

Islam and the Environment

INTRODUCTION

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'The Environment' has become a subject of interest in secular civilizations in recent years. Before Darwin, the significance of the Environment was summed up in the word 'Creation'. Since Darwin, Creation has slowly become an obsolete word in scientific circles - few believe in a Creator. The debate now revolves around new questions:

- Why is there any order at all in nature? Is there a purposive tendency other than natural selection of chance mutations? How, for instance, does a bacterium 'choose' how to mutate in order to combat a lethal chemical at a rate much faster than is probable by chance?
- In quantum theory - energy and mass are now known to be two sides of the same coin - where does this leave materialism?
- How much effect do human intentions have on the results of experiments?
- Some facts are unknowable by human beings because they are changed by the act of measuring them - what are the limits to human beings' capacity to find out? Could such facts be known by their Creator?
- 'Chaos theory': 'random' results generated by a computer from a single equation produce order and beauty. This can be seen by environmentalists as bearing out the capacity of chance to produce order, or by religious people as showing that there is no such thing as chaos: everything operates under laws which ultimately produce order, even though the edges of that order may be blurred to our way of seeing - something like 'fuzzy logic' - an infinitely more complex and subtle order than we have so far been able to imagine. Perhaps the universe is generated from a series of basic equations? If so, who or what generated those equations?
- What are the ethical limits to scientific investigation and the application of scientific findings and technological skills? Who has the authority to set such limits?

The Qur'an encourages human beings to investigate to the limits of their capacity all the phenomena they see about them, to ask questions (like the ones above) and even to try to find fault (67:7). But it asserts that however hard they try, their investigations will end in exhaustion, without finding any fault, because the works of Allah are so much mightier than the human mind can comprehend. Humans cannot comprehend anything of His knowledge, unless He wills it (2:255).

Human beings have been honoured by Allah in many ways: He gave them knowledge of a kind not possessed even by the angels; and made them masters, if not of the whole earth, at least of those creatures and substances that are useful for them.

We have honoured the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things

good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation

17:70

The Qur'an invites people to think, contemplate and reflect upon the signs and wonders of Allah's creation: how He made the sun and moon a means for people to tell the time, how He made it possible for people to travel by sea, and derive food and transport from certain animals.

This is not 'conquest' of nature by human beings as some would like to think, but the subtle observation and use of the ways these things are made - the laws of Allah. What is science but a process of discovery of 'natural laws' so that they can be put to use in the service of humanity? If those 'natural laws' are changed, or different, or even just unpredictably disrupted in some way, human beings are no longer in control of nature, like the ship mentioned in the Qur'an which is tossed by a storm. The people on it only remember Allah when they do not feel in control of the situation, but as soon as they feel safe, they forget about Him again.

He it is Who enableth you to traverse through land and sea; so that ye even board ships;- they sail with them with a favourable wind, and they rejoice thereat; then comes a stormy wind and the waves come to them from all sides, and they think they are being overwhelmed: they cry unto God, sincerely offering (their) duty unto Him saying, "If thou dost deliver us from this, we shall truly show our gratitude!"

10:22-3

Similarly, today we find that disruption in the environment is threatening our control of it and we are starting to worry, and appreciate the fine balance of 'nature' which we have taken for granted up to now.

Environmentalists point out the many destructive results of human science and its applications in the modern world. The Qur'an says:

Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have done, that (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds, in order that they may turn back (from Evil).

30:41

It also shows the right way to interact with the environment. As long as people respect Allah, and the way He has set His creation in order, He will help them:

Do no mischief on the earth after it hath been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts) for the Mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good.

7:56

Creation in the Qur'an

According to Qur'an 21:30

...the heavens and earth were joined together (as one unit of creation) before We clove them asunder ...

As Maurice Bucaille pointed out, this is remarkably similar to the Big Bang theory¹.

Allah is in control of everything and understands everything:

Allah is He Who created seven Firmaments and of the earth a similar number. Through the midst of them (all) descends His Command, that ye may know that God has power over all things and that Allah comprehends all things in (His) Knowledge.

65:12

He set a measure for everything (65:03) and set up the Balance (15:19). So finely interlinked is this balance that the least action of the least creature can, in theory, make all the difference between, for example, fine weather and a storm. This is called, in chaos theory, the Butterfly Effect. How much more so then do the actions of human beings affect the state of the environment? With this in mind, the 'Balance' in the Qur'an refers not just to the 'ecological balance' we know today from science. Most often it means the Balance of Justice which weighs the deeds of human beings, the Balance of Right and Wrong. There is a right way to live and a wrong way. If people follow the instructions given by the Maker, then the balance is maintained, if they go against them, the balance is upset but, as Allah, the Creator, has power over all things, the balance He has created will be restored, at the expense of those who disturb it. It is on their own heads that the results fall.

