



When the Earth Speaks Against Us: Environmental Ethics in Islam

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Abstract

As countries around the globe frantically search for a solution to the current environmental crisis, solutions deep-rooted in the Islamic tradition are rarely offered. Islam has at its core multiple environmental principles that many Muslims and the public in general are unaware of. This paper demonstrates that there exists a narrative within the Islamic tradition that can be extrapolated to form principles that can be implemented by Muslims in the West. This is proven using authentic sources from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The reader is provided a brief look at ethics in Islam, environmental ethics in Western theory, environmental ethics from an Islamic perspective, and five principles with examples of how to apply them in the Western context.

Introduction

Throughout human history the question of “how we should live” has been a recurring and polemical theme. From the choices made on the global stage to the sofas in our living rooms, ethics permeates our lives. These choices we make stem from our core principles. Personal principles are what drive our understanding of good and bad. Traer describes empathy as a crucial aspect of moral behavior.¹ Almost all humans respond to the feelings of others. By aligning ourselves with different groups we create an identity and then use this as a basis for moral sentiment. Once we have discovered what this sentiment is, we naturally formulate principles that support our thought. Infusing both sentiment and principles in the solvent of the mind therefore gives us our conscience and our ethical views.

Ethics, as the term stipulates, and as evidenced by the plethora of literature produced in its own discipline, covers a broad range of subjects. However, the sub-category of environmental ethics which consists of our moral relationship to the environment as well as its own value and moral status² has gained particular attention over the past few years. I intend by this paper to encourage readers to link the rich history of the Islamic tradition with the field of environmental ethics. My

¹ Traer, Robert. *Doing Environmental Ethics*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013. p. 8.

² Brennan, A. (2002). Environmental ethics. In E.N. Zalta (Ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

motivation comes from a recent survey I carried out in which more than 80% of respondents believed that environmental ethics is not being communicated to the British Muslim public adequately. Consequently, more than 85% of the Muslims surveyed were willing to learn more about environmental ethics and how they could apply it within their lives.

As indicated previously, ethics apply to both global and personal issues. However, the current paper is concerned only with how Muslims can apply environmental ethics within a Western context. I believe that Islam contains the necessary tools to establish such a coherent viewpoint. This viewpoint I hope to explain by describing five basic principles and how to implement them. The outline hence will be as follows: a brief introduction into ethics in Islam, environmental ethics with accompanying survey data, Western theories of environmental ethics, Islamic perspectives on environmental ethics and a framework for applying Islamic principles in the Western context.

Ethics in Islam

Conceptualization

Ethics in Islam is incredibly broad and extensive in covering multiple facets. Some of these facets include the relationship between humans and Allah, humans and each other, humans and the universe, and humans with their inner self.³ One word that has specifically become synonymous with the word ethics in Islam is the Arabic word *akhlaq* (sing. *khuluq*). The singular form appears in the Qur'an two times, once in Surah Al-Shu'ara (verse 137) and once in Surah Al-Qalam (verse 4). Muslim theologians and writers such as Ghazali (d. 1111), Al Razi (d. 1209) and Al-Tusi (d. 1274) have always understood this to mean the science of the human soul (*ilm ul akhlaq*)⁴ which defines both its attributes and mechanisms of

³ Quasem, Muhammad Abul. *The Ethics of Al-Ghazali: A Composite Ethics in Islam*. National University of Malaysia: Selangor, 1983. p. 22.

⁴ Omar, Mohd Nasir. *Christian & Muslim Ethics: A Study of How to Attain Happiness as Reflected in the Works on Tahdhib Al-akhlaq by Yahya Ibn Adi (d. 974) and Miskawayh (d. 1030)*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 2003, p. 4.

controlling it. Interestingly, Mohid Omar⁵ highlights when discussing Islamic ethics that earlier scholars such as Farabi (d. 950) linked together the notion of “fair deeds to virtue” and “wicked deeds” to vices. This emphasizes that our ethics are in fact entwined with our actions, making it even more important that we understand what our ethics are. If we are unable to identify our approach, not just to the environment but to all aspects of life, then how are we to navigate contemporary and future challenges?

Al Ghazali’s theory of ethics alludes to what Traer mentioned earlier, in that there is a distinction between what is right and wrong. Al Ghazali believed, much like the earlier theologians, that good souls would produce righteous actions and evil souls would produce evil actions. He emphasizes that by studying *akhlaq* we can engage in righteous actions that are sincere to Allah, our family members, and society as a whole. This is important to our discussion as we can observe that there are links among ethics, actions, and our surroundings. Although this is one opinion, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) suggested that “ethics is much more practical and consists of what should be done and what should not.”⁶ It appears Ibn Taymiyyah was concerned with the boundaries of *halal* (lawful) and *haram* (unlawful), associating the implication of actions directly with Islamic law. Thus, he focused more on a legalistic aspect that was limited to physical application, as opposed to Al Ghazali’s inclusion of strands that lay beyond lawful and unlawful. While these two perspectives are slightly different, they each agree in principle that ethics are central to a Muslim’s relationship with their religion, whether this concerns how we interact with others, or how we use actions to navigate between the *halal* and *haram*.

Sources for an Islamic ethics

Having recognized the importance of ethics in Islam, a look at the sources used to derive our ethics is also needed. Highlighting these sources allows us to examine the depths of Islamic ethics and ascertain its foundations. We can then extrapolate

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Hovannisian, Richard G. *Ethics in Islam*. Malibu, CA: Undena, 1985, p. 11.

from those foundations basic principles in ethical areas such as our interaction with the environment. Two primary sources are mainly drawn upon throughout the multiple disciplines in Islam: the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition). The Qur'an, as the word of Allah, holds an enormous amount of authority and the Prophetic tradition is an embodiment of that authority. The Qur'an includes numerous ethical issues, including the nature of good and bad, divine justice and power, freedom and responsibility. In Surah Al Imran verse 104, the use of the terms *al-khayr* (goodness) and *al-ma'ruf* (approved) denote the moral spirit in calling towards good and enjoining what is right. In Surah Al-Nahl, verse 90, we are reminded that Allah commands us to be *al-adl* (just) and have *al-ihsan* (good conduct), while also forbidding immorality, bad conduct, and oppression. Finally, the fact that humans have moral responsibility is seen in the Qur'an's use of the word *yus'alu*⁷ which translates as liable to questioning. Knowing that we will be questioned in the afterlife tells us that we are responsible for our actions as well as our immediate surroundings.

