Basic Principles of Environmental Ethics in Islamic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The environmental code of ethics seeks to internalize support and respect of nature. By assuming a sanctifying and supporting role, religion can strengthen the authority of ethical principles. The present study seeks to develop and describe basic principles for environmental ethics according to Islamic teachings. In view of the ineffectiveness of law in management and control of damage to the environment, implementation of religiously sanctioned ethics may aid in recovery of the environment, or at least prevent further damage to natural areas. Four principles are proposed in accordance with Islamic teachings, two of which stem from the divine and metaphysical including the principle of universal intrinsic value and the principle of trustworthiness. The other two, i.e. the principle of support and respect and the principle of moderation in utilization of nature, relate to the personal and social responsibilities of people.

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INTRODUCTION

Today issues relating to the environment are among the fundamental and vital problems of humanity. The ever-increasing harm to the environment caused by technological evolution has presented serious concerns to the human race, especially environmentalists as well as people with prudence and compassion [1]. Accordingly, it seems that explication and propagation of a set of environmental ethics in the media, internet, schools, and academia can serve an important function in cleaning the world and opening the path to a healthy and safe environment for the present and future of the human race [2]. It is due to such concerns that many environmental support groups and societies currently operate worldwide, some of which enjoy exceptional political and social influence due to public endorsement [3]. This study is significant in that morality is a powerful deterrent greatly effective in controlling humankind since it emanates from the basic nature and conscience of a person. Also, the sense for ethical virtues is shared among all people.

In addition to aspects commonly held by all people, religion’s support of ethics can create a better foundation for reduction of ethical lapses, especially among followers of monotheistic religions. If the religious individual realizes that the status of living beings before God is greater than previously thought, perhaps human obtuseness toward and ill-treatment of nature will decrease. The overarching question of this study is what ethical principles can be derived from the teachings of Islam as one of the great monotheistic religions of the world for internalization of environmental ethics? As a secondary question of the investigation, is there a logical and satisfactory order to the principles derived from Islamic teachings?

The Critical State of the Environment:

The world around us tells the story of a destructive crisis in the environment. The most important consequences of damage to the natural world include:

- rising global temperatures;
- soil erosion;
- low rainfall;
- agricultural decline;
- drought and famine;
- prevalence of physical and mental illnesses;
- ozone depletion;
- destruction of forests;

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extinction of rare species of plants and animals;
• elevation of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere due to usage of fossil fuels;
• disposal of factory wastes into rivers and seas;
• harmful effects of nuclear war and chemical weapons; and
• Elevated levels of ultraviolet radiation.

Specifically in Iran, the critical reduction in water levels in Lake Urmia and other lakes, extinction of the Mazandaran tiger, and the endangered Iranian cheetah as well as the Caspian beluga number among the unfortunate conditions existing today. Similar circumstances are found in many other places of the world, particularly in developing countries.

**Involvement of Religion and Ethics:**

Seeing that legal codes have not been successful in management and control of environmental crises, focus on ethics, spirituality, and religion is one of the best solutions environmentalists propose. It is believed that the environmental calamity of today is in fact a religious and spiritual one, and that without proper consideration of religious and moral views no amount of talk about damage to the natural world will defuse the situation. Thus, it is emphasized that a return to religious traditions can solve environmental crises [4]. Many scientists and environmental specialists consider preservation of the environment to be a matter of ethics [5]. In 1992, over one thousand scientists from 72 countries, among which numbered 105 Nobel Prize winners, urged that a new ethical approach is necessary toward the earth to compel disinclined leaders, governments, and individuals to shape the necessary changes (ibid).

Support of environmental ethics can be traced back to the 1960s when such movements started growing. International conferences attended by religious and governmental leaders were organized in Oxford, Moscow, Rio, and Kyoto in 1988, 1990, 1992, and 1993 respectively. In 2001, a conference addressing the theme of environment, culture, and religion was held in Tehran. Other conferences on similar subjects were hosted in the United Nations Headquarters among other locations (ibid: 64).

