

# Islam and Environmental Ethics: A Qur'ānic Approach

MD. ABU SAYEM\*

## Abstract

*The present paper deals with Islamic moral teachings of the environment from a Qur'ānic perspective. It attempts to correlate some familiar Qur'ānic terms with human moral responsibility towards the natural world. The paper investigates whether the Islamic view of the natural world supports the anthropocentric and bio-centric approach to environmental ethics or not. In so doing, the paper aims to present an Islamic balancing approach to the environment and show why such a unique approach is necessary to address the present environmental degradation and how it can work for environmental sustainability.*

## Keywords

Islamic eco-theology, environmental ethics, 'abd, 'adl, ākhirah, amānah, fasād, ihsān, khalīfah, mīzān, qadar, tawhīd.

## Introduction

Environmental sustainability is essential for all living forms on earth. Without a healthy environment, no living things can survive. To preserve the ambient environment is an urgent duty for all humans at least for their existence. Unfortunately, human activities are damaging the environment instead of protecting it. Modern science and technology have given much power to humans to exploit the natural

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

An early draft of this article was presented at the 11th International Conference on World Peace and Security: Role of Islam (ICWPSRI) 2017, held at International Islamic University, Chittagong, Bangladesh, on 30-31 December 2017. The author is grateful to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong SAR for the travel grant to attend the conference. He also expresses his thanks to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their valued comments and suggestions.

world ruthlessly. Though we are told by the same science and technology that our planetary earth is going to face an environmental catastrophe, modern science and technology seem to fail in creating a positive approach to nature. For this reason, some scientists urge religious scholars to cooperate in this regard through retrieving, constructing, or reconstructing a positive and sympathetic approach to nature.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, world religions have some strong moral grounds to create an intimate relationship between humans and the natural world. In the present study, we focus on eco-religious, ethical understanding from an Islamic perspective based on the Qur'ānic guidance. Islamic moral teachings are deeply related to environmental ethics. In the Qur'ān, humans are described as vicegerent (*khalīfah*) of Allah on earth to play a responsible role (*amānah*) on His behalf. As intelligent and responsible beings, humans must take care of the earth on Allah's behalf and should not do anything which may pose a threat to the existence of other creatures.

### Literature Review and Research Method

Some contemporary scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Mawil Izzi Dien, İbrahim Özdemir, Mohammad Shomali, Najma Mohamed, A. Saniotis, Riham R. Rizk, Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, Deni Wahyudi Kurniawan, Abd al-Hamid, S. Nomanul Haq, and Md. Abu Sayem among others attempt to focus on certain Islamic moral guidelines in addressing the present ecological crisis. By connecting the Islamic worldview with the present environmental issues, all these scholars attempt to grow awareness in the human mind of ecological equilibrium and a deeper understanding of the human-nature relationship to keep the environment sustainable. These scholarly contributions are useful resources to develop this study, though it deals with a different aspect. In contextualizing some Qur'ānic terms relevant to the present environmental issues, the present study follows some new interpretations used in those works. However, it does not aim to criticize the earlier interpretations of the terms used in classical Qur'ānic exegeses. The study prefers to contextualize the Qur'ānic guidelines on the human ethical understanding of the environment to address the current ecological crisis. It will be critical of

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," in "Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?" ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, special issue, *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 9; Roger S. Gottlieb, *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 653; United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), *Environment, Religion and Culture in the Context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Nairobi: UNEP, 2016), 9.

two main approaches of environmental ethics, anthropocentric<sup>2</sup> and biocentric,<sup>3</sup> by correlating the Qur'ānic view of human responsibility and dignity vis-à-vis ethical behaviour of humans with non-human creatures.

### **An Islamic View of the Environment**

In the following passages, I give a brief account of commonly shared Islamic approaches to the environment. First, I explore how Islam relates God to the natural world, and then, how Islam associates the ambient environment with humans. According to a common understanding of the Islamic worldview, all components of the environment are created by God.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, God is the creator and the environment is just His creation.<sup>5</sup> There is a deep relationship between God and the environment in terms of creation. We cannot separate creation from such a relationship with God. God has not only created it but also sustains it. It means that the environment is not a result of accidental cause; rather, it is created and sustained by the same God Who has created humans on earth. All biotic and abiotic objects in the environment are maintained duly by some rules fixed by God which we call natural laws.<sup>6</sup> Natural law is nothing but the command of God; it is not independent of God. Islamic view of the environment, therefore, opposes the theory of evolution according to which it is not created by a supernatural Being like God; rather, it came into being by accident without having any relation to God. In contrast to it, in the Islamic view, everything is created by God with a very specific purpose.<sup>7</sup> As God's creation, nothing is purposeless or valueless. Some purposes of created