The Qur'an tells us to examine history for examples of people in the past who misbehaved and were destroyed as a result. It gives examples of the people of Lot, who were destroyed because they went against Allah's commands, the people of Hud and Thamud. We could also cite the Romans and the Greeks, and, in our own day perhaps the British and the Americans. In Islamic history Ibn Khaldun noted the rise and fall of peoples, starting with the rise of a virile tribe from the wilderness, who, after several generations of power and affluence and leisure, become decadent and lose power to another, more virile and wholesome tribe, schooled in frugal living. The Arab descendants of the first conquerors of the Islamic era eventually lost their power to the Berbers in Spain; to Turks, Persians and others in the Middle East, who in turn lost power in some places to the Mongols and so on.

Frugal living is a concept which is alien to much of Western society. The capitalist dream is based on the concept of growth and increasing affluence. We expect (or used to expect) our lives to improve all the time, to receive regular pay rises, accumulate a pension, and retire, leaving a nice little nest-egg for our children when we die. Nowadays young couples want a house of their own, a washing machine and drier, a fridge, a car or maybe two, central heating and double glazing, perhaps a dishwasher, as soon as they are married. How many of us, who are not forced by circumstances to do without these things, would reject them because of their extravagance if we could afford them? How many of us would choose to live with our parents after we were married, or have them live with us, or how many parents would choose to go and live with their children? We all want our own place, our own space, plenty of food, and as many possessions as possible. If we have these

¹ *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science* by Dr Maurice Bucaille

things, we are not much interested in those who do not have them, and do our best to ignore them, in case they threaten the way we live.

The Qur'an does not condemn wealth and spending money, in fact it encourages it, so long as it is spent in a good way, the way of Allah. But it does say that wealth should not circulate among the rich, that it should be shared as a right with those not so well off. It encourages enterprise and development of natural resources, but also condemns excessive profit and usury which distort the market.

The sayings of the Prophet* bear out this attitude. The person with the best right to own land is the one who cultivates it and makes the desert green. Conversely, as the Qur'an says, the deeds of the unrighteous can be recognized by their destruction of the environment, whatever they may think and declare their intentions to be:

When it is said to them 'Make not mischief on the earth,' they say, 'Why, we only wanted to make peace.'

2:11

The Qur'an condemns those who heap up wealth, believing it will make them live forever; those who appear to be pious, yet do not help orphans or feed the needy, and refuse to do even small good deeds. These are the people whose callous attitude to Allah's creation and His creatures make them unaware and heedless of the damage they are doing in their quest for wealth: the men who cut down huge forests of majestic trees to provide hardwood for office furniture, window-frames, even paper, and pay no attention to restocking the forest; men who fish vast quantities from the sea, heedless of the fact that they are not allowing the ocean's life to replenish itself; men who oppress people and keep them poor, who force them from their lands, leaving them without any livelihood, and then employ them for low wages on their own land to grow crops for the market to make their employers rich; those who even kill and maim people in order to profit from the land they have stolen. These are the people who cause direct damage to the environment.

Yet above these in the pecking order (as we see in Yasin Dutton's article) are people without faces or guns, whose only concern is in figures and accounts, bankers who charge interest on their loans, who loan other people's money and try to profit from it; who call in their loans when things get rough, instead of helping businesses through the bad patch. These are the ones who squeeze the finances of farms and businesses so that they cannot afford to take a long-term view, and are forced to desperate and destructive measures to raise money to pay their debts.

Then there are those whose money they lend, you and I, who, when we have a bit of money to spare, put it away in an interest-producing account and forget about it, sometimes living off the interest we receive - whatever is left of it after the bankers have taken their share. How could bankers operate without people to lend them money?

The Islamic ideal is different. Muslims are each individually responsible for their actions. No one should expect to have an income without working for it or doing something useful. Begging is condemned, living on usury is condemned, and working for one's living is commended. The Prophet Muhammad said (pbuh):

No man eats better food than what he has earned with his own hand.

In fact usury is forbidden completely, in any form. Even making money from renting a house is disliked. Only investment which shares the risk of profit and loss alike is allowed. In addition, the rich must share their wealth by giving a welfare due - *zakah* - every year, and also voluntary charitable donations and trusts. Waste and extravagance are condemned,

...waste not by excess: Allah loveth not the wasters.

6:14

and moderation in consumption is recommended:

No man fills a worse vessel than his stomach. A few mouthfuls are enough to keep his back straight. But if he wants to fill his stomach, ... he should fill one third of it with food, one third with drink and leave one third empty for easy breathing..