This shows that humanity is now more inclined to accept religious teachings. Public opinion toward religion has changed and it is now considered as an influential factor in resolving environmental crises [6]. Religion depicts the relationship between humans, nature, and God in such a way that harming the environment is considered the same as damaging the integrity of existence and of God’s creation. For this reason, it offers more consistent inner barriers for prevention of harm to the environment [5]. This shows the importance of developing and propagating environmental ethics based on religion to control this global crisis. Experience in the modern world shows that in the area of free will, the most important method of control is a return to religion and ethical conscience. Without ethics, the law is easily circumvented.

In light of the emphasis of Islam toward the inherent sanctity of the environment and everything within it whether living or not, a framework based on Islamic teachings can perhaps aid in preserving the environment and ameliorating the critical situation, at the very least in Islamic countries—especially since this issue is expressly considered in the Quran. For instance, over thirty chapters of the Quran are named after natural things and living creatures such as Baqarah (cow), An’am (domestic ungulates such as cattle, horses, and camels), Fil (elephant), Nahal (bee), Naml (ant), ‘Ankabut (spider), Tin (fig), and Hadid (iron). Moreover, nearly two hundred Quranic verses address environmental issues, many of which are located in the abovementioned chapters.

**Ethical Fundamentals in Islam related to the Environment:**

Environmental ethics presents a moral paradigm for what is right and wrong regarding the interaction of humans with the natural world. Following such norms leads to the inner quality of loving nature. The current research does not seek to specify small-scale parameters or present an environmental code of ethics. Rather, it takes a macro-level but functional approach to developing important general fundamentals for environmental ethics based on Islamic teachings in this area. The most significant principles that can be formulated through analysis of Islamic teachings can be grouped into four categories.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The principles described within this study possess a systematic interrelationship. They are, in effect, complementary and supportive towards one another. Two of the principles are related to human nature and our relationship with the Divine. One is the principle of intrinsic value of all living things, which concerns the divinity God has bestowed upon all of nature. The other is the principle of responsibility and trustworthiness. God considers humans worthy of such and has therefore obligated us to adhere to this value. The other principles involve the personal and social responsibilities humans have toward the environment. These include the principle of support and respect and the principle of moderation in utilization of nature and natural resources. It is worthy of note that the latter principle derives from the former. In other words, support and
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Intrinsic Value of All Living Things:

Since plants and animals are alive, like humans, they have the right to live. They intrinsically possess divine worth. This idea proceeds not only from the tenor of many Quranic verses but also from explicit statement in other verses. The Quran states: We did not create the sky and the earth and whatever is between them for play (Quran 21:16); The sun and the moon are [disposed] calculatedly (Quran 55:5); Indeed in the alternation of night and day, and whatever Allah has created in the heavens and the earth, there are surely signs for a people who are Godwary (Quran 10:6). Even more significantly, God considers all living things to be similar to humans; there is no animal on land, nor a bird that flies with its wings, but they are communities like yourselves (Quran 6:38).

Thus, once when a man salaamed to the Prophet of Islam (s), he reciprocated using a plural pronoun, i.e. ʻalaykum al-salam. The man said, “I am one person! Why did you reply thus?” The Prophet answered, “Because I salaamed to both you and your horse” [7]. Moreover, the Quran states: There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, but you do not understand their glorification (Quran 17:44).

In this regard, Imam Ali (a) states that the cry of the rooster is his prayer, and the flapping of his wings is his genuflection and prostration [8]. The verse above and other similar verses have been interpreted in different ways by Muslim thinkers. Mulla Sadra, a renowned Persian philosopher, stated that all beings, even inanimate objects, are alive and knowing. They praise God, bear witness to His existence, and know their Creator and existence of the Creator. It is not only for the use of humankind; rather, since no other creature has this ability, the earthy and heavenly beings submit to God and worship Him (see: Quran 22:18 and 17:44).

This principle of universal awareness encompasses not only living creatures such as plants and trees but also apparently lifeless matter such as rocks and dirt. The Prophet of Islam (s) has stated, “Mount Uhud likes us and we like it in return” [12]. This statement does not only relate to Mount Uhud; this mountain is just an example. Thus, he meant, “All mountains like us and we like them” [13].

