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Muslims Getting It Right with Nature for Environmental Sustainability

Olajide Abiodun Obi *

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos, Nigeria

*Corresponding author. Email: olajide.obi@lasu.edu.ng

(Received 28th April MMXXIII; | First published online 29th July MMXXIV)

Abstract

The environment is under a serious threat, caused by human actions and inactions. One of such things that posed a threat is the human population which is estimated to be about 7.9 billion and it is increasing on a daily basis and the way humans deal with nature. However, the need for sustainability makes it necessary for every occupant of the earth to play a role in protecting the environment. There have been several campaigns and sensitization by scientists to make people understand the threat they are posing to the environment and the need to stop, then make sure they protect their environment from more damage. Despite all campaigns, seminars and conferences organized to sensitize the people on why they need to treat nature well for their own sake and that of other creatures, the issue keeps getting worst, and people are causing more damage to the environment. Since scientific sensitization seems not to be working, this paper suggests a religious approach to solving an environmental problem and specifically looks at how to tackle the issue from an Islamic point of view. The world Muslim is with an estimated population of about 1.907 billion. If these people follow the teachings of the holy Qur'an to protect nature, then the environmental crisis the world is facing currently will be reduced drastically. The hermeneutic approach is used to reiterate the Qur'an and the Hadith of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him), a prescription on the way the environment should be treated.

Keywords: Nature; Islam; Quran; Hadith; Environmental Crisis; Muslims

1. Introduction

In Islam, nature has its order and functions that work naturally within ecosystems and its components are mutually dependent on each other. Any disturbance will affect the balance of the system and destroy at least one or more components. This has an effect on the lives and living of the occupants of the planet earth. A good example is the depletion of the Ozone layer which scientists confirm is the

reason for the overheating experienced all over the world (Sivasakthivel and Reddy, 2011, Sharma, 2019). In this paper, an attempt was made to talk to Muslims who are over 24 percent of the world's population (Kettani, 2019) about environmental protection to reduce the problem of environmental degradation. This is done by doing a brief exposition and a reiteration of what the Qur'an and the Hadith said about the way Muslims should treat their environment. And the research attempt to the answer question, why should Muslims respect, protect and value the environment? Why do Muslims despite knowing what the Quran and Hadith said about protecting the environment still go ahead to engage in activities that destroy the environment? A brief clarification of the concept will help our understanding of the issue at hand. And this will warrant looking at the meaning of concepts like environment, so we don't just assume people understand what it means.

The term environment simply means our "surroundings". Surroundings in this context mean both the physical and non-physical, living and non-living things around us. According to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (Hornby, 1995a), the environment is defined as, "the natural conditions (e.g. air, water, and land) in which human beings, animals and plants live." The words environment and nature are most times used interchangeably. On this note, the environment is further defined as "the whole universe and every created, not artificial, thing" (Hornby, 1995b).

Ethics on the other hand is a branch of philosophy that deals with human behaviour in terms of whether it is good or bad, right or wrong. Ethics as a branch of philosophy deals with the judgment passed after considering human behaviour. In the past, ethics has helped to reshape human society into a better one. Environmental ethics on this note can be defined as the branch of ethics that deals with the way human beings relate to the environment. There have been cases of environmental crisis and it was alleged that human activities are the cause of the environmental crisis. Environmental ethics as an applied ethics believes that humans are part of society as well as other living creatures, including plants and animals.

It is a clear belief in Islam that the creation of human beings, the earth, and all other natural resources is a clear sign of Allah's power, wisdom, majesty, and beneficence. The contents of environmental ethics are grounded on the belief that humans are representatives of God on earth and that their behaviour and actions are motivated by earthly and/or heavenly rewards. This is stated in Qur'an chapter two;

And (remember) when your Lord said to the angels: "Lo! I am about to place a vicegerent on earth," they said: "Will you place on it one who will spread mischief and shed blood while we celebrate your glory and extol your holiness?" He said: "Surely I know what you do not know." (Quran 2; 30).

Today, humanity is facing environmental degradation which was alleged to have been caused partly by human selfish nature and partly by abandoning the religious teachings about the environment. According to Gada, (2014), man's search for a breakthrough in the aspect of science and technology has led him to search for nature's resources beyond normal which has in turn resulted in ecological imbalance and disturbance in the environmental condition. There is now the need for us to redeem our environment from further degradation and all hands must be on deck. Campaigns are going on everywhere by scientists to educate the people on the importance of the Environment to us. The Quran and the Hadith of the Holy Prophet Muhammed (Peace be Upon Him), which are the guiding principles of the Muslims prescribed to them the way the environment should be treated. In Islam, nature has its order and functions that work naturally within ecosystems and the components are mutually dependent on each other. Any single disturbance will affect the balance of the greater system and destroy at least one or more components. It is believed that if Muslims are reminded of their duty towards the environment as instructed by Allah and His Prophet, then the level of environmental degradation will reduce.

