

ARTICLE 5

Islam, Ecology and Education: Muslims Taking Action

Najma Mohamed⁵



Concern for the environment is deeply-rooted in all fields of Islamic teachings and culture, according to leading contemporary Islamic scholars and researchers. Today, Muslim scholars are investigating the implications of key conceptual principles in Islam, such as *tawhīd* and *khilāfah*, for human interaction with the natural world. They have started to develop and share the green ethic of Islam, and from the *minbars* of Cape Town to the coral reefs of Zanzibar, Muslims are rediscovering the environmental teachings of Islam. In this article, I will provide a brief outline of the environmental message of Islam and discuss the implementation of this message in the educational lifeworlds of Muslims.

Islam's Green Ethic

Tawhīd is often put forward as the key principle underlying the ecological ethic of Islam. This principle, which centres upon the Oneness of the Creator, spells out clearly that the Owner, Creator and Sustainer of the entire Universe is Allah. His Oneness infuses the entire environmental worldview of Islam with the recognition that Nature originates from Him, is purposive, and functions in accordance with His Will. Humans have only been appointed as trustees on Earth, holding it in usufruct, answerable for the just and responsible discharge of this trusteeship in accordance with Divine Laws. Trusteeship or *khilāfah* is further shaped by the belief that humans, in their servanthood, are accountable for all the goods in their care. True *khilāfah* (stewardship) is thus not about dominion, mastery or control over any part of creation, but is centred on responsible trusteeship, cherishing and carrying out the capabilities entrusted to human beings with humility and obedience to the laws of the Creator in all human endeavours.

Creation (*khalq*), which is a reflection of divinely-arranged structure and order, is deserving of care and respect since it possesses inherent value as the signs of Allah, ecological value as part of the integrated system which He has designed, and utilitarian value in sustaining both humans

⁵ Najma Mohamed recently completed her doctorate in Islam, Ethics and Environmental Education and is currently employed in a public sector environmental programme in South Africa.

and the rest of creation. Thus while humans have the right to partake of the natural bounties of the Earth, these rights must be tempered with moderation, balance and conservation. When Nature is disrupted by evil human forces, such as misuse, destruction, extravagance, greed and waste, corruption (*fasād*) will appear on the Earth. Muslims are repeatedly forewarned in the Qur'an against causing corruption (*fasād*) on Earth, by exploiting and oppressing the weak and poor, and misusing, polluting and wasting natural resources, created in measure and for the benefit of all. Instead, Muslims are urged to observe the rights of others, both present and future generations, human and non-human, and to live in accordance with the teachings of the Divine Law, the *Sharī'ah*, which concurs with human *fiṭrah*, the beautiful deepest human nature which has been gifted to humanity. This notion is vividly illustrated in the following verses:

Corruption (fasād) prevails in the land and the sea because of all the evil that the hands of humanity have earned – so that He may cause them to taste something of that which they have done – so that they may return in penitence to God. [The Byzantines, 30: 41]

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) God's handiwork according to the pattern [fiṭrah] on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by God: that is the standard religion: but most among mankind understand not. [The Byzantines, 30: 30]

The eternal and dynamic Islamic legal system of Islam, the *Sharī'ah*, is composed of both a legal methodology and substantive laws which respond to contemporary environmental challenges. The ultimate objective of the *Sharī'ah*, according to some scholars, lies in securing the universal common good and welfare of creation, in compliance with the Qur'an and Sunnah. The *Sharī'ah*, at once, seeks to rectify humanity's relationship with the Creator, inculcate just and moral behaviour in society and mitigate all creaturely harm. Thus, Muslims are meant to actualise the teachings of Islam by implementing the *Sharī'ah*, the roadmap for navigating life on Earth. Justice pervades Islamic laws pertaining to the ownership and use of natural resources, such as property laws, water resource management, and the treatment and rights of domestic and wild animals. The *Sharī'ah* in fact advances the norm incumbent on all believers – this includes the standards for interacting with creation. Even in the absence of enforcement, every Muslim is aware of her responsibility to live in accordance with its teachings since she will be called to account for every atom's weight of good or evil committed on this Earth.



In her relation to the Creator, a Muslim is thus a *trustee* and *servant* on Earth, with the responsibility of living in kindness, compassion and justice with all of creation and caring for the gift of nature in accordance with the laws of its Bestower – in accordance with the *Shari'ah*. In relation to creation, humankind enjoys the rights – as do other living beings, to partake of nature's bounties, but humans are at the same time a *partner* of Nature, unified in praising and glorifying the Originator of the Universe.

