

Understanding Islam

Series Three: Building a Just Society

To view the video that goes with this article, go to <https://chrishewer.org/>

Part Six: Ecology and the environment

The situation affecting our planet in terms of sustainability, preserving the environment and ecology is well known. Of the 510m square kilometres surface of the earth, 149m square kilometres are dry land, which represents about 29 per cent, but only about 70 per cent of this is suitable for agriculture. The human population now exceeds seven billion, with a forecast that this will reach between eight and nine billion by mid-century. This will put pressures on the earth's ability to feed all these people if we continue to consume and waste as we do and if we maintain the meat-based diet of much of the developed world. Whilst Islam accepts the right of human beings to eat meat, Muslim scientists are aware of the fact that it requires forty hectares to provide meat for twenty people. The same amount of land can produce sufficient maize for 100 people, or wheat for 240 people, or beans for 610 people. They are also aware that fodder for animals in the developed world is grown in the developing world where local people starve. The shift towards producing fuel from plant crops further exacerbates this situation.

361 square kilometres of the earth's surface or 71 per cent is covered by water but of this 98 per cent is salt water, one per cent is ice and only one per cent is fresh water. An increasing amount of this water is becoming polluted through sewerage, industrial effluent and the products of intensive farming so that hundreds of millions of people have to cook, drink and wash with this polluted water. This is exacerbated by the drift of populations from rural areas to live in cities with the strain that this puts on water transportation and the appropriate disposal of sewerage. Our atmosphere is becoming increasingly polluted by the "greenhouse gasses" of carbon dioxide and methane, thus leading to global warming and the increased desertification of the land.

The forests of the earth are being cleared at the rate of millions of hectares per year, often to provide for additional grazing and fodder for animals for human consumption. Many of our medicines have been developed from the rain forests and thus their loss is a double blow for the future. The importance of trees was known in the time of Prophet Muhammad, who is reported to have said:

Whoever plants a tree and looks after it with care until it matures and becomes productive will be rewarded in the hereafter.

And

If anyone plants a tree or sows a field and men, beasts or birds eat from it, he should consider it as an act of charity on his part.

A respect for trees was written into the Muslim rules of engagement in war from the beginning, in which it was forbidden to cut down a tree or kill an animal except such as was needed for food.

An Islamic perspective

The Qur'an makes clear that the earth was created by God and belongs to God [Q. 22:64] and that the way in which it is looked after by human beings is a test from God [Q. 7:129]. This led to a principle in shari'a that the land, air, sunlight, water and fire are the common property of all creatures and not the private property of human beings. Men and women are given the right to use God's earth [Q. 55:10] but not to waste its produce [Q. 7:31]. God created the world with a balance in nature and not out of a sense of play; human beings must accordingly act with responsibility towards it [Q. 55:3-9; 21:16-17; 14:19-20]. All the elements of creation were created and live in a state of submission to God, that is, they are *muslim* [Q. 22:18]. The human being, created to be the *abd* and *khalifa*, that is, the obedient servant and the regent of God on earth, has the responsibility to cherish, protect and conserve the earth although some people rebel and spread corruption in nature [Q. 30:41]. Such corruption incurs God's displeasure and must be accounted for on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:204-206].

The earth is created in a state of balance in which all living beings have their right to a share. It obeys the laws of nature given by God and indeed, as Muhammad is reported to have said:

All creation is like a family of God and he loves the most those who are most beneficent to his family.

Not even a leaf falls to the ground without the knowledge of God [Q. 6:59]. This balance provides limits to human activity and must be learnt and obeyed, therefore the principle of utility is not sufficient as a guide to living. Even though the earth is provided for human sustenance [Q. 16:10-11; 80:24-32], we are not at liberty to abuse it but rather must learn to live within it and read the signs of God contained therein [Q. 3:190-191; 16:66; 51:20-21; 88:17-20]. This is a duty placed upon every human being [Q. 17:70; 7:172], in regard to which we will be held to account [Q. 23:115; 99:7-8]. Thus there is a God-given balance in nature, which human beings must comprehend and put into practice in all their dealings with the environment.

