

# Environmentalism, An Islamic Perspective: A study of promotion and Preservation

Mr. Riyaz Ahmad Sheikh

Assistant Professor (Islamic Studies)

Department of Islamic Studies

Islamic University of Science and Technology, Awantipora 192122(India)

## Abstract:

The existence of all creatures on earth is valuable is universal fact. Life is unswervingly allied to the environment in which we live today, it is our moral duty to protect and preserve it for coming generations. Keeping in view the moral responsibility, in this regard, present study is a humble attempt to synopsis the Islamic perspective on environmentalism. This article will draw upon research which synthesized the Islamic ecological ethic (eco-ethic) from sacred texts, traditions and illustrated how environmental consciousness would be inculcated from the very beginning and role of Islamic education in promotion, protection and preservation of our environment. The paper attempts to explore how the Islamic educational institutions, initiatives and other mediums could work together in the promotion of environmental consciousness and environmental endorsement and preservation and how our future would be safeguarded for coming generations.

Key Words: *Islam, Quran, Ecoethics, Khalafa.*

## Introduction

In the midst of the most fascinating trajectories of twenty-first century environmentalism despite of borders are environmental issues, challenges and crises. The hue and cry in national and international conferences, seminars, symposiums, and workshops held far and near, for the preservation and protection environment Vis-a Vis the life (all creatures on earth). The voice of Muslims who are meticulousness for humanity is rising. While the Islamic perspectives on preservation, protection of ecology and environment is non-ambiguous. In the Islamic teachings, the protection of environment is extremely important. Muslim eco-theologians are extending Islam's libratory discourse to the ecological question by constructing an alternative environmental imaginary based on the sovereignty of God and the responsible trusteeship of humankind. Eco-Islamic scholars have, since the late 1960s, applied central ethical precepts detailed in the Qur'an and Sunnah to construct the theocentric ecological philosophy of Islam.

## Environmentalism and Islamic Perspective

It is worth to mention that the code of conduct of environment is also reflected by the Islamic fundamental beliefs like *tawhid*, *khalafah* and *akhira* unity'. Owner and Sustainer of the universe, infuses the environmental worldview of Islam with the recognition that nature originates from Allah, 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. As it has been said earlier, the khalifah is responsible to obey God's rules and to protect His belongings on earth including the environment. 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 designed, and utilitarian value in sustaining both humans 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 and waste, corruption (fasād) will appear on the earth.

The universal focal point of Islam is everything in the universe is created by Almighty Allah. It is Allah (Lord of the Universe), Who adorns the skies with the sun, the moon and the stars, and the face of the earth with flowers, trees, gardens, orchards, and the various animal species. It is again Allah Who causes the rivers and streams to flow on the earth, Who upholds the skies (without support), causes the rain to fall, and places the boundary between night and day. The universe together with all its richness and vitality is the work and art of God, that is, of the Creator. It is again God Who creates all plants and animals as pairs, in this way causing their procreation. God created man subsequently to all these.

We are Allah's vicegerents on the earth; it has been given us in trust. Just as we are not the lords of nature and the world, so the world is not our property which we can dispose of as we wish or as we are able. Nature was created by God and it belongs to God. Everything in nature is a sign of Allah's existence; that is, a token or missive. The Qur'an expresses this truth as follows:

We shall show them our signs in the [furthest] regions [of the earth], and in their own souls.<sup>1</sup>

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds subjugated between the sky and earth — [here] indeed are signs for a people who thinks.<sup>2</sup>

So glory to Him in Whose hands is the dominion of all things: Ant to Him will you be all brought back.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of Divine unity is the basis and essence of Islam. Divine unity is apparent in the unity of humanity and of nature. God's vicegerents on the earth, the holders of His trust, are therefore primarily responsible for preserving the unity of creatures, the integral wholeness of the world, the flora and fauna, and wildlife and natural environment.

The word "earth" (ard) is mentioned twice in these short verses. A clear indication of its importance is the fact that it is mentioned 485 times in the Qur'an as a whole and is portrayed as being offered for man's convenience:

It is He Who has made the earth manageable for you, so traverse through its tracts and enjoy of the sustenance which He furnishes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an, Al Fussilat: 53.

<sup>2</sup> (Qur'an, Al Baqarah: 164)

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an: Ya Sin:83]

<sup>4</sup> Qur'an, Al-Mulk :15.]

