

# Preserving Paradise Through Religious Values of Nature: The Islamic Approach

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**Abstract**—At the root of our contemporary ecological crisis is a mindset that disregards the Lordship, Sovereignty, Power, Control, and Will of God in the universe. The Islamic world view and civilization centers around the Oneness of Allah or God. Nature is Allah's creation, it is a sacred gift for our living planet, and it is through the wonders of nature that one begins to appreciate the unique power and singular majesty of God. The human being, God's trustee on Earth, is responsible for treating the environment with care, love, and respect. In her/his capacity as God's trustee, the human being must ensure that natural resources are used in a judicious manner so that future generations will benefit from God's bounties.

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## The Islamic Approach

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In Islam, nature is God's handiwork, which contains His bounties meant for human use and enjoyment within the limits set by Divine Law. Nature is therefore not a resource without an owner, for God is the Owner of nature. The *Qur'an* contains numerous verses (*ayat*) that reassert this idea that the universe is Allah's creation and that His Dominion over all that is created is absolute (Ali 1991). For example:

To God belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth  
And God has power over all things.  
(*Surah Ali-Imran*, [The Family of Imran], chapter 3, verse 189)

And again:

Unto God belongs all that is in the heavens and all  
That is on earth.  
(*Surah Al Rum*, [The Romans], chapter 30, verse 26)

The *Qur'an* declares that the creation of the universe, of nature, and of the human being is purposive or teleological and that these are signs (*ayat*) of God's Existence, Power, Wisdom, and Purpose (Ali 1991). It states:

Behold! In the creations of the heaven and the earth, and the  
Alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for  
All who are endowed with insight.  
(*Surah Ali Imran*, chapter 3, verse 190)

And again:

And in the succession of night and day, and in the means  
Of subsistence which God sends down from the skies,  
Thereby giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless  
And in the change of the winds: These are signs  
For people who use their intellect.  
(*Al Jathiyah* [The Kneeling Down] chapter 45, verse 5)

In the Islamic world view, the universe, the Earth and their contents are made subservient to the human being, but not in the sense that the human being can do with it what she/he likes. Rather, the position of the human being is one of trusteeship (*khilafah*), and this position carries with it great moral responsibility. As the trustee of God on Earth, the human being is responsible for treating the environment with care, love, and respect, as well as ensuring that the planet's natural resources are used in a judicious manner so that future generations will benefit from God's bounties. Again, the *Qur'an* speaks:

O mankind! Worship your Sustainer, who has created you  
And those who lived before you, so that you may  
Remain conscious of your duty towards Him  
Who has made the earth a resting place for you and  
The sky a canopy, and has sent down water from the sky  
And thereby brought forth fruits for your sustenance.  
(*Al Baqarah* [The Heifer] chapter 2, verse 21-22)

Indeed, the erythrina leaf or Umsinsi, which is the emblem of the Wilderness Leadership School, symbolizes the relationships between homo, terra, and Deus (the human being, Earth, and God). To fulfill God's trust, in relation to both the environment and the community, the human being must abide by those values and principles of life and living that lie at the very core of God's eternal message to humanity. What this means is that mercy, love, and compassion should guide the human being in her/his interaction with the environment and the community. She/he should hold in check greed and avarice and that all too human tendency to pursue selfish interests to the detriment of her/his fellow human beings. A moderate lifestyle that reflects balance and equilibrium is the most cherished value of the Islamic world view.

This leads to the question: What is the purpose of the human being on Earth, what is the purpose of life? One cannot discuss this question in any detail in this paper, but suffice it to say that, in the context of the environment and of nature, the Islamic world view postulates that the life of the human being is subject to a perpetual test by God regarding the human being's behavior toward, and utilization of, all God-given, natural resources (both material and nonmaterial). Are there, then, any principles or values in terms of which the human being should be guided by in her/his utilization of the planet's natural resources?