The second main source we draw upon is the Sunnah. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said, "I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals."⁸ This *hadith* (prophetic narration) emphasizes the value and place of ethics in a conscientious society. From this *hadith*, we can also infer that human beings have a sense of morality intrinsically embedded within them. By observing and following the Prophet's example, we can perfect this basic sense of morality. The *hadith* "Nothing is heavier on the scale than having good character"⁹ illustrates the impact of upholding good character in the afterlife. Consequently, a relationship is created between our actions in this worldly life and the weighing of deeds in the next. Creating this relationship allows us to bridge both worlds and increase the value of our ethical decisions. If we understand that our actions have consequences in the Hereafter, we have to reevaluate our actions in a new paradigm, one that relies on

⁷ Fakhry, Majid. *Ethical Theories in Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1994, p. 18.

⁸ Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad. *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 14:513 #8952; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ in the comments.

⁹ *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* Vol. 4, Book of Righteousness And Maintaining Good Relations With Relatives, *Hadith* 2002.

our interaction with the world around us. Good character extends to not only our interactions with other humans but also our interactions with the world around us.

The result of ethics being central to the message of the Prophet ﷺ leads us to consider an ethical basis for nearly every discipline. This was understood very early on in the Islamic tradition, where scholars such as Abu Yusuf (d. 799) and Abu Ubayd (d. 834) wrote treatises on justice in economics.¹⁰ Further treatises were developed in the 9th century; for example, the Muslim physician Ishaq bin Ali Rahawi wrote about medical ethics. He called physicians the “guardians of the soul,”¹¹ demonstrating that this concept of ethics had started to enter an Islamic literary discourse in the field of medicine. Also, *hadith* compilers contributed greatly to this field in dedicating works that were strictly to do with ethics such as Al-Bukhari’s (d. 870) *Adab al-Mufrad (Conduct for Living)*, Al-Bayhaqi’s (d. 1066) *Kitab al-Adab (Book of Conduct)* and At-Tabarani’s (d. 982) *Makaarim al-Akhlaq (Noble Behaviors)*. As exemplified by these writings, discourses that defined ethical standpoints in numerous subjects were accepted and, in the case of *hadith* compilations, even seen as essential.

This first section has established that ethics in Islam existed as a concept from the Prophet’s time and was developed further by later scholars. By illustrating that there is a basis for a broad application of ethics in both the Qur’an and Sunnah that has also been supplemented by works of classical scholars, we can develop a framework in which we can create principle standpoints for ethics in other disciplines. The next section discusses why there is a need to consider environmental ethics, in particular.

Understanding Environmental Ethics

Environmental ethics as a sub-discipline came to prominence in the 1970s, due to the emergence of two monumental works in this field: Rachel Carson’s *Silent*

¹⁰ Fakhry, Majid. *Ethical Theories in Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1994, p. 11.

¹¹ Zunic, Lejla, Emina Karcic, and Izet Masic. "Medical Ethics in the Medieval Islamic Sciences." *Journal of Research in Pharmacy Practice*, no. 3 (2014): 75-76. doi:10.4103/2279-042x.141072.

Spring (1962)¹² and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968).¹³ *Silent Spring* brought attention to the dangers of chemical pesticides to public health and wildlife. *The Population Bomb*, as its name suggests, discussed the negative impact on resources due to an ever-increasing human population. Moreover, the concerns of environmental ethics also include a decrease in plant life, biodiversity, wildlife, ecosystems, and climate change, to name a few.¹⁴ These concerns have almost become a part of modern-day public consciousness.

Environmental ethics as a discipline is based around two main questions: as humans do we have a duty towards the environment and if so, then what measures should we include?¹⁵ These two questions underpin our moral and ethical relationship with the environment. In answering them, we can then confidently establish what our obligations are to the world around us, if any. Some of the challenging questions that result include:

Should we cut down forests for the sake of human consumption?

Should we knowingly cause the extinction of other species?

How should humans use and conserve the outer space environment to secure and expand life?

Can planetary boundaries create a new relationship between humans and the Earth?

Although the conceptualization of environmental ethics came to prominence almost 40 years ago, the need to engage with this notion has never been more pressing as technology and science have both developed and continue to develop at an unprecedented rate, particularly in recent years.¹⁶ It is justified, therefore, to argue that the challenges we face today are much greater than they were in the 60s and 70s. The means by which we approach this is incredibly important, as we may

¹² Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. London: Penguin Books, in Association with Hamish Hamilton, 2015. (Original 1962, Camberwell Victoria).

¹³ Ehrlich, Paul R. *The Population Bomb*. Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer, 1968.

¹⁴ Attfield, Robin. *Environmental Ethics: An Overview for the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

¹⁵ Rolston, Holmes. "Rights And Responsibilities On The Home Planet." *Yale Journal of International Law* 18, no. 1 (1993): 263.

¹⁶ Kwazo, H.A., M.U. Muhammad, G.M Tafida, and S. Mohammed. "Environmental Impact of Technologies." *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 2014. doi:10.5901/ajis.2014.v3n7p83.

consider the Earth too large to be affected meaningfully by human choice. Yet, now we find ourselves in an entire new Anthropocene epoch, one which is defined by human influence on the Earth; the proposed date of the beginning of this epoch is 1964, indicating just how recent it is.¹⁷ Additionally, record-breaking global temperatures have risen consecutively in 2014, 2015 and 2016.¹⁸ This trend continues with a whole array of other undesirable records being broken, including two-thirds of the Great barrier reef being damaged,¹⁹ ocean acidification rising,²⁰ increases in global flooding,²¹ and the continual consumption of more than the production of the Earth's resources.²² We can conclude then, based solely on the empirical scientific data, that there are a plethora of reasons to focus on environmental ethics. In short, the scientific data provide us with a reality that we must engage.