Responsibility and Trustworthiness:

In Quranic discourse, humans possess a lofty status. Humanity has been elevated above all of creation (Quran 17:70). We possess divine or Godly souls (Quran 15:29), and even the angels bowed down to humankind (ibid). The sun, moon, and all vessels are in service to humanity (Quran 14:33). In fact, all beings on the earth have been created for humans (Quran 2:29). God has given humanity the authority to utilize the blessings of the world. In short, humankind is superior to all beings and is the steward of God upon the earth (Quran 2:30-4). However, this power and volition is based on a specific principle that aims to prevent human nonchalance and misuse. This concept is the principle of responsibility and trustworthiness. As the human race is at a higher level of perfection than all other beings, humans have been given the ability to safeguard the earth, sky, and mountains (Quran 33:72). God has placed nature in the care of humans, but He has not given license for profligate and indiscriminate use. God is Trustworthy, and He has created humans with His own characteristics [8].

According to Imam Sadiq (a), knowledge of the deserts, mountains, and forests is among the factors behind the superiority of humans over angels [14]. In other words, the wisdom and knowledge of humans can be considered one aspect of the higher level of perfection they enjoy. Just as knowledge brings one closer to absolute perfection, it also increases one’s responsibility. Also, just as humans are responsible toward themselves and the society, they are also responsible toward the environment. All responsibilities humans have are essentially connected to their duty toward God. Disobedience to God is a type of injustice and ethical deviance. On the same grounds, hostility toward nature is an injustice and unforgivable sin.

Considering the ethical principles of Islam, it can be deduced that protection of the environment is predicated upon the proposition that every component of the environment has been created by God Almighty, and all living beings have been created with specific responsibilities which God has determined with the utmost meticulousness and absolute balance. Maintaining the environment involves protecting its values as signs of the existence of the Creator. It is not only for the use of humankind; rather, since no other creature can truly take on the responsibility of its preservation, God has placed this charge upon humans (Quran 2:30 and 33:72). The role of humans toward nature is not only exploitation and enjoyment. It is expected that humans protect, support, and aid other creatures. One reason for this is that the environment does not only belong to the current generation.
Strictly speaking, it is a gift by God to all generations. Imam Ali (a) has stated that humans are not only responsible toward themselves, other humans, and God, but are also held accountable for nature, the earth, and animals [15, 16]. On the same lines, the Prophet (s) stated that sating a tree’s need for water is comparable to slaking the thirst of a Faithful person [17].

On verse 61 of the Quranic chapter Hud, “He brought you forth from the earth and made it your habitation,” considering humanity’s inherent love for nature. Allama Tabataba’i [18] stated, “God created humans from this earth and then perfected it. He inspired human nature to change the world to suit humanity’s needs and to utilize it to its benefit. This is because the reason for humanity’s existence and survival has been placed solely on the earth.” Naturally, humans innately love anyone who assume such a role for them. It is like the love of a child toward its mother. The earth can be considered the original mother of humankind and therefore, it is incumbent upon us to respect it. It may be for this reason that when a person is in the state of ihram within the House of God, the Kaaba, and is practicing the highest form of responsibility and devotion toward God, they are strictly forbidden from cutting any plant or hurting any animal. Books of Islamic jurisprudence discuss this matter in great detail [19].

**Respect toward Plants and Animals:**

Indiscriminate destruction of life and natural areas is a great oppression against nature as well as a form of disobedience toward the Creator Who has given this world to humans for safekeeping. All living beings have a share in the earth, and humans do not have the right to violate their portion. As stated by the Quran, “It is He Who has spread out the earth for (His) creatures” (Quran 55:101). In his ethical teachings, the Prophet (s) emphasized protection of all things in nature. For example, he enjoined against polluting waters [20] and cutting down trees [8], especially green trees, except in special cases and necessity [12]. The importance of nature is so great that its support should continue to the moment of death. In this regard, the Prophet (s) has stated, “If you have a sapling in hand and Judgment Day has come, plant it if you have enough time to do so” [21]. He also made a point of showing respect to animals, stating, “Do not strike the face of an animal since every living creature glorifies and praises God” [22]. He also strongly discouraged abuse of animals [23, 24]. Imam Sadiq (a) prohibited loading too much weight upon pack animals [25] as well as branding their foreheads [26].