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare His glory; there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet you understand not how they declare His glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbearing, Most Forgiving!<sup>5</sup>

See you not that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth — the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number of mankind?<sup>6</sup>

The earth is also important in regard to the concept of mutual relations. Human beings are created from two of its elements: earth and water. Thus, if man becomes alienated from the earth, he becomes alienated from his very nature. He is not the lord and ruler of the earth; he is a humble member of it. The superior qualities and faculties he possesses require not that he irresponsibly consumes and destroys its beauties and resources, but that he acts in awareness of his great responsibility towards them.

Who has made the earth your couch and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto God when you know [the truth].<sup>7</sup>

Or who has made the earth firm to live in; made rivers in its midst; set thereon mountains immovable, and made a separating bar between the bodies of flowing water? [Can there be another] god besides God? Nay, most of them know not.<sup>8</sup>

These verses and those similar to them have been sources of inspiration for Muslims and they have looked on nature in their light. They have regarded the universe and nature from this Qur'anic point of view. One can see the finest examples of this in the works of Muslim thinkers, and particularly the great Sufi masters. We shall suffice here with only two examples. The first is Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi, a thinker of the 13<sup>th</sup> century:

“How does this lifeless cloud know when it has to pour down rain? And you see the earth, which holds this flower and produces ten in its place. Someone is doing these things. It is He that you have to see.”<sup>9</sup>

“Despite being lifeless, even the earth knows everything God has bestowed on it. How could it otherwise have accepted the rain, suckled all the plants and nurtured them?”<sup>10</sup>

“The world is being re-created and renewed at every breath, but we are unaware of this, for we see it as static.”

The earth is also considered by Islam to be a place of purification and worship of God. God's Messenger (PBUH) said: “The earth was made a place of worship and purification for me [and Muslims].” The meaning of this is that when water is not available before worship, earth may be used for canonical ablutions (tayammum) in its place.<sup>11</sup> God's Messenger (PBUH) was emphasising this point when he said:

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<sup>5</sup> Qur'an, Al-Isra :44.)

<sup>6</sup> (Qur'an, A-Hajj: 18)

<sup>7</sup> Qur'an, Al- Baqarah: 21-2.]

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an, 27:61

<sup>9</sup> Mevlana, *Fihri Mafih* [Turkish trans. Meliha Ambarcioğlu], Istanbul, MEB Yayınları 1989, 61.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* 340.

<sup>11</sup> Bukhari, i, 86]

“God is beautiful and He loves the beautiful; He is generous and loves generosity; He is clean and loves cleanliness.”

One should not therefore be surprised at the Islamic view related to the environment, that “everyone should remind each other to conserve and protect the earth.” They should not hang back diffidently while the earth is being spoiled. They should attach the greatest importance to cleanliness and purity, physical and particularly moral and spiritual.

### **The Preservation of Trees, Woodland, and Green Areas.**

#### **Trees in the Qur’an**

Incontrovertibly, one of the most important aspects of protecting the environment and ecology is the conservation of the trees, forests, woodland, countryside, and all the living creatures whose habitats are such areas. We see that the religion of Islam puts forward important principles for these too. These noteworthy principles related to the conservation of such areas may be classed as moral and legal.

If we look at the Qur’an, we see that the word “tree” is mentioned with various meanings. Despite containing no direct command to plant trees, it speaks of trees and gardens and orchards so frequently and descriptively that it is not possible for any attentive reader of the Qur’an not to grow in awareness of them. For when creating this world, God adorned it with trees and gardens and offered them for man’s use. The word “tree” is mentioned 26 times in the Qur’an, and the word “paradise” in the sense of garden around 146 times.