Data from Survey

In order to ascertain to what extent English-speaking UK Muslims are familiar with environmental ethics, I conducted an online survey (the link to which can be found [here](#)). This survey was conducted with an online tool within the UK, consisted of a series of multiple choice questions responded to by 53 Muslim individuals. The breakdown of the ages was as follows, 12-17 (9.4%), 18-24 (26.4%), 25-34 (35.8%), 35-44 (22.6%), 45-54 (3.8%), and 55-64 (1.9%). More than 60% of the respondents claimed that the impact we are having on the planet is a negative one when asked, "Is this impact good, bad, or in between?" The

¹⁷ Lewis, Simon L., and Mark A. Maslin. "Defining the Anthropocene." *Nature* 519, no. 7542 (2015): 171-80. doi:10.1038/nature14258.

¹⁸ King, Andrew D. "Attributing Changing Rates of Temperature Record Breaking to Anthropogenic Influences." *Earth's Future* 5, no. 11 (2017): 1156-168. doi:10.1002/2017ef000611.

¹⁹ Wolff, Nicholas. "Dynamic Vulnerability of the Great Barrier Reef: Impacts of Local versus Global Stressors." *Global Change Biology* 24, no. 5 (2018): 1978-991. doi:10.14264/uql.2017.355.

²⁰ Kapsenberg, Lydia, Samir Alliouane, Frédéric Gazeau, Laure Mousseau, and Jean-Pierre Gattuso. "Coastal Ocean Acidification and Increasing Total Alkalinity in the Northwestern Mediterranean Sea." *Ocean Science* 13, no. 3 (2017): 411-26. doi:10.5194/os-13-411-2017.

²¹ Najibi, Nasser, and Naresh Devineni. "Recent Trends in the Frequency and Duration of Global Floods." *Earth System Dynamic s* 9, no. 2 (2018): 757-83. doi:10.5194/esd-9-757-2018.

²² Posthuma, Leo, Anders Bjørn, Michiel C. Zipp, Morten Birkved, Miriam L. Diamond, Michael Z. Hauschild, Mark A. J. Huijbregts, Christian Mulder, and Dik Van De Meent. "Beyond Safe Operating Space: Finding Chemical Footprinting Feasible." *Environmental Science & Technology* 48, no. 11 (2014): 6057-059. doi:10.1021/es501961k.

awareness of human impact could be in part, due to the amount of media attention that is given to the environment in the West and how it forms a fundamental part of the school curriculum in the UK. This exposure causes general concerns about the environment to reach the public. However, when asked whether they believe this is being conveyed to the Muslim public adequately enough, 85% of the responses were “no,” while more than 75% viewed it as a duty on Muslim leaders to inform them about environmental ethics. Finally, 88% expressed the desire to learn more about environmental ethics.

Analyzing these data gives us an intriguing insight into how British Muslims perceive the notion of environmental ethics. We observe that over 75% regarded environmental ethics as important, demonstrating that there is a concern for how we treat the environment. In summary, there are overwhelming numbers in favor of being more informed about environmental ethics, considering the current presentation of environmental ethics to be inadequate to the Muslim public and the view that it is a duty on Muslim leaders to inform the public about environmental ethics. These findings showcase that overall many Muslims are not confident in these issues. They also suggest that Muslims expect their leaders to talk about environmental ethics with them. Another concern is that Muslims feel that this information is not being adequately relayed to them, questioning whether the modality in which it is being communicated in is appropriate. Furthermore, Muslims graded their knowledge of environmental ethics very negatively, with almost 77% saying they had either basic or a fair amount of knowledge on the subject, indicating that this sample does not have a great deal of confidence in their knowledge regarding these issues.

Using these two perspectives—the substantial scientific data and perceptions of Muslims—we can conclude that more education is needed about environmental ethics. A colossal amount of empirical data indicates patterns that would directly affect the Earth’s environment and have further damaging effects on systems within the environment, while the social data point to a population that knows there is a concern but does not know how to respond to it. Muslims have indicated that, even though their knowledge is fairly basic, they are willing to learn and perhaps implement changes that could make a real difference. Combining these two sources

of data suggests that a discussion on environmental ethics is necessary and that Muslims already believe there is a relationship between the environment and Islam. This relationship will be expanded on later, however, as an analysis of current Western theories in relation to environmental ethics is first needed.

Environmental Ethics: Western Theories

In brief, theories of environmental ethics consist of three primary viewpoints: anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. Anthropocentric ethics has been promoted in a variety of writings from Blackstone,²³ O'Neill,²⁴ and Gewirth,²⁵ although they vary slightly, the underlying theme in each is similar. This theme is that humans are obliged to preserve the environment to advance human well-being and prosperity. They cite multiple instances in which humans are at risk: for example, pollution affects health standards, decrease in resources lowers our quality of living, loss of biodiversity results in fewer medicinal opportunities, and deforestation leads to a void in our access to natural and serene beauty. Under these circumstances, the question of whether we have an obligation to future generations arises, which some regard to be the epitome of anthropocentrism. Discourses that discuss this notion have varied considerably and contain proponents both for and against. Arguments that support this obligation normally state that the effects of climate change, resource depletion, and other factors will have a detrimental impact on future generations. Gewirth²⁶ argues that any policy or action we take will have a greater impact on future generations therefore, the present human community has a moral responsibility to ensure we do not hinder the prosperity of future generations. Golding,²⁷ however, argued against this view by proposing that our responsibility is only to our current moral community as future generations cannot reciprocate any of the actions we take to benefit them; thus, they remain outside of our sphere of moral responsibility. Golding's point can

²³ Blackstone, William T. *Philosophy & Environmental Crisis*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974.