2. The Muslims and Environmental Sustainability

Submission to the will and instructions of Allah and his Messenger is what makes a Muslim. On this note, Muslims must follow the teachings of the Qur'an and hadiths of the Prophet in addressing whatever issues that concern their lives and living. For doing this, there are certain rewards and punishment in some cases. Nature or environment is part of our lives, reason the Qur'an and hadith of the holy Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) prescribed to humans how they should relate with their environment. The question to be asked here is, are the Muslims following these laid down principles given by Allah and his Prophet? If they do, there will be a limitation to the level of destruction on the environment considering the populations of Muslims in the world. Also, if the Muslims are duly treating the environment well as prescribed by the Qur'an and hadith, other people in the world will emulate them and nature will not be destroyed as we have it today. The second question that is begging for an answer is having known the rules guiding their relationship with the environment, why are the Muslims not following the rules?

The holy Quran asked a question that should be of concern to every human being on the surface of the earth when it says that *"Have you considered that if one morning your water were to disappear into the earth, who then could bring you water?"* (Q67:30).

This verse of the Holy Qur'an is pointing to the fact that Muslims need to manage their natural environment well, because if they stop seeing them, how will they survive? Human lives and non-human animals and plants depend on the natural environment. Therefore, Islam through the Qur'an and the Hadith so particular about how a man should relate to his natural environment. There have been things like Global warming, global climate change, deforestation, pollution, and resource degradation, and these things are posing threats to human existence which could lead to extinction. Apart from the anthropocentric reasons for taking care of the environment, there are other reasons too that are based on theocentric. Theocentrism is the belief that God is the central aspect of our existence, as opposed to anthropocentrism or existentialism. In this view, the meaning and value of actions done to people or the environment are attributed to God. The tenets of Theocentrism, such as humility, respect, moderation, selflessness, and mindfulness, can lend themselves to a form of environmentalism (Edualingo, 2021).

What environmental ethics as a branch of ethics is trying to do is to ensure that every individual is doing their part to keep the environment safe and protected. Whenever, a tree, for instance, is cut down to make a home or other natural resources are being tapped into courtesy demands, there should be a replacement or it should be well managed to avoid wastage. This will be a way to remind us that, gradually those resources are becoming more and more scarce to find. This is why humans must do everything possible to keep the environment protected and free from danger. It is not as difficult to do as you think if we are ready and willing to make a few simple and easy changes to the way we treat our environment. Treating nature better will be easier if a man understands that nature, as it is perceived, has some intrinsic values, and have the same life as we have, and was created by Allah (God) the same way we are created. On this note, nature should be respected.

Allah (SWT) says; *"Eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters."* (Qur'an 7 verse 2).

The Prophet Muhammed in his Hadith was reported to have said;

"If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (sadaqah) for him." (Bukhari). Also that: *"Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded,"* (Musnad).

Having considered this, Umar and Samir (2015), from their view, said it is important to seek assistance from religion for the protection of our environment. This according to them, is because we keep recording an increase in environmental damages globally and all effort put in place to stop the damages has been abortive this according to them is a result of the irresponsibility of some

actors involved in the control and management of the environmental crisis. Since the attitude of the stakeholders toward environmental issues is not helping matters, consideration should be given to religion to play a role in addressing the environmental crisis. Understandably, what Umar and Samir (2015), are advocating for is that man should try to use the theocentric approach to solve the environmental crisis in the world.

James G. S. (2008), is another scholar who believes religion has a role to play in addressing the environmental crisis. He said, the potential of faith communities is enormous and people seem to abide by religious instruction more than any other thing in the world. Yielding to the advice of Umar and Samir, some verses of the Holy Quran and hadith as contained in the Islamic law will be considered to see what Allah and his Prophet said about how humans should relate to the environment and the reason why they should do that.

