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Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): The Contribution of Islamic Ethics to Solving the Environmental Crisis

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ABSTRACT

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The article argues that the concept of human nature influenced by Aristotle's idea of humans as social animals has deprived humans of their spiritual significance. As the modern world, marked by the Industrial Revolution, took up this idea, it lowered the status of human beings to merely a factor in the process of industrial production. The modern world's view of planet Earth is that its very existence is to serve the unlimited consumption of human beings. These ideas about the nature of human beings and planet Earth have given rise to the current unprecedented level of destruction of the environment. It is argued that Islamic environment ethics, for example, the concepts of human beings as Amanah holders (trustees) and Khalifah (God's vicegerents on the Earth); among others, have established an ethical backbone for the protection and preservation of the environment. It is argued that by drawing on Islamic ethics, the common ground on which all Muslim countries agree, the Muslim world can contribute enormously to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the ethical framework set by the UN.

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Introduction

Aristotle's political thoughts describing human beings as social animals affected immensely the understanding of human nature. Although he did not mean that man is an animal, to place human beings in the category of animals instead of in their own as human beings confused human nature with that of animals. As animals use their instinct to compete for survival, man's very nature is mistakenly regarded as playing a role similar to those of animals, that is, to survive. Driven by such animal instincts, human beings' quest for power and domination using all means at their disposal was established as natural. Their spiritual and ethical aspects were downplayed as being merely secondary, always subordinate to or overwhelmed by their animal instincts (Özdemir, 2003, p. 5). The prevailing view of man's essence in the order of things has created equality between human beings and those of the animal kingdom. The emergence of scientific knowledge based on empirical, verifiable data in the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, which gave rise to the modern era, has further excluded man's spiritual dimensions from being part and parcel of human nature. This development laid the groundwork on which insatiable desire and sheer greed to be firmly secured in their place as the nature of man, which paved the way for modern man to devour natural resources at a devastating scale in the subsequent industrial revolution of the 18th century. The damage and adverse effects resulting from modern man's excessive exploitation of the planet Earth have been immeasurable. Air and water become polluted, and excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers turns the land poisonous; these hazardous resources inflict immense damage on the health and economy of the whole population, particularly those living in the poorer parts. Worse still, global warming and climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions due to the relentless burning of unrenewable fossil fuels have escalated the scale of climate disasters.

The colossal degradation of the Earth's environment that humanity is witnessing is due, for the most part, to excessive industrial pollution, carbon emissions, and abusive applications of technology and science. This abuse, in turn, is propelled by the untrammelled expansionist policies of the great industrialist powers and the Earth's biggest polluters. Oil-producing countries and companies oppose measures to reduce fossil-fuel production regardless of its damaging effects.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that if current emissions of greenhouse gas are not cut to the set target of 30-55 percent in order to keep the rise in

temperature to below 2 degrees Celsius, the world will witness a rise in temperature of 2.7°C as compared with pre-industrial level by the end of 2100. This rise will push the world “way off track” in capping rising temperatures, causing oceans to get warmer. Ice melt will continue at a rapid rate. Average sea levels are predicted to rise by 24–30 cm by 2065 and 40–63 cm by 2100 relative to the reference period of 1986–2005 (as reported by AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change, 2022). The damage caused by climate change has taken its toll on several countries; Extreme drought in Syria was one factor igniting the civil war with devastating consequences. Due to rising sea levels, Indonesia’s capital Jakarta is sinking at approximately 25 cm a year, the fastest rate in the world. Scientists have predicted that the megacity could be entirely submerged by 2050 (Lin & Hidayat, 2018). Provinces in Japan such as Fukuoka, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Saka and several others have suffered unprecedented flooding in recent years due to longer rainy seasons. Uchi Adai, a scientist from the Japan Meteorology Agency, has warned that this is the most potent signal nature sends to remind us of the climate change crisis (Voice Online, 2021). Flooding has become more severe in China, Turkey, the US, the Philippines and many more countries in several regions of the world, and its impact has become more destructive.