It is He Who sends down rain from the skies; with it We produce green [crops], out of which we produce grain, heaped up [at harvest]; out of the date-palm and its sheaths [or spathes] [come] clusters of dates hanging low and near; and [then there are] gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar [in kind] yet different [in variety]; when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! in these things there are signs for people who believe.<sup>12</sup>

It is He Who produces gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar [in kind] and different [in variety]; eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. But waste not by excess; for God loves not the wasters.<sup>13</sup>

It is He Who sends down rain from the sky. From it you drink, and out of it [grows] the vegetation on which you feed cattle. \* With it He produces for you corn, olives, date-palms, grapes, and every kind of fruit. Verily in this is a sign for those who give thought.<sup>14</sup>

These verses thus mention the rain, trees, earth, gardens, vineyards and date groves, and clouds; they point out the Divine balance between all the elements making up nature, and want us to take lessons from them. To put it another way, we are being required to raise our heads in our personal and daily lives and to look at

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<sup>12</sup> Qur’an, 6:99)

<sup>13</sup> Qur’an, 6:141

<sup>14</sup> [ Qur’an, 16:11.

the world about us in a different way. For through their order and systems and ecological balances, all creatures point to their Creator.

In another place, the Qur'an draws our attention to the balance of nature, then indicates that we should be careful to observe the balances and rights in the life of society. That is to say, rights and balances are universal rules that we have to observe.

The sun and the moon follow courses [exactly] computed; \* And the herbs and the trees — both [alike] bow in adoration. \* And the firmament He has raised high, and He has set up the balance [of justice], \* In order that you may not transgress [due] balance. \* So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.<sup>15</sup>

### **Trees and Woodlands in Hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH)**

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) attached immense importance to planting trees, protecting existent ones, planting forests, as well as to conserving existent ones. Umul Momineen Hazrat A'isha (R.A), said: "His character was the Qur'an."<sup>16</sup> His practices and conduct related to conservation of the environment should therefore be considered from the Quranic standpoint. For us His actions are sources of inspiration constituting his Sunna or practices, which we are obliged to follow. To put it another way, as in all matters, the exemplar of Islamic conduct related to the environment and the person who displayed it in most perfect fashion was God's Messenger (PBUH). As this, and his commands concerning it, are learnt, our weighty responsibilities become clear.

Some Ahadith of the Prophet connected with planting trees and protecting them:

"If you have a sapling, if you have the time, be certain to plant it, even if Doomsday starts to break forth."<sup>17</sup>

"Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit."<sup>18</sup>

"Whoever reclaims and cultivates dry, barren land will be rewarded by God for the act. So long as men and animals benefit from it He will record it for him as almsgiving."<sup>19</sup>

"Whoever plants a tree, reward will be recorded for him so long as it produces fruit."<sup>20</sup>

If a Muslim plants a tree, that part of its produce consumed by men will be as almsgiving for him. Any fruit stolen from the tree will also be as almsgiving for him. That which the birds eat will also be as almsgiving for him. Any of its produce which people may eat thus diminishing it, will be as almsgiving for the Muslims who planted it.<sup>21</sup>

The reward accruing from seven things continue to reach the person concerned even if he is in his grave: knowledge he has taught, water he has provided for the public benefit, any well he has dug, any tree he has

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an, 55:5-9

<sup>16</sup> Muslim, Musafirun, 139; Musnad, vi, 91, 111, 163, 188, 216.]

<sup>17</sup> al-Munawi, Fayd al-Qadir, iii, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Al-Musnad, v, 415.

<sup>19</sup> al-Munawi, Fayd al-Qadir, vi, 39; Haythami, Majmau al-Zawaaid, iv, 67-8.

<sup>20</sup> Majma' al-Zawaaid, v, 480.

<sup>21</sup> Bukhari, Tajrid al-Sahih, vii, 122; Muslim, Musaqat, 2 No> 2.]

planted, a mosque he has built, recitations of the Qur'an bequeathed to him, and children who pray for him after his death.<sup>22</sup>

On migrating to Medina, God's Messenger (PBUH) organized the planting of trees and of date groves. He made the forests and green spaces conservation areas, where every sort of living creature lived. These were called sanctuaries (hima). For example, a strip of land approximately twelve miles wide around Medina was proclaimed a sanctuary and made a conservation area. We know that he proclaimed other areas, similar to this, sanctuaries. All these show the paramount importance —as a religion— Islam gives to nature conservancy and protection of all nature's living creatures.

Following these commands of the Qur'an and the exemplary practices of God's Messenger (PBUH), throughout history Muslims have given importance to planting trees and protecting existing one's. Abu Bakr, the first Caliph, for example, when sending an expedition for a battle to Muta, gave some instructions and underlines that: "Do not cut down trees and do not kill animals except food (in the enemy territory)."

