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The Divine Spirituality Within Environmental Stewardship

According to NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI), the “billion-dollar events of 2020” included a cascade of 7 disasters linked to tropical cyclones, 13 to severe storms, 1 to drought, and 1 to wildfires, costing the nation a combined \$95 billion in damages. (Bateman, 2021) The growing list of destructive natural tragedies can be tied back to the consequences of human actions: in the last 50 years, human beings have destroyed about 50% of all forest and woodland due to the increasing market for lumber, construction, fuel, or space to grow more crops. (Nunez, 2019) The increase in carbon dioxide due to deforestation has contributed immensely to the greenhouse effect, a major factor of the widespread disasters we witness today. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is a 95% probability that human activity has caused an increase in Earth’s temperature, as a result of human-produced greenhouse gases. (Masson-Delmotte et al. 2019)

Recently, the advent of “environmental justice,” the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of [origin] with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies,” as defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency, (EPA, 2020) has gained popularity in response to frequent natural calamities. However, this is not enough: rapid industrialization has affected both the world’s exterior and interior ecosystems, wounding all living things within. When considering the nature of earth’s environments today, we must question ourselves: what are we

doing as individuals to strengthen the ecosystem? A broader and yet more significant question that can be asked concerning our spiritual identities is: what are we doing, as Muslims, to counter the effects of mass environmental depreciation?

In this essay, I would like to examine the depth of responsibility that Muslims hold as the maintainers of the earth and how it reflects upon our overall obligations as Muslims to be ideal stewards for humanity. In addition, I would like to analyze the ecological foundation of Islam and how this sets the basis for why we should prioritize fighting for environmental justice, as well as how this should be done. I will reference essential evidence through statements within the Qur'an and numerous ahadith, and provide additional detail with statements from Islamic experts in the ecological field.

According to Arthur Saniotis, author of "Muslims and ecology: Fostering Islamic environmental ethics," early Islam was characterized by "its simplicity and reverence for nature." (Saniotis, 2011) Saniotis notes that scholars consider the 3 founding ideas of Islam's ecological ethics when deliberating the environment: "tawhid" (divine Oneness), "khilafah" (trusteeship), and "akhirah" (the hereafter). The cornerstone of key Islamic ecological beliefs depends on the concept of Tawhid, which cements that Allah (swt) created the universe, and all existence reflects His Oneness within its own plurality and dependency. The universe is characterized by the "principles of unity, balance, and harmony" that seek to express the bounty of the concept of Tawhid, a principle repeatedly quoted in the Qur'an (Qur'an 14:19-20, 46:3, 15:85-86) (Saniotis, 2011). The recognition and pure belief in the divine Oneness of Allah requires devotion for His subjects and love for His creation, which in turn necessitates that nature be maintained by its assigned caretaker. In Seniotis's words, "tawhid is the basis of human action and thought, penetrating every dimension of subjective and social life." (Saniotis, 2011)

Next, the concept of khilafah acts as an essential pillar within the basis of ecological initiative in Islam. The Qur'an is clear in its message that human beings are the stewards of Allah's creation: in the Qur'an, Allah, may He be exalted, says, "It is He who has appointed you vicegerent on the Earth..." (Qur'an 6:165) and this responsibility must be dignified by refraining from corruption, as Allah (swt) says, "And do good as Allah has been good to you, and do not seek to cause corruption in the Earth. Allah does not love the corruptors." (Qur'an 28:77) When considering these verses, we understand that to exploit anything upon the earth is a direct exploitation of the earth itself, which acts as a violation of the sacred responsibility that Allah (swt) has entrusted us with. Although the Earth was created to serve our purposes, the Qur'an makes it clear that we are to treat it kindly, as Allah states in Surah Furqan, "The servants of [the Most Merciful] are those who walk gently upon the earth..." (Qur'an 25:63)

The beloved Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) reported, "The world is [beautiful], and verily Allah (swt) has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves." [Muslim] (Zafar, 2019) This declaration from the Prophet reiterates the Qur'anic teaching that human beings have been given authority over the land in order to respectfully maintain it. The ecological importance of preserving worldwide environments is confirmed by the fact that nearly ¼ of the Qur'an calls Muslims to meditate on the aspect of nature (Saniotis, 2011); many perceive that within the concept of stewardship humans maintain as sacred guardians of the earth is the idea that humans are meant to be friends of the earth, not its masters, (Khalid, 1996) a message that fits elegantly into the ecological portrayal of the human-earth relationship within the Qur'an.