²⁴ O'Neill, Onora. "Environmental Values, Anthropocentrism and Speciesism." *Environmental Values* 6, no. 2 (1997): 127-42. doi:10.3197/09632719776679121.

²⁵ Boylan, Michael. *Environmental Ethics*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 207-11.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁷ Golding, Martin. "Content of Justice-based Obligations towards Future Generations in the Context of Climate Change." *Moins* 56, no. 1 (1972): 85-99. doi:10.5840/monist197256118.

be contested by Kavka²⁸ who mentioned that to carry out the requests of those who have died, for example in a will, is not considered outside our moral responsibility even though there is no direct reciprocal benefit.

As evidenced by these divergent views, there are huge differences in both thought and in the application of this model of environmental ethics. The main question that this seems to revolve around is: what are our obligations to future generations? Within this question arises an additional difficulty in ascertaining exactly who the future generations are and what they encompass. Brian Barry states that technology could develop to an extent that the preservation of a particular species is not needed.²⁹ What would be the need for a diversity of plants if we are able to grow and produce the substances we need ourselves? This has led to an obligation in providing at least “basic” needs that Barry outlines such as food and water.³⁰ Supplementary to this, we could ask what are the competing interests of the contemporary generation and future generations. How do we measure the needs of both and decide? As mentioned earlier, we are currently using more resources than the Earth produces and therefore not meeting the needs of the current generation. If current needs are not being met, then how can we even begin to think about meeting the needs of those in the future?

The second viewpoint is biocentrism, the idea that our moral community should include animals as well as humans. Two prominent academics have proposed this view but differ in their justifications. Peter Singer suggests that our moral community should include any being that is sentient; i.e., able to feel pleasure or pain,³¹ while Tom Regan extends moral standing to those that can, believe, desire, perceive, emote, and engage in action.³² These two ideas differ slightly yet both link to this central thought of consciousness which can be attributed back to

²⁸ Barry, Brian, and Richard I. Sikora. *Obligations to Future Generations*. Knapwell: White Horse Press, 1996, 186-203.

²⁹ Dobson, Andrew. *Fairness and Futurity: Essays on Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011, p. 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³¹ Singer, Peter. 1974. All animals are equal. *Philosophical Exchange* 1. Reprinted in LaFollette, Hugh (ed.). 2007. *Ethics in Practice: Third Edition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 171-180.

³² Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

Trarer's concept of ethics, suggesting that empathy plays a central role in how Western theories attribute moral standing to animals.

The point at which the difference is made most apparent is that Singer's moral standing is essentially interest-derived meaning if one can experience pleasure or pain, while Regan promotes the idea that all life has inherent value. Bio-centrists have expanded on these thoughts to prioritize certain environmental or even animal obligations. In total opposition to anthropocentrism, biocentrism posits that there is much more to evaluate than simply human interest. For example, if clearing a forest would benefit humans across generations, then anthropocentrists wouldn't contest that. On the other hand, bio-centrist thought would argue that the welfare of the animals in that forest would need to be contemplated before any action. If it is concluded that there indeed exists a possibility of harm, then that action would become improper.

Biocentrism has been challenged on two main fronts. Firstly, its classification that "being alive" is a condition for possessing moral standing has been contested. Warren has declared that, because a plant doesn't have the ability to determine its own good, it does not possess moral standing.³³ Essentially, a plant does not care whether it lives or dies; hence, there should be no onus on humans to be concerned for its life. Secondly, the promotion of individualistic entities is in direct opposition to the idea of interdependence. Our reliance on this interdependent "equilibrium"³⁴ is necessary for each individual organism to flourish. Biocentrism fails to address these two important issues.

The third prominent environmental theory is known as ecocentrism. Ecocentrism was initiated by one main ethicist, Aldo Leopold. Leopold was the first to coin the term "land ethic," explaining that the idea of the land being a mere resource or object for human use was gravely mistaken.³⁵ Instead, he viewed the land as a

³³ Warren, Mary Anne. *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009, p. 48.

³⁴ Taylor, Paul W. *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011.

³⁵ Leopold, Aldo, and Charles Walsh. Schwartz. *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.

“fountain of energy, flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals.”³⁶ This energy therefore, would be affected by the relationship of each component within this community. In a later work, he concluded his theory by stating, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”³⁷

Leopold has been widely criticized for promoting an ethic with no real substantive obligation on humanity. His concept can be viewed as just a description of how we should perceive the environment, but not as a proposal for how we treat it. These criticisms have been challenged by several academics, two prominent ones being J. Baird Callicott and Lawrence E. Johnson. Callicott suggests that Leopold’s theory does not assign a specific characteristic for justifying our approach to the environment.³⁸ The outcome is then freeing oneself from attributing only consciousness or biological good as the basis for acting ethically, broadening our moral application to how we “feel” about the environment. “Feeling” is considered much more dynamic and moves beyond the previous arbitrary concepts of self-interest and individualism.³⁹ Although this idea gives us some link between theory and application, using “feelings” as a basis for moral obligation can be problematic. This could be as simple as one individual claiming to feel nothing for the environment; if such is the case, then how would moral obligations be pertinent?

Lawrence Johnson has suggested a slightly different view in ascribing moral obligation beyond simplistic characteristics. He proposes the notion that interests extend beyond the capability of having a conscious experience and by default apply to non-conscious entities.⁴⁰ Johnson uses the case of a child who, though needing oxygen, possesses no understanding of what oxygen is, yet is entitled to it.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 218.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

³⁸ Zimmerman, Michael E. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005. pp.101-13.

³⁹ Ibid., p.101.

⁴⁰ Johnson, Lawrence E. *A Morally Deep World: An Essay on Moral Significance and Environmental Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010, p. 141.

⁴¹ Using this analogy, he confers moral standing on both species and ecosystems and claims that each have an interest that must be considered.