---

<sup>2</sup> "The term 'anthropocentrism' comes from the Greek word *anthropos*, 'human,' and *kentron*, 'center.' Thus, it means an ideology that places human beings at the central position in the world, which indicates the supremacy of human beings over all other creatures." Md. Abu Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh: A Case Study," *Quest: Studies on Religion and Cultures in Asia* 3 (2018): 2.

<sup>3</sup> "The term originally comes from the Greek *bios*, 'life' and *kentron*, 'center.' Thus, it refers to all living things small and big, visible and non-visible, human and non-human. The term is mostly used in an ecological sense of morality and responsibility [implying] that there is inherent value in all living things in nature." *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Qur'ān 13:16. Translations of the Qur'ānic verses in this paper are of Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *The Noble Quran* (Medina: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, 1420 AH).

<sup>5</sup> Mawil Izzi Dien, "Islamic Ethics and the Environment: Theory and Practice," *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 18, no. 1 (1997): 48.

<sup>6</sup> For details, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22-24, 271, 286.

<sup>7</sup> Qur'ān 3:191.

things are very explicit because we directly get benefits from them. For instance, we take some animals and plants as our foods, we can easily grasp the purpose of these components of nature, but we do not know the entire purpose of God's creation. God's message helps us to realize the purpose of creation. The natural world is nothing but the creation of God. It has not evolved from an evolutionary process as a general scientific understanding argues. Instead, it is a result of God's command and follows the same law that God has assigned it to obey. In this sense, nature is a perfect Muslim,<sup>8</sup> because it never disobeys what God imposes on it to follow.<sup>9</sup> For Islam, natural law is not something outside God's control. In light of Islamic metaphysical understanding, the natural laws are completely set by God.

Every component of the natural world has its instinct value.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, it has instrumental value to others, because God has created the whole creation in a way that it interacts and interrelates with each other and is interdependent for its growth and continuation. Somethings are abiotic objects of the natural environment, which are very crucial factors for supporting biotic forms on earth. Sunlight, water, air, soil, etc., are the example of abiotic substances of the natural world. We cannot imagine living things without these substances. Abiotic objects have no life for themselves but without their existence, no biotic organisms can come into being. So, there is an inseparable relationship between biotic and abiotic components. Again, biotic organisms have another kind of relationship with other biotic objects and with their groups for their development, which implies that everything is interrelated and interdependent in a way that nothing should be ignored or devaluated, and that every part of nature is precious and significant.

Externally all abiotic objects of the natural world seem to be inanimate objects of the environment but according to Islamic metaphysical understanding, it is not true. These are also alive,<sup>11</sup> though humans cannot realize this by their own understandings. Some Qur'anic

---

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 286; İbrahim Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective" in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 16-19.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'ān 3:83.

<sup>10</sup> Mohammad Shomali, "Aspects of Environmental Ethics: An Islamic Perspective," *Thinking Faith*, November 11, 2008, [https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20081111\\_1.htm](https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20081111_1.htm).

<sup>11</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "God is Absolute Reality and All Creation His *Tajalli* (Theophany)" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 8; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 24, 271.

verses<sup>12</sup> and Prophetic traditions<sup>13</sup> state that everything in the heavens and the earth, and between them glorifies God. If these are dead, how can they glorify God? Nasr notes that Islamic mystic poets and philosophers like Sa'dī Shīrāzī (1210-1292 CE), Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273 CE), and Yunus Emre (1238-1320 CE) tried to realize these things in their works.<sup>14</sup> For grasping such truth, humans need very specialized knowledge of metaphysics, but modern science and technology cannot allow such ways of understanding, because they base generating knowledge on factual things or appearances not on intuition or revelation.