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One—perhaps it is the essence—of the fundamental principles of Islam is Balance or *Meezan*. This idea, applied to environmental ethics, requires an equilibrium between material progress or economic development on the one hand and the protection and conservation of the environment on the other. Harith bin Khelef, the Chief Mufti of Zanzibar, pointed to the need of Islam to put human beings and other organisms in good order, balance. If not, then there would be mischief and disaster on our planet. Indeed, the fall of nations and kingdoms is, from an Islamic viewpoint, a consequence of the human being's ingratitude to God. An example is the parable of an ungrateful nation, the kingdom of Sheba in Southwestern Arabia. In the *Qur'anic* chapter, appropriately entitled *Saba* or Sheba, we find the following (Ali 1991):

Indeed in the beauty of their homeland the people of Sheba had  
Evidence of God's Grace—two vast expanses of gardens  
saying,  
"Eat of what your Sustainer has provided for you, and render  
Thanks unto Him: a land most goodly, a Sustainer  
Much-Forgiving."  
But they turned away from Us, and so We let loose upon them  
A flood that overwhelmed the dams and transformed their two  
Vast expanses of gardens into gardens yielding bitter fruits  
Tamarisks and a few lote-trees.  
(Verses 15-19; see also *Al Nahl* [Bees], chapter 16, verses  
112–113)

The Islamic world view, through the principle or idea of *Meezan* (Balance), establishes an equilibrium between economic development and environmental protection. However, the practical implementation of this idea has declined within the Islamic world. What are the reasons for this decline? Very briefly, five reasons can be outlined:

1. Ossification within religious civilizations, which very often creates a situation whereby the underlying values and true spirit are forgotten or set aside and, instead, static laws and antiquated practices are projected as the defining characteristics of a particular faith.

2. The dominant pervasive power and influence of Western secular civilization in the contemporary world. The secularization of society, which has its roots in the European Renaissance, reached its peak in the twentieth century with the acceptance that religion is a private matter and has nothing to do with issues in the public realm, including the community's relationship with the environment.

3. The rise of a secular world view has seen the dramatic expansion of a global economy, which emphasizes the maximization of profits, the penetration of markets, and the attainment of high growth rates with little attention being accorded to balanced development and ethical values.

4. Many of the elites in the South, who are either the direct products of colonial education or the indirect products of neocolonial cultural and media indoctrination, possess meager knowledge of what their religious philosophies say about the environment or about the human being's role as God's trustee on Earth, or about the nexus between God (the Creator), the natural environment, and human values. As a result, many planners, public administrators, academics, professionals, teachers, and journalists are in no position to address wilderness, environment, and development from a religious or spiritual perspective.

5. Even if there are groups capable of articulating the religious world view, there is no guarantee that they will rise to the defense of the environment or espouse the cause of balanced development, especially if their own interests or others associated with them are involved. Vested interests linked to wealth, power, and status have always subverted sublime values and altruistic ideals. This is why, in today's world, the greatest threat to the practice of harmonious relations with the environment is the demon of self-serving interests appearing in some guise.

Indeed, the degradation of the environment is the result of the human being's disregard of God's Guidance on the Management of His Resources. I believe that there lies within a God-centered world view an indisputable strength. This is why there should and must be a concerted effort to educate society on the significance of a God-centered world view, not just for the sake of the environment or for the sake of balanced development but, more importantly, for the sake of the future of humanity itself (Fatimah and Rahman 1995; Tyndale 2001).

What is urgently and desperately required in our world is a paradigm shift from a materialistic, secularistic world view to an integralistic, transcendentalist world view, a world view that all religions postulate (Hassan 1995). This paradigm implies, *inter alia*, that:

1. Human and natural resources are God-given bounties (*ni'mah*) and constitutive of the Divine Trust (*amanah*) held by the human being.

2. The concept of accountability is not confined to public accountability or accountability to human superiors, but is extended to include answerability to God.

3. The idea that *Allah* is the True Owner and Manager of His Resources liberates the human mind from the false sense of autonomy or dominion over the Earth's natural resources.

As the late Dag Hammarskjöld (in Muzaffar 1995: 8) once couched it:

On the bookshelf of life God is a useful work of reference,  
always at hand but seldom consulted.

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