Ecocentrism has also been evaluated by academics such as Tom Regan, who sees it as an extremely negative concept. He labels it “environmental fascism”⁴² because placing humans within a larger more important biotic community raises the possibility of human interests being unprioritized over the larger community. Proponents of ecocentrism believe that human beings shouldn’t be prioritized and in certain cases may even be liable to removal by other humans. This is best exemplified in a scenario in which a population of rabbits may be depleted to secure the growth and prosperity of a plant species. In retrospect, particular areas might instead register humans as the greatest threat to the community, if this is the case, then should humans be removed for the “greater good?” Further questions are then raised as to how to navigate between competing interests; e.g., why should rabbits be sacrificed when humans aren’t and if human interests are above all others, then isn’t this just anthropocentrism?

Environmental Ethics: Islamic theory

As elucidated from each of the previous Western theories, critiques remain and still need to be addressed. Islam can offer an alternative unique perspective on environmental ethics that is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition. Environmental ethics have been, and are, represented primarily in both the Qur’an and the Sunnah as well as being commented on in the scholarly tradition. These themes will now be explored to establish Islamic environmental principles.

Islam and nature

Islam’s view on nature is rooted in multiple theocentric positions, best demonstrated by the Qur’anic verse, “There is no God but He, the Creator of all things” (Qur’an 6:102), stipulating that there is a link between creation and the Creator. This link is further clarified when Allah says, “There are certainly signs in

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴² Regan, Tom. *The Case for Animal Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, p. 362.

the Earth for people with certainty, and in yourselves. Do you not then see?” (Qur'an 51:20-21). Verses 50:6, 21:30, 13:12, and 6:73 only add to this theme by asking the reader to reflect and ponder over Allah’s creations. Without attributing divinity to the creation, instead we begin to see the categorization of all creation as a medium through which we can reach Allah. This has serious consequences for actions we take that might not just harm these signs, but might remove them too. An outcome of removing and destroying these signs could also limit and restrict the avenues we have to access the “signs” that Allah has left for us.

The link between the Creator and creation highlights a relationship that transcends the physical world. A term that has been repeated throughout the past two centuries by scholars such as Said Nursi⁴³ and Taha Al Awani⁴⁴ is the “book of the universe.” This book reflects that all created things have an intrinsic value, due to their connection to the Creator and that this collective value is worth more than an individual’s value. Özdemir expands on this concept by adding that “the Muslim lives in a world that is alive, meaningful, purposeful and more importantly, Muslim like himself, even prostrating itself before God.”⁴⁵ Understanding that the creation contains both a spiritual and physical aspect necessitates that we recognize our relationship with the non-human world. I have divided this world into three categories: natural resources, water, and the living creation.

Natural resources

Bagader et al. state that the objectives of natural resources in Islam are contemplation, worship, sustainable use, enjoyment, appreciation of beauty, biological needs, and ecological needs.⁴⁶ Interestingly, they go on to clarify that we are obligated to preserve those resources, both quantitatively in terms of numbers and qualitatively, meaning with their ideal features; there also exists a

⁴³ Yucel, Salih. (2011). *Said Nursi’s Approach to the Ziauddin Sardar on Islam, Science and Cultural Environment: A Spiritual View on the Book of Relations*, edited by Ehsan Masood. London: Pluto Universe. "January 01, 2014.

⁴⁴ Jabir, Al Alwani Taha. *Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. United States: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2005, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁵ Özdemir, Levent. *Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur’anic Perspective*. London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2003, p. 37.

⁴⁶ Bagader, Abubakar A., Abdullatif Tawfik. Sabbagh, Mohamad As-Sayyid Al-Glayand, and Mawil Yousuf Izzi-Deen Samarrai. *Environmental Protection in Islam*. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, 1994, p. 8.

responsibility to avoid infringing on the rights of other people. The Qur’anic verse “And you devour the inheritance (of others) with devouring greed” (Qur’an 89:19) clearly prohibits the abuse, misuse, and exploitation of natural resources. Although the Qur’an does prohibit these practices and values preservation, it also promotes ideas based on cultivation, sustainability, and construction. The Qur’an remarks, “It is He Who has produced you from the Earth and settled you therein” (Qur’an 71:17-18), which promotes the concept of creating and sustaining the land for use. The words of Ali Ibn Abi Talib (Fourth Khalifa) in response to a man who had reclaimed some deserted land, support the previous verse: “Partake of it gladly, so long as you are a benefactor, not a despoiler, a cultivator, not a destroyer.”⁴⁷

One final aspect that Islam promotes in this section is for man to abstain from committing corruption on the Earth. The word *fasad* (corruption) appears within the Qur’an and is used, for example, in 7:56, “Do not cause corruption on the earth, after it has been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of God is (always) near to those who do good,” reinforcing the concept of not causing disruption to the balance of the world. The mention of “keeping a balance” is absolutely crucial to the core message of Islam, and is particularly emphasized in the following verse:

The All-Merciful has taught the Qur’an. He created man and He taught him the explanation. The sun and the moon to a reckoning, and the stars and trees bow themselves; and heaven—He raised it up and set the balance. Transgress not in the balance, and weigh with justice, and skimp not in the balance. And Earth—He set it down for all beings, therein fruits and palm trees with sheaths, and grain in the blade, and fragrant herbs. Which of your Lord’s bounties will you deny? (Qur’an 55: 1–12)

The verse supports a platform for the Earth to revolve and sustain itself, the various pieces all in harmony. It is this harmony, this balance, that we are warned not to break and stretches not only to Earth but also to the universe.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Water

The mention of water appears throughout the Qur'an and is viewed as a vital part of Allah's creation. The Qur'an mentions, "We made from water every living thing" (Qur'an 21:30) and this sentiment is repeated in 24:45 and 25:54. Water is also emphasized as an important aspect of existence and we are told to ponder upon its use:

Have you seen the water which you drink? Was it you who sent it down from the rain cloud, or did We send it? Were it Our will, We could have made it bitter; why then do you not give thanks? (Qur'an 56: 68–70)

These verses asking us to ponder are continued in other verses where Allah asks us to appreciate the function and role of water to every living thing (Qur'an 56:68-70, 67:30). Water also plays a significant role in Islamic jurisprudence; Kamali concludes that damage done specifically to water is taken by some scholars to be forbidden.⁴⁸ Kamali emphasizes water's crucial role in sustaining multiple life forms, which therefore necessitates an obligation to protect that which preserves life. Hence, if destroying water would cause harm to life itself, it would then enact the principle of whatever leads to a prohibited act is prohibited. Moreover, statements from the Prophet ﷺ such as, "There shall be no harm, nor reciprocating of harm,"⁴⁹ are used by Bāqādir to support the belief that precautionary measures should be taken in protecting water.⁵⁰ This responsibility is perhaps more clear in the following Qur'anic verse where Allah says, "And tell them the water shall be shared between them" (Qur'an 54:28). According to Ibn Kathir, this verse is in reference to sharing water between the people of Thamud and a she-camel and emphasizes the duty to share resources and provisions.⁵¹ This verse highlights the principle that sharing the sustenance of the Earth is a right for

⁴⁸ Kamali, Hashim. "Environmental Care in Islam: A Qur'anic Perspective." *Islam and Civilizational Renewal* 3, no. 2 (2012): 267. <http://www.iais.org.my/icr/index.php/icr/article/view/66/62>.

⁴⁹ *Sunan Ibn Majah* Vol. 3, Book of Chapters on Rulings, *Hadith* 2340.

⁵⁰ Bāqādir, Abū Bakr Aḥmad. *Basic Paper on the Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment / Etude De Base Sur Les Principes Islamiques Relatifs À La Conservation De L'environnement Naturel / by Abou Bakr Ahmed Ba Kader*. Gland, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), 1983.

⁵¹ Al-Mubarakpuri, Shaykh Safiur-Rahman. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir (10 Volumes; Abridged)*. S.I., 2000. (See Surah Qamar, verse 28).

all creation and warns about the perils of abusing that right. The *hadith* “Muslims are to share in these three things: water, pasture, and fire”⁵² further reflects the Qur’anic statement, as this duty extends to not only water but other forms of natural resources. Additionally the Prophet ﷺ emphasized in the *hadith*, “Even if you take ablutions in a flowing river, do not waste water,”⁵³ indicating that there is an obligation on us to evaluate how we use water. Because he ordered us not to waste water, we need to be aware of the consequences of our actions for the natural environment.

Animals/Plants

The final category concerns our attitude towards animals and plants. Animals feature prominently throughout the Qur’an, with some chapters even being named after them such as Al Baqarah (Qur’an 2 “The Cow”), An Nahl (Qur’an 16, “The Bee”) and Al Ankabut (Qur’an 29, “The Spider”). According to the previous categorization, animals and plants form part of the creation of Allah. Subsequently, they are then also a subgroup of his signs left for humankind to ponder and reflect on. This amounts to animals and plants possessing a value in that they are said to worship and glorify Allah, as well as be an integral part of His creation. However there is a limit to this in that Islam recognizes that animals and plants have been placed here for the service of humanity, most clearly mentioned in the verse, “Do you not see that Allah has subjected to your use all things in the heaven and the Earth, and has made bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, seen and unseen?” (Qur’an 31:20). Islam therefore asserts a balance between rights that are to be given to animals and plants and the interests of humans.

The Prophet ﷺ expounded upon this understanding in multiple incidents; e.g., he made clear to his Companions, “Allah punished a woman because she imprisoned a cat until it died of hunger. She neither fed it, nor let it obtain its own food.”⁵⁴ He also made it explicit when a Companion asked him, “Is there a reward for doing good with these animals?” He responded, “There is a reward in doing

⁵² *Sunan Ibn Majah* Vol. 3, Book of Chapters on Pawning, *Hadith* 2473.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Chapter No. 2, The Chapters of Purification and its Sunnah, *Hadith* 425.

⁵⁴ *Sahih Muslim* Vol. 2, Book of Zakat, *Hadith* 2242.

good to every living thing.”⁵⁵ Specifically regarding plants, the Prophet ﷺ explained, “If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and a human, bird, or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him.”⁵⁶ Perhaps the most prominent *hadith* reflecting the importance of this relationship is the one that encourages the planting of a tree even if the world were ending, “If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has a seedling in hand, let him plant it.”⁵⁷

A summary of our responsibilities towards animals was eloquently presented by Izz ud-Deen Abdi Salaam (d. 1262) where he stated:

*The rights of creatures and animals over humanity are the following: that he provides for them as they require, even if they have aged or sickened such that no benefit comes from them; that he not burden them beyond what they can bear; that he not put them together with another creature that could injure it, whether of their own kind or other species, whether by breaking their bones or butting or wounding them; that he slaughters them with gentleness and he does not flay their skins or break their bones until their bodies have become cold and passed away; that he not slaughter their young within their sight but rather he does so in solitude; that he makes their resting and watering places comfortable; that he puts the males and females together during their mating seasons; that he does not discard what he has hunted; and that he does not shoot them with anything that breaks their bones or harms them by any means that would render their meat forbidden to eat.*⁵⁸

The evidence provided is incredibly supportive of the notion that there is a basis for environmental ethics in Islam. The Qur’anic verses make clear that we are to live in tandem with the creation around us and use it as an opportunity to access the signs of Allah, and the Prophetic character exemplifies the concern and need to engage with nature on both a personal and local level. From these narrations we

⁵⁵ *Sahih Bukhārī* Vol. 3, Book 43, *Hadith* 646.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, Book 39, *Hadith* 513.

⁵⁷ *Musnad Ahmad*, *Hadith* 12491.