Green is the colour of Islamic civilization, so too the dome of Prophet's tomb is green. These are not mere coincidence; they should be seen as reflecting the importance Islam gives to greenery, nature, and trees.

### ***Role of Islamic Education***

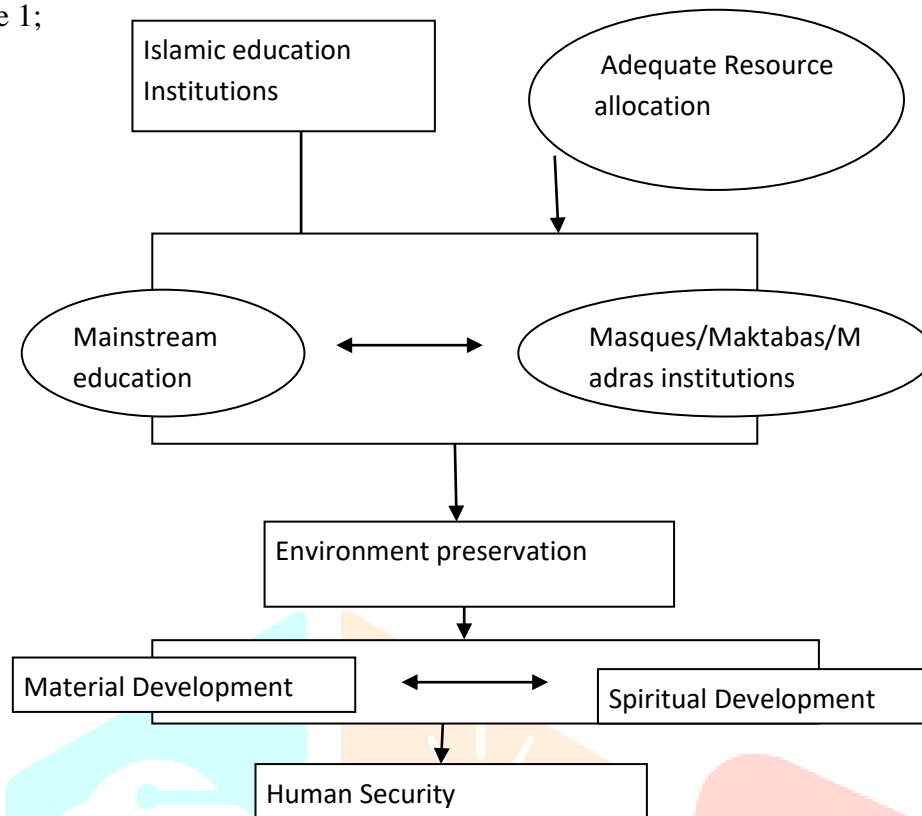
Environmental scholars and activists have started developing educational strategies to revive Islam's environmental teachings and practices. These have involved the articulation of the ecoethics of Islam; and the development of teaching and learning materials to introduce these ecoethics into the rich educational scenery of the Muslim world. While Makdisi (1981) provides a useful typology of traditional Islamic institutions, the emergence of Muslim schools and universities, as well as the plethora of formal and informal learning opportunities offered by civil society bodies, has expanded this educational establishment<sup>23</sup>. In keeping with the centrality of knowledge in Islam, many Muslim communities thus boast a range of institutional structures which have been harnessed to impart the green message of Islam. The eco-Islamic initiatives (Sermons, Maktabas, Madrassas, Conferences, seminars, symposiums, workshops, media, and Environmental organizations) illustrates how the enduring network of Islamic institutions, the masjid, maktab and madrasah as well as new and evolving establishments, such as Muslim schools, engage with the ecological question. Figure 1, indicate that Islamic environmental education supported through adequate financial resources should be started in mainstream education and madrassahs. Both these systems should also coordinate with each other in this regard. This would lead to environmental security, physical and spiritual development. These developments would promote environmental protection leading to a high level of human security which will provide a solid base for human development. Once this cycle is started, its various components will be mutually supportive to achieve the desired objectives.