The Islamic law otherwise called the Shari'ah in Arabic is the point of reference for any activities of an average Muslim. The shari'ah is a combination of the principles from the Quran, the hadith, the analogical reasoning by scholars (Qiyas), and juridical consensus by Shari'ah scholars (Ijma). This is been thought to every Muslim during Islamic studies in secondary schools and evening Arabic schools. However, there are four schools of thought in Islam each of which is headed by these scholars; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, Hanbali, and Jafari. The opinion of each school is significant in any Islamic ruling after the Quran and Hadith have been searched and the issue at hand is not addressed in both (John, 2014). The Shari'ah is divided into two sub-categories which are: i) those relating to the worship of Allah and ii) those relating to the interactions between humans and the balance of the creation (Umar and Samir, 2015). The second category is where the issue that has to do with our relationship with nature which is the main concern of environmental ethics falls. The reason for this according to Umar and Samir is to prevent harm in the world and the hereafter. So it is not the case that, humans were made superior and given the license to subdue and destroy nature with their excessive exploitation of it (Nomanul, 2001). This is evident in the Qur'an where Allah says;

“Certainly, the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of human beings, but most human beings do not know.” (Q 40 vs 57).

The Qur'an moves further by making it known that birds and other animals are nothing but communities just like humans;

No animal crawls on the earth, no bird that flies with its two wings but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book (of decree). Then to their Lord will they all be mustered. (Q 6 vs 38).

The above two verses are clear indications that Allah knows the importance of animals in the environment and a clear warning to mankind to be environmentally sensitive. The hadith which is the second source of Islamic Law also demonstrates concerns for the environment. Umar and Samir (2015), made it known that the hadith comments more on issues concerning the environment compare to the Qur'an. Among such things, the hadith dealt with those things like land cultivation and conservation, the fair treatment of animals, plants, and vegetation environmentally and socially considerate guidelines on the construction of buildings, water usage, and other mineral resources.

Ahmad (1993), posited that humans may enjoy certain benefits from nature, but whatever enjoyment they hope to get from nature must not result in wastage of nature, there should be adequate maintenance of ecological equilibrium and fulfillment of their communal obligation under the Islamic Law. Among such Islamic law rulings on maintaining a dignified relationship with plants, animals and other living things can be found in several hadiths. For instance, in a hadith narrated by Imam Muhammed Ibn Al-Hassan –Ash- Shaybani which was translated by Muhammed Abdur Rahman the Prophet was reported to have said; “Treat your sheep well, make sound their resting

place, and pray in their environs, for they are among the animal of paradise (Abbass and Asagullahi, 2010).

In another hadith, it was narrated by Abu Hurairah that the Prophet of Allah said: "One of the Prophets was bitten by an ant, so he ordered that the ant colony be burned. Then Allah revealed to him: 'Because one ant bit you, you destroy one of the nations that glorify Allah?'" (Sunan Ibn Majah 3225). What the above hadith is simply talking about is being mindful of our actions against other creatures that are not human. The hadith can be said to be theocentric because the reason given for the protection of the ant is because they too glorify Allah. Though there are instances when you will have to kill the animals for food or other important reason, the Muslims were advised to kill the animals well and not suffer them. It was narrated from Shaddad bin Aws that the Messenger of Allah said:

"Allah has prescribed Al-Ihsan (proficiency) in all things. So if you kill, then kill well, and if you slaughter, then slaughter well. Let one of you sharpen his blade and spare suffering to the animal he slaughters." (Sunan Ibn Majah 3170).

Also, it was narrated that 'Abdullah bin 'Umar said:

"The Messenger of Allah commanded that the blade should be sharpened, and hidden from the animals, and he said: 'When one of you slaughters, let him do it quickly.'" (Sunan Ibn Majah 3172).

Another hadith narrated by Abu Sa'eed Al-Khudri said: "The Prophet passed by a man who was dragging a sheep by its ear and he said to him; 'Leave its ear alone and hold it by the sides of its neck.'" (Sunan Ibn Majah 3171).

From the aforementioned Qur'anic verses and hadith of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH), it is quite obvious that there are guiding principles for Muslims on how to treat nature and prohibitions on causing unnecessary damage and pains to plant and animal lives where there are no necessity or justification that warrant that. Though, the issue of justification for killing or mistreating plants and animals or nature at large may be subject to debate. There might be a question like what will be the justification for killing a fellow living being? This is the reason some people prefer to eat only vegetables and not meat of any form. In order to encourage Muslims to treat the environment right, Allah promised to reward them. A narration by Al Saybani proclaims rewards for whoever treats his animals well. He said the one to whom his Horse is a source of reward is the one who keeps it in the path of God and ties it by a long rope in the pasture or garden. According to him, such a person will get a reward equal to what the horse's long rope allows it to eat in the pasture or garden. And if the horse breaks its rope and crosses one or two hills, ten marks of his hoofs and its dung will be counted as a good deed for the owner. What this translates to, is that the owners of animals are liable for the well-being of those animals. As quoted by Umar and Samir (2015, Andalusian Al Qurtubi (d.1273CE) support the fact that humans may use the beasts of burden for transportation purposes but whoever is using the animal must consider the weight to be placed on the animal with potential implication for humans both positive and negative (Tlili, 2012).