⁵⁸ *Qawā'id al-Ahkām fī Islāh al-Anām* 1/167.

see the abundance of reward that can be gained from looking after the creation of Allah. This adds in a transdimensional element to our ethics in that we will be accountable for our actions and how we impact the world around us.

When compared with Western theories, we realize that Islam also does, in fact, promote and develop further reasons why we should evaluate our relationship with the environment. While containing a uniqueness in why it advocates for the protection, cultivation, and proliferation of our ecological systems, at the same time, it provides a solution to the various issues of previous theories, such as establishing the boundaries and limits of human interest, including the community instead of individualistic preferences, providing a direct link between humanity and creation in the form of our worship of Allah, not just based on “feelings” but a relationship that transcends the physical world, and emphasizing maintaining the “balance” of the Earth.

I posit that rather than being an “adaptive” alternative to Western theories, the model Islam presents is in fact unique and deserving of its own authoritative space. Although proposed as a response to Western theory, the foundations of an Islamic environmental philosophy as I have demonstrated are based purely on the Islamic tradition. I would like to suggest that the following principles are independent of Western thought and constitute but one perspective from the Islamic tradition. I recommend that, as Muslims extracting from the authentic sources, we take into consideration the following five principles when advocating for an Islamic environmental ethics in the West: Community, Stewardship, Trustee, Moderation, and Sustainability. I will explain these principles in brief with some examples of how they can be applied in the Western world. To be clear, these applications are only suggestions for how to actualize the principles. Many other methods could also be undertaken to fulfill each principle.

Principles

Community

The principle of community was made clear before in that there exists between us and the rest of creation a permanent link. This enduring link is that all of creation is from the Creator; this link, as mentioned, will transcend this world and be present in the next. This implies that the creation is entirely interconnected by virtue of being created by the same Creator and interdependent, relying on each other for both prosperity and goodness. We rely on the rest of creation as a means of sustenance and as a reflection of Allah's signs. Creation also participates in the worship and praise of Allah which strengthens the relationship we have with our Creator. These factors and the welfare of all created beings is deeply affected by how we interact with them. If we are directly contributing to removing the praise, signs, and responsibility Allah has bestowed us, then why would we not expect there to be a detrimental effect on our own connection and relationship with Allah? Accepting this principle places us in an exclusive role as humans where we are compelled to do right by the entire community of Allah's creation.

Application

One major threat to this "community" of creation is human-induced deforestation. Deforestation is the conversion of forest to permanent non-forest land. This has harmful effects on the ecosystem, causing an enormous loss in biodiversity and increasing the greenhouse effect. Mining, urbanization, logging, expansion of farmland, and a whole range of human actions are having a dramatic effect on forests.⁵⁹ While the image of trees being removed may be our conceptualization of deforestation, the effects are far-reaching. Forests consist of entire ecosystems, habitats, and real cornerstones in the formation of different parts of the world; they also function as a living and breathing environment that praises Allah. A realistic solution that we can implement as Muslims is to maintain and manage our own "forest gardens." This would aid in providing a space for the creation to live and

⁵⁹ Chakravarty, S., Ghosh, S. K., Suresh, C. P., Dey, A. N., and Gopal Shukla. "Deforestation: Causes, Effects and Control Strategies." *Global Perspectives on Sustainable Forest Management*, 2012. doi:10.5772/33342.

prosper, whether in our own personal gardens or via a community initiative. Also, this can help in raising awareness as our local neighbors or visitors would be intrigued as to why we have started or created this initiative.

Stewardship

The second principle this naturally turns into is our role as stewards on the Earth. Allah mentions in two verses, “And lo! Your Sustainer said to the angels: Behold, I am about to establish upon Earth a *khalifa* (Qur’an 2:30) and “It is He Who appointed you *khalifas* on this Earth” (Qur’an 6:167). These two verses indicate the responsibility we have been given in acting as “*khalifas*.” *Khalifa* can be translated as vicegerent and is derived from a root word meaning “successor.”⁶⁰ This term appears in the Qur’an in both the singular and plural forms, demonstrating that it refers to both a personal and global level, and is related to our role of keeping balance on the Earth.

Application

One way in which we can apply this in a Western context is the building of roof gardens in conjunction with local Islamic institutes. Roof gardens add an enormous benefit to the wider ecological sphere; much of the West is urbanized and roof gardens have proven to be particularly beneficial in such environments.⁶¹ This strategy is relatively inexpensive and can be maintained by the local community so it fosters a relationship between us and the environment. Using local Islamic institutes as a base for this enterprise provides a new and dynamic relationship between the members of the institute and the institute itself. It could also be utilized to teach young children the importance of the environment and life skills in maintaining and growing the beauty in the world.

⁶⁰ Munn, Ted. *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change*. Chichester: Wiley, 2002; Khalid, F. Islam, Ecology and the World Science, Values and the Environment in Islam and Order. Islam and the Environment, pp. 332-39.

⁶¹ Oberndorfer, Erica, Jeremy Lundholm, Brad Bass, Reid R. Coffman, Hitesh Doshi, Nigel Dunnett, Stuart Gaffin, Manfred Köhler, Karen K. Y. Liu, and Bradley Rowe. “Green Roofs as Urban Ecosystems: Ecological Structures, Functions, and Services.” *BioScience* 57, no. 10 (2007): 823-33. doi:10.1641/b571005.

Trustee

Thirdly, the principle of being a trustee creates a situation where it is incumbent on us to educate others in regards to the environment and what we can do to help. This is best proven using two *hadiths*, the first of which is, “The world is sweet and green and verily Allah has installed you as a *khalifa* in it in order to see how you act,”⁶² and the second “Each of you is a shepherd and will be answerable for those under his care.”⁶³ These *hadiths* indicate a duty to not only act and look after the environment but to instill this view in others around us. Trust also appears within the Qur’anic verse, “Verily, We did offer the *amana* to the heavens and the Earth and the mountains but they refused to bear it. Yet man took it for verily, he has always been prone to tyranny and foolishness” (Qur’an 33:72); *amana* here can be translated as being entrusted. This trust encompasses how we interact with the universe, Earth, and our own immediate surroundings.