Lastly, we must consider the implications of the Akhirah (hereafter) when considering our obligations to the wellbeing of the environment. This notion indicates that humanity is not

only obligated as trustees upon the earth, but they will be held accountable for their actions in the hereafter, an idea that seeks to emphasize the intensity of the responsibility that Allah has gifted us with. Every passing generation is obligated to improve the condition left by preceding generations, and not a single human being has the right to degrade Earth's ecological systems and upset the delicate balance of nature by ruthlessly polluting its bounties and depleting its resources. (Zafar, 2019) This concept is only further motivated by the level of "environmental maintenance [open] to divine judgment" in the afterlife. (Saniotis, 2011)

Multiple hadith note that cruelty to animals and the degradation of nature warrants divine punishment. Ibn 'Umar reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said: "A woman who tied a cat will go to hellfire; she neither fed it nor allowed it to find food on its own," [Bukhari]. (Saniotis, 2011) al-Sharid reported that he heard the Prophet say, "If you kill a sparrow wantonly, it will hasten to God on the Day of Judgement, saying: "Oh Lord! So and so killed me for play and not for use!" [Ahmad] (Saniotis, 2011) These incidents provide ecological groundwork that affirm that humans have the privilege of living upon the earth in a sustainable manner, an idea that both the Qur'an and hadith expound on when "unequivocally prescrib[ing] a criterion for responsible human trusteeship of the earth," which is significantly linked to both tawheed and recognition of the akhirah. (Saniotis, 2011)

Renowned 14th-century Muslim philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah noted "shari'ah" or "islamic legislation" must work to "protect all benefits, eliminate or minimize evil, safeguard the greater good, and remove the greater harm from those who are most vulnerable," and we find that the preservation of the environment is essential to the benefit of the worldwide community, becoming the basis of what is known as environmental shari'ah itself. (Saniotis, 2011) Therefore, environmental corruption of all kinds, including industrial pollution, environmental damage,

reckless exploitation, and mismanagement of natural resources are ultimately and inextricably disliked by Allah (swt). (Saniotis, 2011)

While the delicate balance of nature seeks to be maintained, our heavily industrialized nations are disrupting the “balance (mizan) of greenery.” (Bagnied, 2016). Toxic emissions make roughly 70% of greenhouse gas emissions in the US (EPA, 2019), and cultivate an atmosphere that causes a wide range of health hazards, as well as catalyze high-scale natural disasters. (Bagnied, 2016). It becomes evident, then, that as the inhabitants of the earth, we are also harmed when corruption is performed upon the earth, and most significantly as Muslims, we have a strong role to play in putting a stop to this corruption.

The multitude and complexity of the natural world require that we work to preserve the trust that Allah has endowed upon us, by consuming less and in healthier, more efficient methods that set a precedent for the rest of the world. Within our adherence to the regulations of Allah, we submit to social values that call for the integrity and the preservation of diverse life. Professor Al-Jayyouzi, author of “Islam and Sustainable Development,” commented that the mass ecological crisis is intricately connected to human values because human actions are immensely responsible for the current crisis we face. “Reflecting on main environmental problems … we see that all are triggered by human [ignorance]. Human responsibility is to [protect] livelihood and ecosystem services...” said Professor Al-Jayyousi. He emphasized that “every living thing is in a state of worship,” (Al-Jayyousi, 2018); when one hurts a being, an entire community of worshippers are being silenced, as Allah states in Surah Hajj: “Do you not realize that everything in the heavens and earth submits to Allah: the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees, and the animals?” In order to celebrate the spiritual unity of all life, we as Muslims must work to maintain the biological and cultural diversity within our environments.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was himself a “pioneer” when it came to environmental preservation, cultivating “land preservation and providing sanctuary for wildlife.” (Bagnied, 2016) He specifically designated unique areas in which water, wildlife, and forestry use would be restricted for the public (‘haram’) or left alone altogether (‘hima’), actions that are precedents for what is known today as nature reserve. He clearly forbade the destruction of trees and crops even during war and cultivated an immense degree of importance towards “sustainable cultivation of land, waste minimization, human treatment of animals, preservation of natural resources, and protection of wildlife.” (Bagnied, 2016) This is further proven within his words when he said, “If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds and an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift for him,” in a manner that encourages positive treatment of the environment. [Bukhari] (Zafar, 2019) As the role model for all of humanity, the Prophet set an exemplary example for how we should act as maintainers of the environment; he (pbuh) believed that all earthly resources, such as animals, land, and water were not possessions of humanity, meant to be used endlessly according to will, but instead, as provisions from Allah that were created to be used in moderation through wisdom. The Qur'an tells us, “....waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters.” (Qur'an 7:31)

