

Taking Care of the Environment as an Act of Faith

The basic role of the human being on earth is to worship Allah [S.W.T.]:

“I have only created Jinns and men, that they may serve Me.” (Qur’an, 51:56)

To serve God or to worship Him is a comprehensive way that covers every aspect of life. Fulfilling all that God has demanded from us in terms of Praying, Fasting, Zakah and [Hajj](#) indicates worshipping. The same could be said regarding any action that the human being performs in accordance with the Islamic world-view, as long as it is done for the Sake of God.

Every act, as long as it is good [e.g. protecting the environment] and done for the Sake of Allah [S.W.T.], is considered an act of worshipping that generates reward in this life and the Hereafter. This is the via media between two extremes; total disregard for the environment, and worshipping it as the case of nature worshippers.

The total disregard for the environment is detrimental for the human being. The same could be said regarding the extreme position of protecting the environment in an absolute sense. An example is advocating the protection of every single member of the animal kingdom to the level which might endanger the life of the human beings involved in rescue operations.

It should be known that Islam advocates the protection of the environment, though not in name, for the word ‘environment’ [bi’ah], along with its connotations, evolved in recent times. That Islam has high regard for the environment is something that can be found in the Qur’an and the [Sunnah](#) as we shall discuss later in this paper. The fact that to protect the environment is considered an act of worshipping, does not mean that every component of the environment should be saved. In fact, it is sometimes to the contrary. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, stated that a person who uprooted a tree [which formed an obstacle] in the path of people, ended up in heavens.

The Islamic position forms a middle path between human behavior that has disregard to the environment and those who practically worship the environment or certain parts of it. While the Islamic world view supports the protection of environment from the greedy behavior of human beings, it allows room for sustainable development.

The Environment is the Loci of the Signs Pointing to Allah [S.W.T.]:

The environment is perceived as the place where the signs (e.g. rivers, plants, and birds), pointing to Allah [S.W.T.] exist:

“Verily in the heavens and the earth, are Signs for those who believe. And in the creation of yourselves and the fact that animals are scattered (throughout the earth), are Signs for those of assured Faith. And the alteration of Night and Day, and the fact that God sends down Sustenance from the sky, and revives therewith the earth after its death, and in the change of the winds,-are Signs for those that are wise.” (Qur’an, 45:3-5)

As a result, any destruction occurring to the environment is tantamount to destroying these signs. If any species becomes extinct, it is considered a loss of a Sign that reflects the greatness of the Creator. It is indeed a very sad thing if we continue to destroy the environment, because we will prevent the generations to come from having a healthy relationship with the environment, where “healthy” means the chance to experience these Signs.

It has been said that there are two books; the one which is read [i.e. the Qur’an] and the one which is seen [i.e. the universe]. While it is known why the Qur’an is described as a Book, the universe is considered a book in the sense that includes signs pointing to God. A transparent heart is needed, though, in order to unveil the way these signs function. Indeed, once the person is not blocked from “reading” the signs that fill up the universe, beautiful forms of [dhikr](#) [remembrance of Allah the Almighty] are ensued, and a correlation between many verses of the Qur’an and the corresponding “verses” of the universe are established.

Being blocked from the Signs is best expressed with the example of the large industrial or metropolitan city. The huge structures, including high rise buildings, change the horizon. Sunrise and sunset are not anymore phenomena that form a part of daily experiences; at least not for those who are trapped inside the city. One needs a lot of ingenuity to see a “sign” in concrete slabs!

In the absence of green lungs for the city, its dwellers, who only see steel and concrete growth, might not experience the natural cycles of growth stated in the following verse:

“A Sign for them is the earth that is dead: We do give it life, and produce grain therefrom, of which ye eat.” (Qur’an, 36:33)

Though we do not understand how, everything in the universe, including the components of the environment, participates in making remembrance [dhikr] of God:

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, declare his Glory: There is not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet ye understand not how they declare His Glory! Verily He is Oft-Forbearing; Most Forgiving.” (Qur’an, 17:44)

There are many verses that mention specific beings that praise God; some of which are the following:

“Nay, thunder repeateth His praises, and so do the [angels](#), with awe ...” (Qur’an, 13:13)

“Seest thou not that it is God Whose praises all beings in the heavens and on earth do celebrate, and the birds (of the air) with wings outspread? Each one knows its own (mode of) prayer and praise. And God knows well all that they do.” (Qur’an, 24:41)

“...It was Our power that made the mountains and the birds celebrate Our praises, with David...” (Qur’an, 21:79)

It is rather obvious that both animate and inanimate objects celebrate the praises of God. As such, the destruction of the habitat of any species means the extinction of a Sign that, not only leads people to remember God, but also participates in praising God. With just a little imagination, one can see the universe in a constant circle of dhikr. Excluded of course are those whose hearts are not sensitive enough to see the need to join the rest of the universe.

That the creation inherently point in the direction of the Creator is something widely discussed by Muslim scholars and mystics. A very beautiful and illuminating statement by Sa`id An-Nurasi (d. 1960) indicates that every creature, by its own nature, has what I would translate liberally as a Divine stamp that cannot be imitated.

