

# Environmental Ethics: An Islāmic Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The environmental crisis is the great challenge of our times. It threatens human beings and other living creatures on the earth. Today evidences have shown us that scientific solutions are not much satisfactory. Now the question is “how should we behave toward the environment” is a matter of concern. In an axiological standpoint, environmental ethics is getting more significance to seek a necessary outcome for extensive environmental humiliation. Ethics is more concerned with intrinsic value and beliefs, this paper, examines the basic concepts of environmental ethics and its approaches in Islāmic perspective of environmental ethics. It concludes that Islāmic ethics gives an extensive model of environmental ethic where human being is a consumer and recipient just as vicegerent and trustee of the earth at the same time. However, it is possible to have a holistic approach toward conservation of the natural environment. The present paper shall highlight the main features of Environmental Ethics with special reference to Islāmic teachings.*

**Keywords:** *Conservation, Environmental ethics, Islām, Nature, Trustee.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional ethic is mainly concerned about relations between individuals, but the ethics that manage common relations of humans with the land, animals and plants (i.e. Nature) are not existent as yet. Extension of ethics upon this third part in human environment is a transformative opportunity and need of environmental sustainability (Abedi, 2008, 610).

The exploring relationships with nature in shape of moral issues are allied with modern era and environmental ethics only recently began to gain support in the 1960s with the developing prevalence of the environmental movement. There are many explanations behind the regarding of environmental ethics. First reason can be established in this reality that ethical direction and worldviews can have significant impact on individual and unified behaviors (Hatcher, 2004, 357-363). Environmental conviction or belief system, as underlying a system of attitude and beliefs about human-Nature relationships, determine human behavior toward environment and make referential system which is used when co-operating with the environment (Corral, 2003, 247-257). In this respect, this article aimed to give a brief outline of essential and basic

approaches of environmental ethics and introduce a system for environmental ethics from an Islāmic point of view.

## II. ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

The question whether nature or its components should be of concern is closely related to the question what kind of ethical principles should apply to the human-nature relation. The values of underlying philosophy are expressed in the ethical guidelines for the relation, thus, it is important to clarify the underlying philosophy of human-nature interaction (Lund, 2006, 75). Ethics is the philosophical study of right and wrong conduct and the rules and principles that ought to guide it (Abedi, 2008, 610). Ethics deals with issues of goodness versus badness of their actions and hence defines acts which are morally permissible or obliged (*Ibid*).

There are two basic questions in any ethical theory. One is “What kinds of things are intrinsically valuable?” and the other one is “What does make an action to be right or wrong?” (*Ibid*). Answering the first question defines what possesses moral standing and thus what has privilege of ethical obligations. In traditional ethic, human has moral standing because he/she is only being that possessed intrinsic value and

there is no difference between the ethicists. Whereas propounding environmental ethics needs to examine human values versus nature world values, the debate on environmental ethics is thus largely concerned with finding out whether intrinsic value in non-humans is possible or even necessary in order to develop universal theories why humans should protect their natural environment (Paterson, 2006, 144-50). Therefore, several points of view can currently be identified. These views arise from philosophical considerations about what has moral standing possesses intrinsic or value in the world and why (Pentreath, 2004, 1-30). Value theory as applied to environmental ethics distinguishes between instrumental and intrinsic values for individual organisms and populations, species, biomes, ecosystems and even insentient landscapes (Hatcher, 2004). Instrumental value usually compare with intrinsic value. Instrumental value means useful for human to obtain something else. For example, nature has instrumental value if human sees the nature as a source for satisfying his/her needs. The environment has intrinsic value when it is valued for itself not for others (Abedi, 2007, 59-72).

### III. APPROACHES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

With respect to two basic questions in ethics, namely questions about “center of value” and “basis of evaluation”, it is possible to distinguish a *spectrum* of approaches in which the types of right and wrong behavior toward the natural environment are defined. These approaches should be considered as manifestation of efforts to expand moral standing to nature and non-human world (Newton, 2002, 117). The most common of these approaches are anthropocentrism, biocentrism, animal rights, land ethic, deep ecology, ecofeminism, stewardship or trusteeship, sustainable development and sustainability (Brennan, 2002).

From a perspective of anthropocentrism, any view that understands human beings have an ethical obligation towards one another; they appear to have towards different species or substances is extremely just an indirect obligation towards other individuals. Early philosopher argued, cannot attest humans have direct duties to the nature (Norton, 1984, 131-48).

Besides of anthropocentrism, biocentrism leads the direct moral significance to the Nature and have intrinsic value toward all biological living beings. It supports all form of life as “moral entity”. To claim that parts of the natural world have value in their own right just is to claim that they have intrinsic value. Another way of putting this point that was popular in the early environmental ethics literature was to say that anthropocentrism attributes only instrumental value to the Nature (i.e. values it only as a means to human ends), whereas non-anthropocentrism attributes intrinsic value to at least some parts of nature (i.e. values them as ends in themselves) (McShane, 2009, 408).