One of the regions hardest hit by climate change is the Middle East. As extreme temperatures and severe droughts have ravaged the region, forests have burned, and cities have become islands of unbearable heat. Anchal Vohra wrote in Foreign Policy that in June (2021), Kuwait recorded a temperature of 53.2 degrees Celsius while Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia recorded over 50 degrees. A month later, the temperature in Iraq spiked to 51.5 degrees, and Iran recorded close to 51 degrees. Worst of all, Vohra warned, this is just the start of a trend. The Middle East is warming at twice the global average and, by 2050, will be four degrees warmer compared to the 1.5-degree limit that scientists have prescribed to save humanity. The World Bank says extreme climatic conditions will become routine, and the region could face four months of scorching sun every year. According to Germany’s Max Planck Institute, many Middle Eastern cities may become uninhabitable before the end of the century.

This article argues that the ecological crisis the world is witnessing today is rooted in the corruption of modern man’s spiritual and ethical relationship with our planet Earth. Unless fundamental ideas about human nature and its relations with the environment are redressed, the search for a real solution to the crisis will remain elusive. The talk about environmental protection and all related issues would at best be merely lip service. At worst It could be

exploited to suit the agenda of the industrial powers. The author maintains that Islam provides a rich reservoir of environmental ethics with far-reaching socioeconomic and political ramifications. The Muslim world should turn this crisis into a platform where common concerns for the environment can be mobilized as a unifying force to contribute to protecting planet Earth's ecological system. It should also take the lead in having Islam contribute to achieving the SDGs. This effort would be an antidote to the violent images of Islam and the Muslim world portrayed by world media.

Ecological Crisis and Islamic Environmental Ethics

Religious traditions; on role of human beings in the cosmic scheme have never placed them on par with animals. According to major religious teachings, man is naturally a spiritual being, and his essence is a spirit associated with and yearns for the celestial realm (Bhikkhuni, 2016, p. 68). Therefore, the disposition of human beings is noble, and conditioned by their moral and ethical responsibility towards other creatures and themselves. Religious teachings raise the status of human beings high above terrestrial objects. As human beings occupy their moral high ground by subduing their covetous cannibalistic impulses, their status would further uplift them high above the angelic world.

The world's faiths and spiritual traditions also insist that the relationship between human beings and the planet Earth was never that of master and servant – in the sense of exploitation - as established by a secular-modern developmental mentality where relationships are characterized by violence initiated by the former against the latter. Bakar (2016) argues that the deepest human roots pertain to human beings' spiritual relationships with God and nature that largely determine humans' traditional appreciation of nature (p. 118). Regarding the planet Earth, its uniqueness and sacredness have been integral to the worldview of traditional men/women. The Earth is not merely treated as an economic resource, soundless, scentless, colorless, and meaninglessly devoid of soul and intelligence with no inherent or intrinsic value at all, waiting to be occupied and exploited as one of the factors in the production process. Rather, it has its own spirit, and its relationship with human beings in the cosmic order is cordial support. The Earth, therefore, is often called Mother Earth, like a mother who always unconditionally protects and supports her child. Indeed, given the intimate connection between nature and human beings, its abuse is nothing but self-abuse. Hallaq's (2013, p. 162) excellent reflections on the very existence of human beings and their

relationship with nature are worth mentioning here:

“Our attitude to and dealing with this natural world is the measure of our existence, of our estimation of what it means for us to be human beings. As many think, the consequence of these attitudes is not just a fact of life, a merely unfortunate byproduct of our otherwise good intentions and soundly established acts of progress. Rather, it is the ultimate measure of Man because it constitutes the lowest benchmark against which our moral accountability toward all things in the world must be gauged and judged”.

With respect to Islam, no sacred scripture speaks about nature and the Earth as much as the Quran does. It contains numerous guidelines about our treatment of the Earth and the rest of God’s creation, so much so that the Quranic revelation intimately connects itself with the notion of the sacredness of nature; to ponder how the universe is being perfectly created is to nurture one spiritual association with its Divine Creator; thus, the Quran (3:190-191) says:

“Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the Earth and the alternation
of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding.
Who remembers Allah while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides
and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the Earth, [saying],
“Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing];
then protect us from the punishment of the Fire.”