In Islam, there are two fundamental identities, one is the Creator and the other is the created. Except for God, all things are God's creation. There is a unity (*tawhīd*) among created things, according to which everything is equal in a general status from the perspective of creation.<sup>15</sup> Abdur-Razzaq Lubis considers humans equal to other components of the natural world because humans are created by God like other creatures and also subject to follow God's laws.<sup>16</sup> In a metaphorical sense, all creation is like the family (*'iyāl*) of God as it is entirely dependent on Him.<sup>17</sup> If human beings have such an understanding and feeling, they cannot mistreat animals, plants, and other biotic and abiotic objects of the natural world only for their luxurious living. As the crown of creation, humans are privileged with a hierarchical position. God has subjected (*sakhhara*) animals, plants, and what is on the planetary earth to humans<sup>18</sup> so that they could benefit from the natural world. All these things are special blessings from God to humans. However, permission to utilize them is not unconditional. Shomali notes that humans are advised

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Qur'ān 24: 41; 33: 72; 17: 44; 22:18.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Kitāb al-jihād wa 'l-siyar.

<sup>14</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 75-96.

<sup>15</sup> Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics," 3-4; N. Mohamed, "Islamic Education, Eco-ethics and Community," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no. 3 (2014): 317; A. Saniotis, "Muslims and Ecology: Fostering Islamic Environmental Ethics," *Contemporary Islam* 6, no. 2 (2012): 156-57; Riham R. Rizk, "Islamic Environmental Ethics," *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research* 5, no. 2 (2014): 195.

<sup>16</sup> Abdur-Razzaq Lubis, "Environmental Ethics in Islam, Muslim Environment Watch: A Blog About Environmental Issues, Projects and Developments in the Arab and Muslim World," April 4, 2010, <https://muslimenvironment.wordpress.com/tag/abdur-razzaq-lubis/>.

<sup>17</sup> James Robson, trans., *Mishkat al-Masabih* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1965), 3:1392.

<sup>18</sup> Qur'ān 2:29; 45:13; 31:20; 16:5-6; 16:10-16; 22:65; 14:32-34.

repeatedly to treat God's creatures in a balanced and sustainable way.<sup>19</sup> As intelligent and responsible creatures (*khalifah*) of God, humans are assigned certain duties (*amānah*) to take care of God's creation on His behalf. Humans should not fail to meet such responsibility; otherwise, they will be accountable to God in the hereafter (*ākhirah*).

Nature serves as signs (*āyāt*) of God.<sup>20</sup> Nasr mentions that the way the Arabic word *āyah* is used for a Qur'ānic verse is also used for a natural phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Al-Hafiz Basheer Ahmad Masri notes that the Qur'ānic word *wahy* (God's revelation to the Prophets) is also used for divine communication with animals other than human beings.<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, Tariq Ramadan sees nature as God's revelation.<sup>23</sup> The Qur'ānic verses deal with a theoretical perspective of God's law while the natural world deals with the practical form of God's law. In the Qur'ān, God explains His guidance on how to behave with the natural environment. In the natural world, it is seen how every component of the environment works under God's law. That is why, in the Qur'ān, God refers humans to the natural world for reflecting.<sup>24</sup> It is a natural phenomenon where humans can feel the beauty of creation. It works as a mirror of God's wisdom and power. The beauty of nature and its extremely organized system are enough for humans to realize God's existence. If humans look deeply at the diversity of the natural environment, its dynamic functions, and its distinctive characters, they will be amazed and astonished to ponder: How can all these go without an intelligent Creator? It implies that the natural world is a source of guidance for which God sent down the divine books with Messengers from Adam to Muḥammad. For İbrahim Özdemir, nature serves like "a well-ordered and well-bounded book." It can be called "the book of the universe."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Shomali, "Aspects of Environmental Ethics."

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 131; Nasr, "Islam and the Environmental Crisis" in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. A. R. Agwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997); Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics," 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 95-96.

<sup>22</sup> Richard L. Fern, *Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 204n8.

<sup>23</sup> Saniotis, "Muslims and Ecology," 166.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, see Qur'ān 3:190-191; 30:12-24.

<sup>25</sup> Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics," 21.