However, if owners of animals are unable to cater for the needs of their animals in terms of feeding, looking after their health, and providing shelter, it was ruled that such individuals should sell the animals or let them go free so they may find food and shelter or slaughter them if eating their flesh is permissible (Haq, 2001). On the final note here, Ahmad (1993) reiterates the teachings of Islam that slaughterers of animals (for food) must not allow the animal to witness the slaughtering of animals waiting for slaughter, or sharpen a knife in their presence. Hunting of animals purely for sport and inciting them to fight one another as some Muslims do during the Ram killing festivals (Eid-Il Adha) are highly prohibited and carnivorous animals should not be killed except when it poses dangers to human life.

3. Why do Muslims Join in destroying Nature?

It was mentioned earlier in this paper that the population of Muslims in the world is above 1.9 billion which is almost one-quarter of the earth's population. The question is why are these number of people who have guidelines enshrined in their books on how nature should be treated joined in destroying it? The answer to this question could not be tied to any other thing other than ignorant of those guiding principles. The ignorant of the law though, they said is not an excuse but when you don't know something, you don't know it, and the reason why it is necessary to implore religious leaders to look beyond how best man should behave to fellow humans and the worship of Allah to enlightening their followers on the Islamic ethics regarding the environment. Make Muslims understand that maltreating nature is an aspect of the Islamic criminal law and any persons found violating the law are liable for punishment here and in the hereafter. It should also be made known that there is a reward for whoever treats the environment well here on earth and in the hereafter. If this is done, it will help to protect the environment from further degradation.

In some states where Muslims are majority for instance Northern Nigeria, there is an agency called Hisbah that is saddled with the responsibility of enforcing compliance with the Islamic laws. They should be made to enforce Islamic environmental laws the same way they do for Islamic law forbidding alcohol consumption, prostitution, and other vices. The Muslims should see the ethics of the environment as part of worship which have its reward here on earth (anthropocentric) and in the hereafter (theocentric) considering these six principles which are that nature is;

- i Pointer to the oneness of God and the worship him as well (Q 22vs 18, Q55 vs 6)
- ii Signs of God's existence (Q 13 vs 3)
- iii Is put in our care as caretakers (Q 6 vs 165)
- iv We should create a balance or be moderate (Q 54 vs 49, Q 55 vs 7-9)
- v A trust in mankind
- vi Be accountable for whatever we do on earth (Derya Iner).

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

There have been several efforts by scientists to tell the world what damage their actions have caused the environment and want them to desist from such because the world it on the verge of collapsing. Despite all campaigns and sensitization by scientists to make sure people treat the environment well, nothing has changed. On this note, this research has deemed it fit to talk to people in the religious language since it has been observed that that is the language they listen to the most. The paper has so far considered the Islamic law on environmental ethics that has to do with the way nature should be treated. The paper has also answered the question of why humans should respect or value nature in different ways. The first is that our lives depend on the existence of nature which is what is termed anthropocentric reason for persevering. The second is the theocentric reason which means that we have to respect and preserve the environment because it worships God, just the same way humans do. We have to respect and preserve nature because it is proof of the existence of God under what is called the cosmological argument for proof of the existence of God. They were also created by God and if we truly respect God, we must respect all his creatures too. This is what can be called the intrinsic value of nature as it has been mentioned by some environmental ethicists that argue that nature should be respected and preserved for its intrinsic value.

The Muslims, if can get along with nature because of either of the two reasons mentioned above, will be doing the world a great benefit. The preservation of the environment based on these two reasons will reduce drastically, the level of environmental crisis and this will translate to

environmental sustainability which is what the world needs now. On this note, this research wants to recommend that Islamic clerics should make it a point of duty to educate their followers on the need to obey the Islamic law that instructs Muslims to preserve and respect nature. This should be done at every one of their congregations in each of their sermons, especially on Fridays when people gathered to observe the Jumat prayer. When this is done considering the population of Muslims in the world, within a short period, the environmental crisis will become a thing of the past.

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