Application

To apply this principle, we could dedicate days to teaching and promoting our values regarding the environment. The current means by which environmental ethics is being communicated, in my personal view, isn’t nearly sufficient. Promoting our values and increasing awareness will connect us to other organizations that have the same concerns we have. This opens new opportunities for collaborating with non-Muslim organizations, holding joint workshop events, and networking with those who have similar views. Local institutes such as zoos are willing to engage in conservation projects as well as hold workshops for the public. Taking part in these initiatives generates a new perception and adds the unique perspective of the Islamic tradition.

Moderation

The principle of moderation is best exemplified in the Qur’anic and Prophetic examples of maintaining balance. Highlighted in numerous verses, we are

⁶² *Sahih Muslim* Vol. 6, Book of Heart-Melting Traditions, *Hadith* 6606.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, Book of Government, *Hadith* 4496.

reminded constantly of the perils and dangers of upsetting the balance. Upsetting the balance in our time is an ever-increasing reality as the world changes and we are subjected to the consequences of a changing climate. This compels us as individuals to re-examine how we waste resources. The *hadiths* indicate that even when faced with an abundance of a particular resource, such as a river, we should still take care in how we use it, ensuring that we are conscious about our usage and its impact on the surrounding environment.

Application

A concept that has been underestimated in its positive impact on the environment is recycling. There are huge benefits to recycling including economically, spatially, reduced health risks and greenhouse gas reduction, to name a few. Recycling not only involves the re-use of plastics and household items but also community-based management, which has proven to be a key mechanism in diverting the number of recyclable items to landfill.⁶⁴ Recycling also has the capacity to be a real creative force in Arts and STEM projects. This can be as simple as using recycled material for household items like scoopers, watering cans, snack storage, and brooms. Art projects can be organized to engage the youth in using only recycled materials for a specific objective. By implementing these various recycling methods, we can have a real impact on how the environment is treated and ensure that we are abiding by the principle of moderation.

Sustainability

The final principle that I would like to suggest is sustainability: the verses from the Qur'an that support maintenance of the Earth also advocate for the sustainability of the Earth. As mentioned earlier, there are *ahadith* that specifically encourage water sustainability and forestry sustainability. We can extend these principles and begin to implement sustainable plans that relate to other areas of the environment. The Prophetic example encourages us to cultivate the land, placing a responsibility on

⁶⁴ Chai Charoen Wattana, Amornchai, and Chanathip Pharino. "Co-Benefits of Household Waste Recycling for Local Community's Sustainable Waste Management in Thailand." *Sustainability* 7, no. 6 (2015): p. 7417. doi:10.3390/su7067417.

us to not just preserve what we have, but to also facilitate its growth. This is the basis we can use to promote the concept of sustainability and utilize its multiple benefits such as reducing energy usage, improved efficiency, and growth opportunities through innovative thinking.

Application

Sustainability can be used across a range of channels including after-school projects in local Islamic institutes, community-devised projects, funding start-ups, and competitions encouraging the submission of sustainable schemes. One such recent example is the Cambridge Mosque project, which is Europe's first eco-friendly mosque.⁶⁵ It is estimated to have an almost 0% carbon output, making it an incredible feat of sustainable planning and a real embodiment of Islamic environmental ethics. Other projects that promote sustainability include organizing community litter removal, promoting local farmer markets by holding food and drinks festivals, and contributing to efficient water usage. One final suggestion is offering ecological alternatives to debt, meaning that someone who is indebted may be given the opportunity to instead grow particular aspects of the environment or preserve a particular species in place of paying back a loan.

Conclusion

Ethics has been a fundamental aspect of Islam from the time of the Prophet ﷺ until now. It is unquestionable that the Prophet ﷺ embodied values that he believed were vital parts of a Muslim's life. These ethics don't just encompass simple principles that we state; they are a direct manifestation of our state of being. Muslim theologians had always understood that these ethics govern how we live our lives and what we define as acceptable or not. They believed that a science existed wherein one could derive methods that would alleviate the troubles of the soul. These troubles were associated directly with an absence of ethical thought

⁶⁵ Gaia. "Cambridge to Build Europe's First Eco-Mosque." Sustainability. Accessed June 25, 2018. <http://environment-ecology.com/ecological-design/252-cambridge-to-build-europes-first-eco-mosque.html>.

and practice. It is this that we are trying to revive by promoting environmental ethics.

As demonstrated, Muslims have a deep connection to the natural world that transcends space and time. Far-reaching consequences await us in the afterlife if we ignore our duty and responsibility in this world. Allah has decreed for the creation to be a manifestation of His signs and we too are included within that. How troubling would it be if we were to knowingly accelerate and remove these signs that Allah has bestowed upon us? What would we think and ponder upon if all that's left is our own destruction?

The answer cannot be found in current Western thought, as proponents of each theory are in constant disagreement with each other, with some even labelling others as fascist. There exists currently no universal agreement on how the West should view and apply environmental ethics. Islam on the other hand, has a unifying factor between the Qur'an and the Sunnah that possesses unique principles grounded in the tradition. These principles promote a worldview that can be presented by Muslims, adding real substance to the current conversation displaying that Islam is dynamic enough to act as a vehicle for real change. I have no doubt that this narrative would be welcomed and supported by environmental groups and non-Muslim organizations. It is time that Muslims really put forward their own perspective and become central forces within this field.

The above Qur'anic verses, *hadiths*, scholarly opinion, and principles have indisputably established an Islamic viewpoint on environmental ethics. Although each principle may be critiqued and found wanting, I do believe they will play an essential role in at least bringing the conversation to the forefront. Muslims need to How we respond to local and global environmental challenges as a community is critical. When we enter the court of The Almighty and are called to trial, witnesses will be brought forth, I wonder whether the Earth will act as a witness for us or against us?