Nasr connects the Arabic term *muḥīt* with the environment arguing that the term corresponds to the meaning of the English word “environment.”<sup>26</sup> *Al-Muḥīt* is one of the beautiful names of God. As God encompasses everything,<sup>27</sup> God Himself is the Environment.<sup>28</sup> Mystic people can realize how God surrounds, but laymen can hardly grasp this truth because such realization requires a spiritual feeling and a deeper understanding. Though it is difficult to perceive this truth by modern scientific knowledge, humans should not ignore the other ways of knowing and experiencing God around them. We can debate the mode of surrounding: How does God encompass? According to the most authentic interpretation, it is not the physical body of God by which He encompasses, but rather it is the power and knowledge of God which surrounds everything. If we take this meaning as a metaphorical understanding of the environment, it does signify that the natural world is very precious and has a direct connection with God.<sup>29</sup> We can grasp this truth in the sense that it is nature through which God’s power and wisdom are known. Nature should not be considered lifeless<sup>30</sup> and valueless or purposeless.<sup>31</sup> As God’s creation, it has its own value and value for others. Humans, as a creature of the same God, should not disrespect nature. To show any dishonour to it means to show disrespect to God. Humans should utilize natural resources in a very responsible and balancing way<sup>32</sup> so that no part of the natural world, be it inanimate objects, could be polluted and depleted. Thus, based on the Qur’ānic understanding, some Muslim scholars like Nasr see nature as sacred.<sup>33</sup> Humans should keep the natural environment as it is kept by God and treat it in a very humble way and not in a transgressing manner.

---

<sup>26</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 131; Nasr, “Islam and the Environmental Crisis,” 18; Lisa Wersal, “Islam and Environmental Ethics: Traditional Responds to Contemporary Challenges,” *Zygon* 30, no. 3 (1995): 454.

<sup>27</sup> Qur’ān 4:126; 11:115.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 130-35; Nasr and Iqbal, “Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” 96.

<sup>30</sup> Nasr, “God is Absolute Reality,” 8; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 24, 271.

<sup>31</sup> Özdemir, “Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics,” 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> Shomali, “Aspects of Environmental Ethics.”

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, “Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis,” 96-97; Saniotis, “Muslims and Ecology,” 167; Shomali, “Aspects of Environmental Ethics.”

## A Qur'ānic Understanding of Ethical Responsibility to the Natural World

Now I turn to interpret some important Qur'ānic notions in the light of ecological questions. First, I explain the term *khalīfah* and then present a holistic understanding of it in connection with other two Qur'ānic terms, 'abd Allāh and *amānah*. Without referring to 'abd Allāh and *amānah*, the interpretation of *khalīfah* is one sided and partial. For, maintaining justice in interpreting *khalīfah* requires making its connection with 'abd Allāh and *amānah*. Though all these three Qur'ānic terms are well familiar to Muslim communities, these should be reinterpreted vis-à-vis the present unprecedented ecological crisis. According to the Qur'ān, humans are given the highest status among God's creatures. This prestigious dignity of human beings lies in the Qur'ānic term *khalīfah*<sup>34</sup> which is generally translated as vicegerent, successor, deputy, steward, representative, etc., of God on earth. Humans are given this privilege to rule on earth on God's behalf. Sometimes, this status of humans is criticized by some secular environmental ethicists. For instance, Lynn White and Arnold Toynbee argue that the dignity of human supremacy separates humans from other creatures and permits humans to show their mastery over non-human creatures.<sup>35</sup> In their views, it is an open license for humans from God to exploit the natural world as they wish. For them, it develops an anthropocentric approach to the environment, because it allows humans to consider them the centre of creation where everything is evaluated from a human's worldly interest. If humans are seen in this way, it poses a potential threat to the environment. In it, only humans are viewed as valuable creatures while the rest of creatures are seen as valuable only when they produce benefit for humans, which implies that humans have intrinsic value while other animals and plants do not have any intrinsic value like humans; rather, they have only instrumental value in terms of their relationship with human needs. Such interpretations do not fit the Islamic notion of *khalīfah*. As vicegerents of God, humans are required to rule on earth in a way that every creature could get good treatment from human behaviours. *Khalīfah* does not refer to an autocratic ruler who thinks for his own benefit. If we take *khalīfah* as a ruler, it does imply just ruler. A *khalīfah*

---

<sup>34</sup> Qur'ān 2:30.