The Islamic position on environmental care, drawn from the principles outlined above, also rests upon the notion of the whole Earth as a mosque (*masjid*) and the need 'to walk on the Earth in humility' [See The Criterion 25: 63], exhibiting qualities of gentleness to Nature. Thus, in place of the attitudes of haughtiness, aggression and greed, Muslims need to reflect on the Qur'anic dictum to 'tread lightly on the Earth', paying careful consideration to their life and lifestyle choices and interaction with the environment. We need to reflect on the position of the Earth as a *masjid*; as a Sign of the Most High; and as a living entity which will speak of the actions—pure and evil—which she bore witness to. The Earth, we are told, will speak one day of the ones who have bowed down in prostration to Allah with joy, but she will also recall the mischief, corruption and destruction wreaked upon her. How we live upon, and approach the Earth, is thus a matter of great consequence for the Muslim.



Greening the Muslim Educational Landscape

Education is regarded as central to the development of the Islamic personality. One of the definitive purposes of the educational process in Islam is to facilitate the trusteeship of humankind on Earth. Muslim environmentalists, working towards translating Islam's ecological ethics into action, have earmarked the educational sphere as the primary arena for raising environmental awareness and achieving action amongst Muslims. They have realised that the rich institutional landscape of Islam, the *masjid*, *maktab* and *madrasah*, as well as the Muslim schools and universities, fulfil an indispensable role in developing engaged, ecologically-literate Muslims.

The educational landscape of Islam, old and new, is being enlisted to broaden engagement with the environmental teachings of Islam. The *masjid*, one of the most visible symbols of Islam, has acted as both a place of prayer and learning throughout Muslim history and continues to be one of the most important centres of learning in Muslim society. It is playing a vital role in communicating the ecological ethics of Islam, and across the world environmental education initiatives, rooted in Islamic teachings, have been centred around *imāms*. Conservation

messages rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an are being transmitted from the *minbar*, greening campaigns such as the Green *Ramadhan* campaign in the USA are being spear-headed by the *masjid*, and *eco-masjid* initiatives which address the environmental impact of the design, construction and upkeep of the *masjid* are sprouting across the world. The *masjid*, more than other institution, is being used to great effect to impart and enact the environmental teachings of Islam.



In Indonesia, the *madrasah*, one of the enduring institutions in Muslim society, is known as a *pesantren*. In this most populous Muslim country, Muslim educational institutions such as the estimated 17000 *pesantren* are seen as pivotal in propelling Muslims to become more practically involved in environmental action. One *pesantren* near Bogor, Java is showcasing the use of *harim*, the establishment of a barrier zone around a river which is discussed in the *Shari'ah*, as a model for river conservation. As the training ground for community leaders, the *madrasah* is playing an important role in embedding the ecological teachings of Islam in religious training and alerting Muslim students to this key social concern, the environment.



Muslim schools are beginning to include the Islamic perspective on a range of contemporary issues, such as the ecological question. They strive, for the most, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Islam and a number of schools are addressing environmental concerns. Unfortunately, many initiatives often present “snapshots” of the Islamic ethic in the curriculum. One would expect a different picture emerging from the *maktab*, which provides elementary instruction in Islamic teachings, but this institution faces even more challenges than Muslim schools. The *maktab*, in my view, is the most neglected Muslim institution yet presents untold learning opportunities for introducing the ecological ethics of Islam to Muslim children. Where *maktab* curricula might be lagging behind, Muslim writers and educationists have started to produce a rich resource base which could be used by *maktab* teachers to introduce Islam's ecological ethics to the Muslim child.



New learning opportunities, formal and informal, such as conferences and study circles; lectures, workshops and seminars; relief efforts; and media and social movements have also been utilised to great effect by Muslim environmental activists. Numerous Facebook groups, blogs and campaigns promoting the environmental teachings of Islam, such as the *Green Deen* Campaign in South Africa, have also been launched.



Environmental education projects, campaigns and programmes, premised on the ecological ethics of Islam, are being developed in many Muslim communities. These endeavours exemplify the diverse efforts aimed at harnessing Muslim educational institutions in activating the environmental teachings of Islam. They are applying the environmental teachings derived from the Islamic legacy in practice, and showing that, for Muslims, environmental care is a religious obligation, an act of spiritual obedience, *and* requires action.