Focus on water

The Qur'an regards water as the source of all life [Q. 24:45; 25:54] and it is detestable (*makruh*) to waste it. This is made clear in a Hadith of the Prophet:

God's Messenger appeared whilst Sa'ad was performing the ablutions [for prayer]. When he saw that Sa'ad was using a lot of water, he intervened saying, "What is this? You are wasting water." Sa'ad replied, asking, "Can there be wastefulness while performing the ablutions?" To which, God's Messenger replied, "Yes, even if you perform them on the bank of a rushing river."

It should be noted here that the abuse of water in this way was detestable even though the supply was plentiful, it was free and obtained without effort, it did not pollute or deprive other creatures of their share and it was for a good cause, to perform the ritual washing for prayers. This then describes a Qur'anic and Prophetic attitude to the good things of the earth that transcends the limitations of utility and harm. The water is to

be respected in its own right. The corollary is clear when we consider how often water is wasted for a lesser cause, whilst causing harm and pollution and depriving others of their rights.

Widening the perspective

The same rules that apply to the profligate use of water can be applied to the waste of food in the developed world or the reckless consumption of petroleum products or other natural resources. The Muslim attitude must be guided by the principles of justice and balance. The principles of fair trading apply, workers must be paid a just wage promptly and justice requires that a fair price is asked and paid.

Muslim scholars hold various opinions on the question of genetically modified plants. Some see it as interfering with the rights of all creatures, in the same way that many object to the degrading conditions of much of intensive farming, whilst others see it as the engagement of science under divine guidance to provide the necessary food for those in need.

Two case studies: land and water

By looking at the way in which land and water were to be treated and conserved according to the Muslim code of living, we glimpse the underlying ecological principles of balance, respect, justice and a sense of fairness.

Land was traditionally divided into three categories: developed, undeveloped and protected. Developed land was that which had been enhanced by human settlement or cultivation. Undeveloped land, by contrast, was that which had not been “brought to life” by cultivation or settlement. Key to our concern is the concept of protected land, which could be a protective zone around developed land, almost like a “green belt” around a settlement that would allow space for the people who live there to collect firewood or pasture their animals. It could also be a cordon around a well or a river to allow open access to people and to keep away animals that might pollute it. In a similar way, it could be an area surrounding a tree to correlate with its roots to allow it to draw the water that it needed. Such protected lands (*harim*) could be owned by individuals or collectively. There is also a concept of protected land as being set aside (*hima*) for emergency or collective need; this could be “common land” open to all the residents of a settlement, emergency pasture that could be cut for fodder in times of shortage, a “tree nursery” to bring on robust stock for cultivation or an area of wild flowers needed for bee pollinators.

Water is a gift from God and thus remains God’s property for the use of the people as a whole on uncultivated land. Rivers were divided into three categories: those large ones that flow naturally and permanently, which are open for all to use and to tap for irrigation; small or seasonal rivers that might barely suffice the needs of all had to be divided justly according to local need, e.g., depending on soil types, crops, seasons and potential for storage; finally, water conveyed by artificial canals may be used only

by those who contributed to their building or digging. Similarly, wells were categorised according to those dug for the common good, to which all had equal access: first for human consumption, then for livestock and then for crops. If a group dug a well for their temporary camp, they had first call on that water as long as the camp remained, with others having access to the excess, until such time as they broke camp, when the well became common property. If someone dug a private well on their own land, then they had sole rights to it for human consumption, animals and crops, except in a time of emergency such as a drought. Any excess water should be freely given away if required by people or animals but those who use it should then do the work of drawing it or else a contribution would be in order. A similar equitable usage was drawn out for naturally occurring springs with variations according to whether they arose on private or common land and whether they had been developed through a reticulation of pipes or canals; there was an overriding clause of “human necessity” having preference over private claims.