A whole eco-theology unfolds as a result, which distinguishes Islamic spirituality with its own characteristics. Just as human life is sacred, according to the above Quranic verses, so nature is a religious, hence sacred, institution. The Earth, with its fruits, palm trees with sheathed clusters, husk grains, and fragrant plants (55:10-13), is there for our benefit. According to the Quranic texts, God said: We have honored the children of Adam and provided them with transport on land and sea. And We gave them for sustenance things good and pure and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of Our creation (17:70). All this creation, God warns, has to be treated with respect, justice and balance, as He expounds it in most explicit terms that, “He has set the balance so you may not exceed the balance: Weight with justice and do not exceed the balance” (Surah 55:7-9).

The Quranic views the planet Earth as human beings' home. The uniqueness, conditions and special features of the planet Earth provided and sustained by its Creator is a suitable planetary home for human beings. Bakar (2016) observed that the Quran describes the earth using terms that we normally associate with homes. The Quran’s first mention of

the earth as human beings' only planetary home occurs early in its second chapter (2:30) (p.130):

“(God) Who has made the Earth (*al-ard*) your couch (*firash*), and the sky (*al-sama*) your canopy (*bina*’); and sent down rain from the sky; and brought forth in addition to that fruits for your sustenance (*rizq*); then set not up rivals unto God when you know (the truth).”

Based on this verse, the planet Earth is depicted as being blessed with ideal functional and aesthetic qualities that would best serve humankind. In functional terms, in conformity with standard architectural language and the appearance of things as seen from a human being's position on the Earth, the planet is described as a couch (*firash*) and the sky a canopy (*bina*’). The verse is obviously depicting the planet Earth as humankind's home since the couch and canopy refer to essential parts of a human being's home. The present and future well-being of humanity's present home will depend very much on the quality of his guardianship of the Earth's environment. In turn, it depends largely on the extent and quality of their appreciation of the Earth as their temporary home (Bakar, 2016, p. 131).

One of the most important concepts regarding human beings and the planet Earth originating from the teaching of Islam is the concept of Khalifah. It is usually translated as vicegerent or trustee. That human beings are Khalifah or trustees of God on Earth is made clear in the Quran (2:30), where God tells the angels: ‘I am putting a Khalifah on Earth.’ The Khalifah comes as a representative of a higher authority, that man has no exclusive rights to anything. The function of trustees is to carry out their responsibility diligently and ensure that the trust survives and thrives. As trustees of God on Earth, it is the individual and collective responsibility (*Amanah*) of humankind to maintain the balance or harmony of nature, preserve and conserve the environment with all its flora and fauna, and treat all God's creation with due respect and reverence. Thus, according to Islamic teachings, human beings are not independent of God but responsible and accountable to God for our activities on the planet: scientific and technological, industrial and business, individual and collective. The trust, maintaining the integrity of the Earth and its environment, is a test from God; and human beings will be judged on how their responsibilities as trustees are carried out. Thus, the Quran maintains that “it is He who had made you trustees on Earth and raises some of you above others in ranks, to test you through what He gives you” (6: 165) (Sardar, 2011, p. 266). When humankind acts, instead of as a trusted custodian and architect of the Earth, but as its most dangerous destroyer, driven by greed rather than need, and becomes an extravagant and

insatiable consumer, the natural balance is disturbed. Human beings' survival would imminently come to a catastrophic end. When humankind shows no responsibility, awareness, and appreciation of ecological systems and does not value the latter as they should, to use Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich's words, humankind is sawing off the very branch it is sitting on, thinking only of how much he can sell it for firewood (Foltz, 2016, p. 21).

Khalifah (trustee), Amanah (responsibility, accountability), Mizan (balance) and Adalah (justice) are among the main principles central to man's intercourse with nature that run throughout the Quran and Prophet's tradition. These fundamental principles, which can be termed Islamic environmental ethics, must be interpreted and applied in light of present challenges. They must also be expounded less theoretically so that practical applications can be adopted as part and parcel of an organization's best practices, whether private or governmental. The story of Prophet Muhammad instructing Sa'ad (d.637), one of his distinguished companions, concerning the use of water is very instructive in this regard, and it runs as follows:

Prophet Muhammad appeared while Sa'ad was performing the ablutions. When he saw Sa'ad using too much water, he intervened, saying: 'What is this? You are wasting water, ". Sa'ad replied by asking: "Can there be wastefulness while performing the ablutions?" The Prophet replied, "Yes, even if you perform them on the bank of a rushing river" (Özdemir, 2003, p. 14).