“An illuminated heart is capable of seeing the stamp which help in transcending this realm to the other!”⁶

Allah [S.W.T.] provided humanity with sustenance; He only asked them not to worship or associate anything or anyone with Him:

“ye people! Adore your Guardian-Lord, Who created you and those who came before you, that ye may have the chance to learn righteousness; Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto God when you know the (the truth).” (Qur’an, 2:21-22)

The Qur’an shows that there is a correlation between the behavior of people and the conditions of the environment. The right and moral behavior yield positive results:

“If the people of the towns had but believed and feared God, We should indeed have opened out to them (all kinds of) blessings from heaven and earth...” (Qur’an, 7:96)

“And o my people! Ask forgiveness of your Lord, and turn to Him (in repentance): He will send you the skies pouring abundant rain, and add strength to your strength: so turn ye not back in sin!” (Qur’an, 11:52)

The opposite is also true. Disbelief and swerving from the right path that God has designated for humanity will result in negative impact on the environment:

“But whosoever turns away from My Message, verily for him is a life narrowed down ...” (Qur’an, 20:124)

In addition, there are verses that establish a correlation between natural disasters and disbelief, immoral behavior, or a combination of both:

“...He flingeth the loud-voiced thunder-bolts, and therewith He striketh whomsoever He will ...” (Qur’an, 13:13)

“Do ye feel secure that He will not cause you to be swallowed up beneath the earth when you are on land, or that He will not send against you a violent tornado (with showers of stones) so that ye shall find no one to carry out your affairs for you? Or ...a heavy gale to drawn you because of your ingratitude...” (Qur’an, 17:68-69)

The end result of disbelief or immoral acts, when they become prevalent, is the total destruction of the environment. Such is the story of Prophet Nuh (Noah) and the Flood which destroyed every thing except the Ark and its load of people and animals. The order that came to end the flood show that the water gushed and abated at God’s command:

“When the Word went forth: ‘O earth! Swallow thy water, and O sky! Withhold (thy rain)!’ and the water abated, and the matter was ended. The ark rested on mount Judi , and the Word went forth: ‘Away with those who do wrong!’” (Qur’an, 11:44)

The Qur’an is full with stories that reflect the correlation between wrong doing and Divine punishment which lead to a certain measure of destruction. The Chapter [Surat] of the Cave [Kahf] includes a story about two separate owners of two fruit orchards with water flowing in between. One of them faithfully and humbly put his trust in God, but the other did not have the proper relationship with God; he arrogantly alleged that his garden will always be the same without invoking the Will of God [i.e. without saying: “Insha’ Allah”]. How did this parable end?

“So his fruits (and enjoyment) were encompassed (with ruin), and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had (now) tumbled to pieces to its very foundations, and he could only say, ‘Woe is me! Would I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!’” (Qur’an, 18:42)

The same criterion could be applied to the story of the Owners of the Garden in the Chapter of Pen [Qalam]. The owners wanted to gather the fruits very early in the morning so that no needy people would have a share. The result was that before they went to the garden, and in the course of the night, there came a visitation from God which swept away all around. When they saw that their garden looked like a dark and desolate spot, they were reminded by one of them that they have transgressed:

“They said: ‘Glory to our Lord! Verily we have been doing wrong!’” (Qur’an, 68:29)

As a general rule, there is a direct relationship between wrong doing and calamities:

“Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because of the things your hands have wrought, and for many He grants forgiveness.” (Qur’an, 42:31)

In addition, committing sin generates corruption everywhere:

“Mischievous has appeared on the land and sea because of (the meed) that the hands of people have earned, that (God) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil).” (Qur’an, 30:41)

Corruption [fasad] in this context covers all kinds of material and spiritual damage. One should be thankful that God did not hasten punishment whenever humanity erred. Had punishment been simultaneous, life on earth would have been interrupted long time ago:

“If God were to punish people according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the back of the (earth) a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated Term: when their Term expires, verily God has in His sight all His servants.” (Qur’an. 35:45)

In Surat An-Nahl [Bee], the same notion is reinforced again:

“God sets forth a Parable: a city enjoying security and quite, abundantly supplied with sustenance from every place: Yet was it ungrateful for the favors of God: so God made it taste of hunger and terror (in extremes) (closing in on it) like a garment (from every side), because of the (evil) which (its people) wrought.” (Qur’an, 16: 112)

Its clear that not thanking God for His bounty led to its disappearance. For hunger means that there was a Divine order that led to the interruption of the normal function of the environment which led eventually to less sustenance in a way commensurate with the sin that people have committed. Had they been thankful, the situation could be reversed:

“And remember! Your Lord caused to be declared (publicly): ‘If ye are grateful, I will add more (favors) unto you...’” (Qur’an, 14:7)

This verse is a proof that positive moral behavior, which is in line with the Islamic world-view, leads to a better physical environment; God willing, of course.