Hadith:Tirmidhi

The Prophet* himself ate very little, and sometimes went for a month without cooked meat:

The family of (the Prophet) Muhammad never ate wheat-bread with meat to their fill for three consecutive days, till he met Allah.

Hadith: Bukhari

Profits should be moderate and fair. Cartels and monopolies, and hoarding and any other method of artificially interfering in market prices are banned in Islamic law. The office of consumer protection and market supervision, the *muhtasib*, was instituted during the *khilafah* of Umar Ibn al-Khattab to ensure that fair prices and quality control were maintained.

The means of making profit should be generally beneficial to the community. Any harmful trade, like drugs or alcohol, is forbidden. By analogy, Taleghani, the pre-revolutionary Iranian thinker, wrote that the arms trade should be forbidden too, though the Qur'an recognises the need to build up an impressive display of arms to frighten off any potential enemies (8:60). By analogy too, trade in harmful chemicals, once proved to be so, should also be banned, as would tobacco and other harmful consumer products, like petrol containing lead, and CFCs which destroy the ozone layer.

No believer in Allah could, like President George Bush, ridicule a person who earnestly strives to protect the environment and Allah's creatures, or argue that jobs come before protecting the environment. The environment IS jobs. No product, however small and insignificant, can be made without using natural ingredients derived from the earth and its plants and animals. Food is not made in supermarkets, or even factories, it is grown in Allah's earth, nourished with His rain and harvested by workers He has created. The cars and lorries that transport it are built from iron dug up from the earth, and plastics made from oil which used once to be trees. Electricity is generated from heat made by burning coal, oil and gas from

under the earth, and from uranium, dug out of the earth. Pencils are made from trees, and computers too, from oil and metals dug out of the earth. The intelligence with which human beings devise means to use these resources is also a gift from Allah, Who first taught Adam the Names of Things (Q. 2:31), and subjected the earth and many of its creatures to the use of humanity.

The Trust

Allah gave the responsibility to humanity as His *khalifah* - successor, viceregent, agent, representative, steward - to care for His Creation: in the Qur'an this responsibility is called *al-amanah* - the Trust, which was refused by the mountains and all of creation but taken on by humanity in their folly (33:72).

Human beings often want power, and sometimes they get it. What they do with it then shows clearly their own failings and strengths - more often failings. But it is not only those who get into positions of political and economic power who have power to influence the natural environment. Each one of us, in whatever we do, has some effect, and the combined effects of the unprecedented number of people in the world today is potentially devastating. Every time someone eats a hamburger, for instance, or a piece of steak, they endorse the consumption of large quantities of grain or grassland by the cattle. This grain or grassland could have been used as food directly by a far larger number of people. Every time someone switches on an electrical appliance, they are using electricity generated by some form of hydrocarbon burning or nuclear reactor which in its own way depletes or pollutes the environment. Eating imported fruit or rice may mean that you are providing profits for a large business which has usurped land that once belonged to peasant farmers and was used to provide food for them. They now try to scratch a living from much poorer land and cause environmental damage as a result.

So each one of us has a responsibility to use what little power we have to make things better, not worse. We should try to live economically, grow some of our own food, use electricity and petrol sparingly, walk and cycle and use public transport where possible, and share whatever we have with others who are not so well off. We should not be stingy about spending our money, but should try to make sure it goes to deserving people who are in need of it, rather than those who have too much already.

Islamic Economics

If each of us had, in order to obtain food from someone, to provide a different kind of food or commodity or service for them in return, how many of us would be able to earn a living? Yet this is how the original economy of Islam functioned. Money was a medium of exchange, but so were dates, and basic food grains like wheat and barley. And money was a real commodity, made of gold or silver or copper, that could be melted down to make useful or marketable things. The rates of exchange were fixed, and profiteering by varying rates of exchange was forbidden. In this way the economy functioned on a scale that was proportional to the productivity of the earth, unlike our own where the medium of exchange can be manufactured almost without limits, and is as imaginary and insubstantial as the promises to pay the bearer printed on the banknotes.

The international economy has become like a game of Monopoly where one or two players own all the property, and the rest of the players are kept in the game by an unending series of loans and mortgages, so that the owners can continue to rake in the rent. The wealth is circulating among the rich, as the Qur'an warns us, urging people not to allow this to happen but to accept that some of their wealth should go to the needy (59:07).

The wider picture

As recent corporate learning theory has confirmed, only when each person can see beyond their own individual needs to the effects they produce on the rest of the community, does the whole community begin to work properly and adapt to survive as a viable organism. Perhaps this collection of essays will go some way towards helping people to see the wider picture.

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