According to Özdemir (2003), this tradition and the attitude of the Prophet refer not only to using less water while performing ablutions but to a basic and ultimate principle to be followed by all Muslims, which is the prohibition against wastefulness, i.e., never adopting an extravagant or irresponsible attitude in the use of natural resources.

Parallel to the practical adaptation of Islamic environmental ethics in contemporary society, different measures should also be invented to promote these noble principles. For example, Islamic environmental and ethical measures are attached to loans issued by Islamic financial institutions. Mosques and madrasahs (Islamic schools) should devise measures to promote zero greenhouse gas emissions as an example for their communities to follow. These measures are not without precedent in Islamic practice to protect fragile ecosystems. The Prophet Muhammad established two types of sacred or haram precincts and set aside land for the common good, known as *hima*. The *haram* zone, where certain activities were forbidden, was maintained around wells, water sources, towns and cities. Around wells, a

space was left to protect them from impairment, to provide room for their operation and maintenance, to safeguard their water from pollution, and to provide resting areas for livestock and room for irrigation facilities. The *hima* zones were set aside outside cities specifically to conserve forests and wildlife. The Prophet declared the area surrounding Medina, the Prophet's city, as *hima*; and within the city, he established several *haram* zones. The right of flowing (*haqq al-majrah*) is recognized in Islam and protected according to the saying of the Prophet, who addressed an obstinate landowner, saying, "by God, the water will be passed to others, if necessary, over your belly" (Dien, 2003, p. 118). The partnership between people and water is indicated as part of the general human partnership in all the sources of life. Following the Prophet, the Caliph Umar, for example, established the *hima* of al-Sharaf and the extensive *hima* of ar-Rabdah near Dariyah. Several *himas* created during the classical period still exist in Saudi Arabia today (Sardar, 2011, p. 270).

To begin a common environmental policy in the Muslim world

The Muslim world has every right to take leadership in conserving the natural environment and protecting planet Earth from climate change disasters. As most Muslim countries are poor, except the small number of rich Gulf countries, they are the one who suffers most from environmental disruptions – a more extended period of extreme drought, severe flooding and all other related phenomena which destroy their lands and crops, the primary and only source of income. Although the Muslim world has been plagued by conflict among its members, regrettably in many cases resulting in war with one another, they share the same worldview regarding the natural environment. Nevertheless, for the most part, it must be admitted that for most of the world's Muslims today, as for people everywhere, environmental concerns are not seen as central. The reasons are varied: the decline of Islamic civilization, the ravages of colonialism and then the mad rush for modernization. In the Muslim world, environmental issues may be included within a litany of other problems and injustices, many of which are accorded equal or greater weight. It is a misperception to assume that poverty is a direct result of environmental degradation. The survival of nations depends on the conservation of their natural resources.

The problem that needs collective action can be raised to national and international levels by acting in concert to form the Muslim world's common environmental policy. For example, the global SDG framework was adopted by 193 countries at the UN General

Assembly in 2015. The SDGs are a shared ethical framework set to achieve 17 goals covering five dimensions of global sustainable development, namely, to uplift the well-being of people, stay responsible for our planet Earth, secure peace, create partnerships, and generate prosperity. This global effort enables member countries to voluntarily commit to the goals – set to be met by 2030 - throughout their development by reviewing their progress every five years in the key areas as measured by 241 indicators. As an ethical framework, it is argued that SDGs are identical to the Islamic environmental ethics mentioned above; hence, it is considered crucial for their very survival and the religious imperative for Muslim countries to contribute whole-heartedly to SDGs.

Conclusion

The environmental crisis with the devastating effects the world has witnessed is fundamentally a crisis of values. Humanity-related values and beliefs, and both traditional and modern thoughts on the nature of planet Earth, are distinctive contributions to the state of the world's environment. In a world where the number of human beings and human desires seems to be increasing without restraint, the finite resources of our common earthly home seem destined for the hands of those who remain bent on taking all they can, whether by persuasion or by force. To challenge this decadence, Islam offers a comprehensive foundation for ecological treatment, which Muslims are duty-bound to implement in their individual and collective efforts to develop appropriate policies and strategies for safeguarding the planet's future. A global effort through the framework of the SDGs provides a perfect path along which the Muslim world must walk and join hands with the international community to protect the planet Earth, hence, realizing their religious commitment and the well-being of their people.

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