While there is great talk in the political atmosphere in regards to utilizing eco-friendly engineering as a broad solution, even if humans can successfully reduce their carbon footprint relatively soon through technology, the crisis will continue until the environment is given its due respect. (Murad, 2010) A true solution can only be possible when humanity makes peace with the surrounding world, just as the Prophet (pbuh) set an exemplary model for. This idea begins within, with the most important being consciousness of God; an idea that can, “be established with proper mindset and performance.” (Murad, 2010)

According to Murad Manjed from Harvard's Committee on the Study of Religion, "Before one can attribute sacredness to creation, one must recognize that all sacredness stems from the Creator and therefore make peace with God. With this realization, individuals may see that all holiness within nature is but a mere reflection of God the Holy. By doing this, individuals make peace with themselves as servants of the Lord and with the rest of creation as servants of the Lord as well." (Murad, 2010) The consciousness of God is portrayed through consciousness in eco-friendly actions, a notion that can be formally implemented by involving oneself in pursuits that seek to cleanse the Earth and rectify corruption. In addition, responses from the Muslim academia are fundamental to working towards a viable solution; religious thinkers can produce mass inspiration for "hands-on environmental stewardship by informing and educating people on environmental aspects of Islam. (Murad, 2010)

Examples of innovative ecologically-conscious Muslim thinkers include Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a writer since the 1960s. Nasr has set an essential basis that allows others to explore and develop an Islamic response to the current environmental crisis. Additionally, writers such as Mawil Izzi Dien and Ibrahim Abdul-Marin, who wrote the book "Green Deen: What Islam Teaches About Protecting the Planet" have worked to propose solutions according to the Islamic outlook towards nature. With the advent of the internet, especially, Muslim activists are finding the means to respond to the environmental crisis powerfully in increasingly accessible ways, a prime example being "A World of Green Muslims" an innovative blog that spreads "Green messages from across the Muslim blogosphere." (Saniotis, 2011)

Malaysia's eco-friendly social model for the future, labeled Vision 2020, offers a unique blueprint that seeks to "combine western principles of governance with Islamic environmental ethics," that fosters "community-based democracy, economic equity, and the reduction of

poverty, and ensures ecological protection.” (Saniotis, 2011) Muslims in western countries have also increased efforts to become ecologically conscious by involving themselves in rapidly influential ‘green’ organizations, the foremost of which being in the UK as the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, which has similar goals to Vision 2020. The pursuits of collective Muslim organizations and respected writers of authority implement God-consciousness throughout their goal in protecting the environment, maintaining a fundamental role within implementing tawheed, dignified khilafah, and recognition for the hereafter.

Closing sentiments emphasize that nature demands human responsibility in Islam. “The sense of domination over nature and a materialistic conception of nature on the part of modern man are combined, moreover, with a lust and sense of greed which makes an ever greater demand upon the environment.” (Saniotis, 2011). This demand must be dealt with by restricting greed and enforcing Islamic ideals that seek to preserve the environment and adhere to the basis set forth by the Qur'an and prophetic sayings. With the establishment of these fundamental principles, intricately woven with the overlying ideas of consciousness of tawheed, implementation of khilafah, and recognition of the hereafter, it is “incumbent on every Muslim to establish a lifestyle where justice and equilibrium are firmly established between the human and non-human worlds.” (Murad, 2010)

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