<sup>22</sup> al-Munawi, Fayd al-Qadir, iv, 87

<sup>23</sup> Makdisi, G. (1981). The rise of colleges: Institutions of learning in Islam and the west. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press



Figure 1;



*Majids* or mosques is one of the most visible symbols of Islam and has acted as both a place of prayer and learning throughout Muslim history. It fulfills a multifaceted role in the life of a Muslim—a place of prayer and meditation, a centre of religious instruction and political discussion, and a place of safety and refuge.<sup>24</sup> Siddiq (2003) suggests that in addition to training imams in environmental matters, “mosques, whose number far exceed even the total number of primary schools in many Muslim countries, should be used as centres for mass education and for creating environmental awareness”<sup>25</sup>

The maktab, according to Hossain-Rhaman (2006), “unconsciously” educates for sustainability through the spiritual development intent of values education which aims to nurture right action, with the Creator, with humankind, and with the natural environment.<sup>26</sup> While makātib curricula constitute one source of introducing Muslim children to the environmental teachings of Islam, children’s books which focus on

<sup>24</sup> Foltz, R. C. (2000). Is there an Islamic environmentalism? *Environmental Ethics*, 22(1), 63–72.

<sup>25</sup> Siddiq, M. Y. (2003). An ecological journey in Muslim Bengal. In R. C. Foltz, F. M. Denny, & A. Baharuddin (Eds.), *Islam and ecology: A bestowed trust* (pp. 451–462). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p 461

<sup>26</sup> Hossain-Rhaman, P. (2006). Education for sustainability by way of values education—Bangladesh Context. In S. Woolterton & D. Marinova (Eds.), *Sharing wisdom for our future: environmental education in action* (pp. 93–99). Proceedings of the Australian Association of Environmental Education. [http://www.aeee.org.au/2006conference/11\\_Hossain-Rhaman.pdf](http://www.aeee.org.au/2006conference/11_Hossain-Rhaman.pdf).

the environmental teachings of Islam<sup>27</sup> as well as online curriculum materials which expand on the ecological teachings of Islam<sup>28</sup> are also being used at this educational stage

These ecoIslamic initiatives fare in building ecological literacy, improve and enhance Muslim capacity to understand the environmental question and to take action to maintain, restore, or improve the health of the earth. Most ecoIslamic initiatives are, for the most part, still at the stage of nominal ecological literacy—increasing knowledge and awareness of the environmental teachings of Islam. Islam's rich educational landscape, the masjid, maktab and madrasah, as well as the Muslim schools and universities, undoubtedly fulfill an indispensable role in developing engaged, ecologically-literate Muslims. However, for this establishment to take its place in revitalizing the eco-ethics of Islam, it must reflect the action-oriented or lived spirituality which this ecotheology embodies. It must represent the holistic knowledge-structure and objectives of Islamic education in relation to environmental learning; facilitate knowledge of the relationship between human beings, the Creator and creation; and propel every Muslim towards living in justice with creation.

Muslim schools, both primary and secondary, aim to operate according to an Islamic ethos and fulfill an important function in the modern Islamic educational landscape. In addition to the learning opportunities in Islamic sciences, faith schools adhere to national curricula, many of which incorporate Environmental education, was developed as a resource to be used by religious schools in teaching environmental ethics to Muslims

### **Conclusion**

In lieu of summation the theo-centric eco-ethics of Islam presents an environmental imaginary which promotes just, respectful and responsible interaction between humans and the natural world. Environmental education, which assists in the actualization of the ethical mandate of human trusteeship, equips Muslims with the knowledge required to fulfill this religious obligation. This educational process should not only impart knowledge about the workings of nature, but how to interact with the natural world—an ethic in which the well-being of all creation is accorded value. The budding ecoIslamic movement and the Islamic educational institutions, both traditional and modern, as centers of environmental learning and teaching would inculcate the values of the surroundings/environment and deals with justice in the affairs of environment. It is seeking to enliven an ethic which recognizes that living in justice with people and with the planet is an obligation for every Muslim who accepts the mandate to live as a trustee of Allah on earth. It is showing, in words and deeds, that the educational landscape of Islam remains a vital resource in broadcasting an environmental narrative which presents both an ethical and educational vision of relevance to the contemporary environmental movement.

<sup>27</sup> Murad, K., & Gamiet, A. (1981). Love all creatures. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.

<sup>28</sup> Ana, S. (2010). Love Allah—Recycle. Story and follow-up materials. Waqf Sunni Book. [http://islamicbulletin.org/free\\_downloads/kids/recycle.pdf](http://islamicbulletin.org/free_downloads/kids/recycle.pdf).



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