<sup>35</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science*, 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203-06; Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 3, nos. 1-4 (1972): 142-43, 146.



cannot destroy any part of the natural world which is created by God.<sup>36</sup> Every creation glorifies God.<sup>37</sup> Should humans stop this worthy voice? As a part of the natural world, humans should interact with other parts of the environment in a very responsible way. Everyone should be a true *khalīfah* to take care of God's creation. Humans, as *khalīfahs*, are allowed to benefit from God's creation<sup>38</sup> provided that they will not be a cause of extinction of other species, even be it any abiotic object of the environment. According to some Muslim scholars like Nasr, a profound sense of accountability to God and responsibility to His creatures lies in the Islamic notion of *khalīfah*.<sup>39</sup> It is not something for power practice in an unlimited way; rather, it suggests performing duties and responsibilities imposed by God.

Humans are not only *khalīfahs* of God but also servants or slaves (*'ibād*, pl. of *'abd*) of God.<sup>40</sup> When we interpret *khalīfah* as the highest dignity of humans, we should articulate it with the Qur'ānic term *'abd Allāh* which refers to the servant of God. The concept of *khalīfah* indicates a magnified status of humans over God's creatures while the concept of *'abd* reminds them that, in principle, their identity is of the servant of God. Though humans are granted a privilege as *khalīfah*, it is restricted in many ways. Humans are not the lords of the natural world; they are inseparable parts of it like other creatures. Being conscious of this fact, humans should treat justly non-human creatures. As humble servants (*'ibād*) of God, humans should perform their duties and responsibilities towards God and His creatures with God-gifted mental faculties and physical abilities.

---

<sup>36</sup> Qur'ān 13:16.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 24:41; 33:72; 17:44; 22:18.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 2:29; 45:13; 31:20; 16:5-6; 16:10-16; 22:65; 14:32-34.

<sup>39</sup> Saniotis, "Muslims and Ecology," 157; Deni Wahyudi Kurniawan, "Human Responsibility towards Environment in the Quran," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 293, 303-06; Najma Mohamed, "Islamic Education, Eco-ethics and Community," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 33, no. 3 (2014): 317-18; Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 75-96; Rizk, "Islamic Environmental Ethics," 196; Abd-al-Hamid, "Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. A. R. Agwan (Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997), 42-43; Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics," 25-27; Nasr, "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis," 97.

<sup>40</sup> Nasr, "Islam and the Environmental Crisis," 22; Kurniawan, "Human Responsibility towards Environment in the Quran," 293, 301-02; Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti, "*Fitra*: An Islamic Model for Humans and the Environment" *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 71-73.

Now I turn to another Qur'ānic term *amānah* which means trust or trusteeship<sup>41</sup> and is performed with a kind of autonomous power.<sup>42</sup> In an interpretation, Abd-al Hamid notes that humans are given “relative free will” to work between good and evil,<sup>43</sup> though their thoughts and works are also restricted by certain moral obligations. God does not interfere in their deeds directly; human beings should decide what to be done and not be done. When the term *amānah* is explained vis-à-vis the term *khalīfah*, it becomes evident that a burden of responsibilities falls on humans.<sup>44</sup> *Amanah* is a very difficult task that was offered to the heavens, earth, and mountains before it was offered to humans.<sup>45</sup> After realizing its toughness, they refused to take it. On the contrary, humans accepted it without fully recognizing its implications.<sup>46</sup> *Amānah* is a great challenge for humans to perform properly and at the same time, it is an opportunity to realize God-granted potentialities. We should keep in mind that, only because of this, humans are different and distinct from other creatures. Humans took up this challenge while other creatures did not run risks.<sup>47</sup> For performing this difficult job, God has granted intellectual faculty to humans so that they could think and work freely. It was enough for humans to find out what is good and what is evil with their intellect, but God blessed them with the divine messages sent down to the Prophets. Humans are not left without guidance from God. It is a divine blessing that they can utilize their mental faculties to follow the right path and perform *amānah* in the guidance of revelation. *Amānah* is a very inclusive term, it includes many things in it as duties and responsibilities. If *amānah* is related to the environment, it means that humans are entrusted with the task of taking care of every component of the natural world on God's behalf as His vicegerents on earth; otherwise, they will be accountable to Him for not meeting this responsibility.<sup>48</sup> Riham R. Rizk explains that *amānah* is a trust offered by God to humans who are the trustees by accepting the responsibility.<sup>49</sup> It signifies that

---

<sup>41</sup> Saniotis, “Muslims and Ecology,” 167; Rizk, “Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 197-98.

<sup>42</sup> Rizk, “Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 197-98; Abd-al-Hamid, “Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 42.

