation for eternal life in heaven, then the loving care of the natural environment would seem to be appropriate training for the afterlife in the company of God and the angels in an environment that is perfectly balanced, peaceful, and verdant. Muslims believe that all generations will be gathered together at the Last Judgment and that in heaven the saved will enjoy the company of generations of faithful Muslims who have been rewarded with a blessed afterlife. Whether one plants a palm shoot as the end is closing in or invests in an environmentally sound way of life for the sake of her/his posterity, it comes to the same thing: serving God through a stewardship that reflects what the Qur’an throughout sets forth as God’s generosity, mercy, and guidance in the first place. As the Divine Saying so beloved by Sufis declares concerning God’s reason for creating the universe: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I wanted to be known, so I created creatures in order to be known by them” (4). Community between God and His creatures does not end with death; rather it truly begins with the Afterlife, according to Islamic belief. In a stirring passage describing the end of the world, the Qur’an details the destruction of the natural and familiar world and then declares: “When Hell shall be set blazing; and when the Garden is brought near—then shall each soul know what it has produced” (Sura 81:12–13).

“Do you not observe that God sends down rain from the sky, so that in the morning the earth becomes green?” (Sura 22:63). The color green is the most blessed of all colors for Muslims and, together with a profound sense of the value of nature as God’s perfect and most fruitful plan, provides a charter for a green movement that could become the greatest exertion yet known in Islamic history, a “green *jihad*” appropriate for addressing the global environmental crisis (5).

About This Author

Frederick M. Denny is Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies and History of Religions at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has conducted field research on Qur'anic recitation, Muslim popular ritual, and characteristics of contemporary Muslim societies in Egypt, Indonesia, and Malaysia. His current research includes Muslim community formation in North America, and Muslim human rights discourses. His college level textbook *An Introduction to Islam, Third Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Printice Hall, 2005) is widely used and his University of South Carolina Press series, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, publishes pioneering books on diverse subjects. He serves on the editorial boards of *The Muslim World*, *The Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, and *Studies in Contemporary Islam*. He also has served on the board of directors of the American Academy of Religion for 11 years (1992-1997, 2001-2007). He published with John Corrigan, Carlos M. N. Eire, and Martin S. Jaffee, *Jews, Christians, Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to Monotheistic Religions* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998), together with a related anthology, *Readings in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1998). He co-edited, with Richard C. Foltz and Azizan Baharuddin, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). He is lead editor for the second edition of *Atlas of the World's Religions* (Forthcoming, 2007 from Laurence King Publishing Ltd. and Oxford University Press).

Endnotes

1. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967) 1203-1207. See the critical response to White by Patrick Dobell, "The Judaeo-Christian Stewardship Attitude to Nature," *Christian Century* (12 October 1977). There is much in Dobell's article that would apply to Islam too, as a cognate "Abrahamic" tradition.
2. For a brief survey of Islamic environmental ethical principles and a sense of both what Islam and Muslims have embraced in the past and are

engaged in sustaining and developing further today, see Mawil Y. Izzi Deen (Samarrai), "Islamic Environmental Ethics, Law, and Society," in *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response*, J. Ronald Engel and Joan Gibb Engel, eds. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1990) 189–98; and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Environmental Crisis," in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue*, Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder, eds. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 85–107.

3. Quoted from Mawil Y. Izzi Deen, "Islamic Environmental Ethics," loc. cit., 194. The author comments that "Even when all hope is lost, planting should continue for planting is good in itself. The planting of the palm shoot continues the process of development and will sustain life even if one does not anticipate any benefit from it. In this, the Muslim is like the soldier that fights to the last bullet." This is the deeper meaning of *jihad* as "exertion" in the service of God.

4. "Divine Saying" is a translation of the Arabic *hadith qudsi*, an utterance inspired by God but expressed verbally by the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is held by Muslims to be completely God's composition, which the Prophet faithfully transmitted orally after receiving it through a revelatory process.

5. For this idea, I am indebted to Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Toward an Islamic Ecotheology," *Hamdard Islamicus*, XVIII, no. 1 (1995) 40. Frustrated with the traditional theological practices of many contemporary Muslim thinkers, the author calls for an "alternative Islamic theology" or perhaps even a "theological detour" based on Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition (Hadith) that are not shackled by the "common obliviousness, on the part of leading Shi'ite jurists [and by extension to other legal schools], to ecological insights."

Source: <http://fore.yale.edu/religion/islam/>