An interesting fact is that, according to Islamic tradition, harming animals entails payment of a blood price to their owners. Examples of this include harming dogs [27] and horses (ibid:172). Furthermore, the Prophet (s) has stated that if a person causes the abortion of an animal’s pregnancy, they must pay one tenth of the price of the animal [28]. Noble Ali (a) judged that a man who had taken out the eye of an animal must pay one forth the price of that animal to its owner [29]. The Prophet (s) even declared that one must not curse at animals [8]. He also said, “Do not mutilate animals, even rabid dogs” [30]. Another thing he forbid was causing animals to fight each other [8], which in some places has become a form of entertainment. Breeding fighting cocks as well as bulls for competitions is a case in point of this type of illicit entertainment. These statements were not limited to words for these individuals. Such consideration toward animals is also seen in their behavior. Imam Ali (a) has stated, “The Prophet (s) was making wudu when a thirsty cat approached him. He first quenched the thirst of the cat and then made wudu” [31]. In short, according to Islamic teachings, protection of the environment in its entirety is a universal ethical principle. It is the responsibility of both people and governments.

**Moderation in Utilization of Natural Resources:**

Islam permits usage of natural resources for food, clothing, and other regular needs. However, this use must not cause destruction or lead to unconditional domination of nature. Humans should understand that they are not the owners of nature. Rather, mutual need is what exists between humans and nature. Development of environmental ethics in Muslim countries can be achieved by bringing environmental policies closer to Islamic teachings. Applying scientific methods and taking into account the religion of Islam, educational systems can pave the way toward increased environmental awareness. Apart from control and utilization, the relationship between humans and nature also consists of development. Therefore, humanity must not stop at self-indulgence. It is said that a person who sees God’s blessings only in food and clothing shows ingratitude toward Him by their ignorance [32].

In addition, such a hedonistic perspective is associated with immoderation and waste, which is—according to Islamic teachings—a reprehensible immoral act as well as a type of social deviation. According to traditions, wasting prevents acceptance of prayers [33] and also causes poverty [34]. This may be since indiscriminate use will eventually destroy both humanity and nature. Imam Sadiq (a) has stated that God hates wasting, even if it is a date pit with very little use [35]. In addition, Islamic teachings emphasize moderation in daily use [36, 37]. Therefore, with the aim of restoring the environment, or at least preventing further harm, the following points are necessary in judicious use of nature.

1. Correct and sensible use of natural resources on the basis of need;
2. struggle against selfish consumerism and depletion of resources;
3. control of human and machine presence in natural places, especially in special and important biomes;
4. efforts to restore the environment to its natural state by spreading the culture of tree-planting, recycling, reuse, and thriftiness;

In summation, moderation toward nature, i.e. rational use in tandem with respect toward nature, is the most important strategy for restoring the environment to its original state and preventing greater harm to animals, plants, waters, etc.

Conclusion:

This study aimed at clarifying principles of environmental ethics based on Islamic teachings. It shows that a comprehensive, methodological view of religion can be a suitable approach to internalizing environmental ethics. This research examined four basic principles that can aid in the mitigation of existing crises. In view of the fact that these principles are logically interrelated and stem from the human conscience and nature, they can function as a kind of moral enforcer for all people, or at least for followers of divine religions, not just Islam. According to the first principle, since plants and animals are living beings like humans, they have the right to live. Also, they possess spiritual and moral value, and thus must be respected. According to the Quran and Islamic traditions, not only do all beings have consciousness and understanding, but they also praise God. The second principle necessitates trustworthiness in humans. Since humans are beyond all other creations in terms of perfection and nobility, they also have the greatest responsibility in protecting the earth, sky, and everything in between. Internalizing this in the young generation can reduce the possibility of environmental harm. Respect and support of the natural world, including plants, animals, and even inanimate objects, is the heart of the third principle. It is a universal ethical principle for both people and governments. The final principle is a limiting factor. It requires moderate use of resources in daily life. Prodigality in use of nature is a type of wasting, and thus must be avoided. According to the Quran and Islamic teachings, not only is it not a social problem according to Islamic teachings, but also a betrayal of public interests.

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