<sup>43</sup> Abd-al-Hamid, “Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>45</sup> Qur'ān 33:72.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Sofia Bt. Samsudin and Md. Sirajul Islam, “Environmental Ethics from the Qur'nic Philosophy,” *Advances in Environmental Biology*, 8, no. 4 (2014): 1162; Rizk, “Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 198.

<sup>49</sup> Rizk, “Islamic Environmental Ethics,” 197.

humans are the custodians of God's creatures on earth as trustees. For Haleema Sadia Mian, Janas Khan, and Ata ur Rahman, this trust is but a mutual commitment between God and humans.<sup>50</sup> They state that humans accepted nature as a trust from God for their moral struggle.<sup>51</sup> For them, Islamic eco-theological guidelines come out from the notion of *amānah*.<sup>52</sup>

If we summarize the Qur'ānic description of human identity, we see the two-fold human status: One is of the vicegerent of God on earth, and the other is of the servant of God. With these two identities, humans are to perform their duties and responsibilities on earth. The very special dignity of humans, that is, *khalīfah*, is balanced with a great responsibility embodied in the terms of *'abd Allāh* and *amānah*. Human life is a responsible life, a humble life, a serving life, and a life of taking care of God's creation on His behalf.

Scholars like Nasr show how the Qur'ānic understanding of human ethical responsibility embodied in *khalīfah*, *'abd*, and *amānah* can serve for environmental sustainability. Environmental ethics is generally used in a secular sense. It deals with some philosophical questions of human moral responsibility towards the natural world mostly without reference to God or revealed knowledge. Ethical theories, consequential (used by Peter Singer) and deontological (developed by Immanuel Kant) for instance, never discuss God's relationship with humans and non-human creatures. Secular ethicists and environmental activists criticize religions for the development of the human-centric approach and argue that such anthropocentric view supported the exploitation of the natural world, which in turn brought the present, unprecedented, environmental destruction. However, eco-religious scholars like Nasr disprove this allegation and contend that the Islamic concept of *khalīfah* never endorses an anthropocentric approach unconditionally. Some secular environmental ethicists misunderstand the religious notion of human supremacy over non-human creatures and interpret this without referring to religious stewardship. Again, some other secular environmental theorists and activists see humans as just substances like other living forms. However, this does not fit a privileged position of humans as special creatures of God. In other words, secular environmental ethicists' effort to reduce all causes of the present ecological crisis to the notion of humans' superiority over other creatures seems unfounded because they ignore the very basis which

---

<sup>50</sup> Haleema Sadia Mian, Janas Khan, and Ata ur Rahman, "Environmental Ethics of Islam," *Journal of Culture, Society and Development* 1 (2013): 73.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

one cannot afford to ignore. One may ask: How is it possible to deny a distinctive identity of humans? Is it a logical approach? Is it not possible to work for environmental sustainability keeping humans in the given position which they have? There are certain ways to convince humans to be more moral and responsible for their activities in the environment. In this regard, a Qur'ānic understanding of human moral responsibility towards the natural world may pave the way to the present environmental ethics.

The Qur'ān always commands humans to behave towards others justly. Though the Qur'ānic term *'adl* is primarily understood as justice<sup>53</sup> in human society, it is not limited to human dealings. It also implies a just treatment of non-human beings. If justice is meant to keep something in its due place, this Qur'ānic term can easily be used in environmental issues to reduce ecological degradation. Human unethical activities in the environment have destroyed many ecological areas by polluting air, water, soil, etc., which in turn have increased global warming, depleted the ozone layer, and led many species to extinction. Without a doubt, humans are unjustly treating the natural world, where everything is created in a due measure (*qadar*) and a balance (*mīzān*).<sup>54</sup> When any part of the environment is violated, it affects the whole environment. Haq notes that humans are morally committed not to distort or corrupt (*qadar*) the due proportion and (*mīzān*) harmony of the natural environment by their selfish activities.<sup>55</sup> In his view, it is “the fundamental moral imperative of humanity” to maintain the measure and balance in the cosmos.<sup>56</sup> Humans should not pollute or alternate the basic features of the natural world. If they do that, it will be a very unfair and immoral deed that will eventually pose a challenge to their own existence. Humans should not be a reason for the destruction of the ecological system in which they live. If they cannot improve the surrounding environment, at least they should do justice to it. They should keep the environment in its due place. If they are to utilize some portions of the natural world, it should be in a sustainable way so that future generations could benefit from it and the environment could also support them equally. In the Qur'ānic concept of justice embodied in the term *'adl*, such equilibrium (*qadar* and *mīzān*) is present.