From the view point of animal rights / liberation leads the basic principle as intrinsic value, it means we should extending moral standing and moral consideration to all living beings, as well as natural world. Most of the thinkers proposed

extensions in the scope of application of moral principles and concepts (Jenni, 2005, 3).

A more radical development came when the moral focus on individuals was challenged by thinkers who argued for holistic ethics: the expansion of moral responsibilities to collections, communities, or wholes. In these theories, entities such as species and ecosystems were accorded moral standing in place of, or in addition to, the individuals that constituted those wholes. Holistic theories challenged not only traditional conceptions of ethics, but also assumptions in metaphysics, epistemology, and political philosophy (*Ibid*, 4).

Today, environmental ethics has taken another new philosophy of ecofeminism and the study of environmental racism, which advocate environmental exploitation to forms of human oppression, to virtue ethics, which relates appreciation of the natural world to ideals of human character, to pragmatic pluralism, which seek incommensurable values and the insights of competing theories in a search for practical policy formation (*Ibid*, 10).

### IV. THE ISLĀMIC PERSPECTIVE

Muslim sages have distinguished between *Qur'ān-al-Tadwani* (written Qur'ān) between in *Qur'ān-al-Takwini* (cosmic and ontological Qur'ān). The Qur'ān refers to the phenomenal features and events within the soul of man as *ayat* (symbol) and the verses of the Qur'ān are as well referred to as *ayat* (symbol or signs) of Allah. The Nature, according to Qur'ān, is not primarily, comprised of bare facts of scientifically studied and technologically manipulated. It is primarily a Theophany, simultaneously veiling as well as revealing God. In fact, from an Islamic perspective, God Himself is the Environment; He is designated in the Qur'ān as al-Muhit (All-Encompassing). He encompasseth everything. Man is himself immersed in the Divine Muhit. When the remember God, we see Him everywhere, for His reality is al-Muhit. Our environmental crises may be set to have been caused by men's forgetfulness of God as the real environment. The crises is born by men's assumption that natural environment is ontologically independent order of reality. According to Islamic perspective the Natural environment can't be divorced from the Divine Environment. When we remember of God as al-Muhit, we became aware of the sacred character of Nature, for natural phenomena or are signs of Allah. The natural environment is a manifestation of and derivation from the Divine Environment. Our natural environment is derived from the Divine Environment and ultimately returns to the same. The divine Environment sustains and permeates the natural environment. In several of its verses, it distinguishes between unmanifested and manifested worlds. The manifested world is integrally connected to the unmanifested world. The invisible world is both the origin and the destiny of the visible world (Agwan, 1997, 17-18).

In view of this Qur'ānic perspective on Nature, the traditional Muslims have nourished great love towards the universe. We can delineate this love across Muslim languages and literature. In view of the same, there no clear and categorical distinction natural and supernatural orders in

Muslim thought. Muslim poets, mystics and contemporaries have loved Nature with extraordinary depth and intensity. There are several verses of the Qur'ān which speak of the entire flora and fauna singing the praises of God. The Qur'ān says, "Nothing is, that does not proclaim His praise" (Qur'ān 17:44). Muslim mystics and contemporaries have always been attuned to celebration of God by the flora and fauna across the spectrum. The sages while living in the remembrance of God listen to prayer of flowers, birds, trees, mountains and the stars. Although, the contemplative attitude and love for Nature have been practiced by highly accomplished mystics, however, its impact has percolated to wider community of Muslims across North Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia and Eastern parts of Europe.

However, Muslim law of Nature should not be confused with Western philosophy and Naturalism which was critiqued by Christian theologians. It is rather akin to poetry of Saint Francis of Assisi. He is closest to Muslim law of Nature among all-medieval Christian saints. Muslim of law of nature and environment is a means to gain access to God's wisdom as manifested with countless phenomenal features comprising the nature. The mystical or spiritual attachment of Muslim to phenomenal features of Nature is no way amounts to the negation of God's transcendence. Such an attunement should rather be understood as compliance with the Qur'ānic verse, viz; "Whatsoever ye turn, there is the face of God" (Qur'ān, 2:115).

'Environmental ethics deeply concerned with the ethical problems surrounding environmental protection, and it purposes to provide ethical justification and moral motivation for the problems of global environmental protection'. In the environmental debate it has often been argued that what is really needed to solve the current ecological crisis is environmental ethics. Such 'ecoethics', according to Ouis (Ouis, 2003, 1-7), would provide guidelines towards 'right' and 'wrong' actions and attitudes towards nature. There have been many attempts to illustrate the underlying environmental ethics of Islām and the actual concrete rules related to the environment, generally recognized as part of *Shari'a* law. One important attempt is that of Schwarte (Schwarte, 2003, 567-576) who says that the classical judicial doctrine of Islām, expressed by the Qur'ān and *Sunna*, provides for the solution of all legal and moral questions. In recent decades, it has been realized that the accelerating deterioration of the environment is not so much an environmental problem as a human one, and has its roots in a distorted and unbalanced perception of existence. The question arises: is it really the human being who accelerates environmental deterioration? If yes, then why? And what is the penalty? The Qur'ān and *Sunnah* provide the answers (Al-Damkhi, 2008, 16).