---

<sup>53</sup> Izzi Dien, “Islamic Ethics and the Environment,” 49.

<sup>54</sup> S. Nomanul Haq, “Islam and Ecology: Toward Retrieval and Reconstruction,” in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 127.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Humans should do more good things for environmental sustainability. The Qur'ānic term *ihsān* usually means kindness,<sup>57</sup> inspires humans to perform some additional works for the betterment of others. If the term *ihsān* is connected with the environment, it means that humans are advised by God to take more actions for improving the surrounding environment apart from focusing on ecological equilibrium. Without a sacrificing mentality, no human can achieve the basic qualities of a perfect human (*insān kāmil*). If humans could control their temptation of economic affluence and military power for the sake of ecological equilibrium, the natural world would continue to serve all living forms in a sustainable way. The natural environment deserves more attention from humans for its sustainability. They always benefit from the environment, but sometimes they should offer service to it in order to protect it. Such teachings are embedded in the Qur'ānic term *ihsān*.

Now I want to relate the Qur'ānic term *fasād* to the present ecological disequilibrium. Nasr interprets it as corruption on earth.<sup>58</sup> God has addressed humans repeatedly not to make any form of corruption on earth. What we see as corruption on earth is but a consequence of humans' bad actions.<sup>59</sup> To corrupt on earth is both a crime and sin in Islam. Primarily, it relates to human society, but it also incorporates the surrounding environment. When it is related to the environment, it means polluting the natural world. Needless to say, modern humans are polluting the environment by throwing a huge amount of carbon dioxide into the air, dumping hazardous chemical materials into water and soil, cutting trees and mountains for construction and farming lands, depending on fossil-based energy, and contaminating natural resources to intolerable levels. With the power of modern science and technology,<sup>60</sup> humans are performing all these dangerous things in order to make their lives comfortable. By doing so, they have managed to make their lifestyle comfortable. But in cost-benefit analysis, they have achieved short-term benefits only, their long-term benefits are being destroyed rapidly. The way the present generation of humans are exploiting natural resources, their future generations would not be able

---

<sup>57</sup> Izzi Dien, "Islamic Ethics and the Environment," 49.

<sup>58</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 95; Mohamed, "Islamic Education, Eco-ethics and Community," 317; Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics," 28; Abd-al-Hamid, "Exploring the Islamic Environmental Ethics," 55-56.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'ān 7:85; 30:41.

<sup>60</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 76; Nasr, *Man, and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1976 [1968]), 21.

to get the same benefits. The present generations are putting their future generations in a very dangerous position in terms of natural resources. Natural resources are limited. When humans want to use them, they should think that they are not a blessing for them alone, they are a blessing for all—humans, animals, and plants. No human has a right to claim a monopoly on natural resources. Fresh air, clean water, and contamination-free soil are essential to life to which every living form has an equal right. Therefore, no one should pollute natural resources. But present human activities continue in an uncontrolled manner. It seems as if humans are fighting against the environment to achieve their highest utility for comfort.<sup>61</sup> Even if they win in this battle, they will be the losers, because human life including all living forms on earth is completely dependent on the environment.

The Qur'ānic terms *isrāf*<sup>62</sup> and *tabdhīr*<sup>63</sup> are also related to environmental degradation. The word *isrāf* refers to wasteful consumption while the word *tabdhīr* means squandering.<sup>64</sup> Present environmental problems are also a result of such bad human practices. In many developed countries including some Muslim states (especially Arab states of the Persian Gulf), people are overconsuming natural resources. In many ways, people are wasting foods, even during cultivation, harvesting, and processing,<sup>65</sup> which indicates that humans are not free from extravagance. Since natural resources are not unlimited nor are they the monopoly of any rich nation, everyone should be very responsible and self-constraint while utilizing them as commodities or foodstuffs. Under no circumstance, misusing and abusing should be accepted. These bad practices must be brought to tight control and accountability. The Qur'ān criticizes misusers and abusers vehemently and compares them to the brethren of Satan.<sup>66</sup> If the bad practice of extravagance is stopped properly by making people conscious of the limitation of natural resources and more accountable for the safety of the environment, there may be some satisfactory progress in environmental sustainability.