The Islāmic perspective is described by a particular characteristic of theocentricity in which God encompasses everything. Clarifying environmental ethics dependent on this concept can build up a comprehensive moral approach for human nature relationship. Many Qur'ānic verses affirm this reality as:

*And whatever in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is Allah's and Allah encompasses all things (Qur'ān, 4: 126).*

*Now surely they are in doubt as to the meeting of their Lord; now surely He encompasses all things (Qur'ān, 41: 54).*

It tends to be said that an Islāmic-based natural morals empowers such conduct toward the earth in which following accomplishments are possible. Human being is significant part of this universe. It has a unique position among the other parts of the natural world. God also rejecting any irresponsible dominion role over earth because human is both God's caliph on earth and responsible for safeguarding of creations. As Qur'ān says:

*Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth". They said: "Wilt thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? - whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not" (Qur'ān, 2: 30).*

Although humans are as the superior over other creations, human being is also executer of God's injunctions and commands. In other words, a good human being is who follows God's commands and behave toward God's creations rightly.

Another important question related to the environment is the proper treatment of the animals, the protection which is due to them—or more correctly, extending and expressing our kindness and compassion to them. But, unfortunately, today many animal species are becoming extinct. Other animals stray abandoned and hungry in the streets of many parts of the world.

The primary point to be made about animals in the Qur'ān, which may surprise the environmentally-sensitive reader, is the way that various sections of the sacred text bear the names of the animals as- *al-Baqara* (The Cow); *al-Nahl* (The Bee), *al-Anqabut* (The Spider), and *al-Naml* (The Ant). Moreover, one of the striking expressions which the Qur'ān uses in referring to animals is that they constitute a "community" (*umma*) just like us. It is especially noteworthy that this concept, which is a highly significant theme in Islāmic tradition and literature, should also be used for animal (Ozdemir, 2003, 19).

Environmental ethics is also concerned with the preservation of the natural resources as air, water, soil and other resources. Human beings have duty to maintain the natural resources because God's wisdom has ordained that His creatures shall be of service to one another. The divinely appointed measurement and distribution of all elements and creatures. Over-use, misuse, and destruction of natural resources are violation of the divine scheme.

*"God says in Qur'ān, "Verily, all things have We created by measure" (Qur'ān 54:49).*

God has created everything proportion and measure in this universe. Do not transgress the balance because various elements in the universe fulfill the human needs and his welfare in future aspects.

Thus, the way of humankind's life styles must be changed with respect to the natural universe disciplines. This reality recalls integrative essence of the Islāmic worldview in which human is not only considered as integral part of nature but also puts humans in a complex network of animate and inanimate life. Prevent humans from overexploiting natural resources because human is being asked to avoid from any damage to living organisms.

Forgetting inner self causes environmental crises to emerge. It happens when human beings forget God and makes human being as a slave to satisfy mere animal desires.

*“And be not like those who forsook Allah, so He made them forsake their own souls: these it is that are the transgressor’s” (Qur’ān, 59: 19).*

In brief, environmental degradation should be seen as a result of forgetting God. In these circumstances, human being cannot understand its real position in the universe and it seems as if human being is free of ability to acknowledge cohesion and integrity of the universe.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Human-nature relation should be re-defined to establish a more well-intentioned and harmonious one. In this respect, ethics is fundamental to understand the crises that afflict society today. For most of scientists and a large number of environmentalists, nature conservation is a major ethical issue and humankind’s way of life need to be changed in order to conserve the natural environment. There is a need for a proper ethics to return back to the right human-nature relation.

There are some approaches to environmental ethics. On the one hand such approaches are existed that attach intrinsic value only to humans. They are considered as human-centered approaches in which nature is just for satisfying human needs. On the other hand, some approaches can be identified in which all creations along with non-human world possess intrinsic value and thus humans should hold them in reverence in spite of any utility that they might have for humankind. Nevertheless, there is still an urgent need for a comprehensive and holistic approach of environmental ethics which prepares possibility to make human being limit her/his unlimited material desires on a voluntary basis for a better living conditions.

Response to the two basic questions of environmental ethics from Islāmic perspective is completely differed from other conventional environmental ethics approaches. This response is based on Theo-centricity and theological deontology respectively. Islām views the natural environment in a specific perspective in which God encompasses all things. Based on this view, intrinsic value belonging to God, sit means the universe integration. This view helps to deliver a more comprehensive and holistic approach to environmental ethics in which any damage to the environment is just as damage to universe integrity and God’s verses. The properties of this approach make it appropriate for the need of present-day humans to conserve the natural environment. In Islām human life is significantly prominent and all the creation of God helps in sustaining the very existence of that life. The entire suitable environmental developments provide a sustainable healthy life for the general progress of humankind in all the departments of life. The Islāmic teachings strongly advocate for environmental ethics.

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