---

<sup>61</sup> Tucker and Grim, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>62</sup> Qur'ān 7:31.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 17:26-27.

<sup>64</sup> Shomali, "Aspects of Environmental Ethics."

<sup>65</sup> FAO (Food & Agricultural Organization of the United Nations), "Food Wastage Footprint: Impact on Natural Resources," <http://www.fao.org/food-loss-and-food-waste/en/>.

<sup>66</sup> Qur'ān 17:27.

In the present capitalistic world, money or capital is seen as a symbol of comfortable and luxurious life, which motivates modern humans to gather more materialistic resources than ever before. This kind of understanding results from the materialistic philosophy on which the present worldview is based. Uncontrolled human desires and wants are responsible for the present environmental degradation. Without controlling human greed, there is no viable solution to this problem. Relating to this kind of human obsessive tendency, the Qur'ān repeatedly reminds humans of its inevitable consequences.<sup>67</sup> They are frequently suggested in the Qur'ān to avoid greed and love God's creation. A greedy human is always disliked by God while a greed-free human is always appreciated by Him. It is not possible to maintain environmental sustainability until humans are free from uncontrolled greed. The Qur'ānic teaching can work to curb this fatal disease of humans.

### **A Qur'ānic Eco-religious Ethical Understanding of the Value Approaches of Environmental Ethics**

The Qur'ānic view of human responsibility towards the environment does not support an anthropocentric approach to environmental ethics. It is also critical of bio-centric environmental ethics. In an anthropocentric approach, humans are seen as the sole criterion for evaluation of other components of the natural world, and in an aggressive bio-centric approach, humans are put into the category of other animals. Is it possible to see humans as the sole criterion for evaluating others? Or should it be acceptable to lower human status to the level of non-human beings? In an anthropocentric approach, humans seem like the lords of the environment, while in a bio-centric approach, a unique status of humans as rational beings is compromised. Both approaches engage with two extreme sides. This is against the Qur'ānic understanding of the human-nature relationship. In the Qur'ān, the special status of humans vis-à-vis non-human beings is not compromised as it is done in a bio-centric approach, nor are humans considered the parameter for evaluation of other creatures as it is done in an anthropocentric approach. The Qur'ānic approach to environmental ethics is unique and distinct, it is neither an extreme anthropocentric approach nor an extreme bio-centric one; rather, it is in

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 100:8; 2:96; 4:128.

between them in a sense that it covers both approaches to some extent and criticizes them to some other extent.<sup>68</sup>

Some secular environmental ethicists and activists are performing some good tasks to save the ambient environment, but their movements and scholarly works cannot fully convince people, because they do not deal with the heart, they deal only with the physical existence. Secular environmental ethics has deficiencies in dealing with the issues of the environment.<sup>69</sup> Without the full-fledged cooperation of faith communities, the present environmental problems are not possible to be solved properly. The way religious moral virtues can prevent humans from greed is not possible by secular ethical values. The way religions can convince people to feel for the environment is not possible by secular ethics. Secular ethicists and environmental activists should realize this important thing. I think, in this regard, the religious worldview of nature and moral guidelines, especially of the Islamic view of human responsibility towards the natural world as found in the Qur'ān, can help scholars to develop a holistic vision of environmental ethics.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Islamic religious tradition offers theoretical and practical support for environmental sustainability. If modern humans consider such Islamic guidelines potential sources for ecological equilibrium and work accordingly, the current situation will reverse. More specifically, the Qur'ānic paradigm of *khilāfah* and *amānah* with an interpretation of other Qur'ānic terms like *'adl*, *ihsān*, *isrāf*, *tabdhīr*, *fasād*, and *ākhirah* shows humans how to treat the environment and why to take care of it. Thus, the Qur'ān instructs humans to be more conscious of the ecological equilibrium while dealing with the natural world.

• • •

---

<sup>68</sup> In addition, there is another approach, called the God-centric approach, according to which only God is valuable and other things have no value. It is an ascetic approach. In reality, it is true; but when we come to discuss about the creation of God, we should be convinced by our understanding that God's creation is not valueless or purposeless. In the discussion of the environmental issues, this ascetic approach seems irrelevant.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 151, 153; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 273; Egbert Giles Leigh, review of *Religion and the Order of Nature* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44, no. 2 (1998): 125.