

The Creation of an Environmental Conscience (part 1 of 4): The Nature of Nature

Description: Before one can truly appreciate the relationship between man and his environment, one must first appreciate the relationship between man and God. The essence of creation and the primordial religion of man.

By AbdurRahman Mahdi (© 2006 IslamReligion.com)

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"To God belongs the sovereignty of the heavens and the earth, and to God is the return (of all)." (Quran 39:44)

Islam teaches that everything in the universe, all ecological-systems and the life-forms they support, are created by and dependant upon their Lord-God, the One True God, God. As such, human beings actually have more in common with the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky and the beasts that crawl upon the earth than they do with God Himself.



"There is not a moving creature on earth, or a bird that flies with its wings, but they are communities like you (humans). We have neglected nothing in the Book; then unto their Lord they shall (all) be gathered." (Quran 6:38)

Although man may be at the top of the food-chain, he is still part of a food-chain all the same; whilst his Creator is not constrained by the need to feed, or for that matter, to seek shelter or reproduce. Those who fail to see this reality and who instead take their fellow human beings as objects of worship would do well to consider the following verse:

"The Messiah (Jesus), son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother (Mary) was a truthful, righteous Believer. And they both ate food! Look how We make the signs clear to them, yet look how they are (still) deluded (from the truth)!" (Quran 5:75)

Implicit in this verse is the point that if one is in need of food, he or she is also in need of defecating and urinating in order to relieve themselves of their food's waste products. Far removed is God from such physiological needs.

"And We never sent before you (O Muhammad) any of the Messengers but verily, they (like you, also) ate food and walked in

the markets..." (Quran 25:20)

In other words, although the Prophets, their followers and the believing members of their households truly were the best and most righteous of God's creatures ever to walk the face of the earth, they were, nevertheless, still *His creatures*, sent by and wholly dependant upon Him for life, sustenance and salvation. Therefore, before one can truly appreciate the relationship between man and his environment, one must first appreciate the relationship between man and God.

Ubudiyya - Servitude to the One God

Muslims believe that all of creation is created in a natural state of submission to its Creator. That is, in so far as all things inherently submit to the One God, the natural state of all things is Islam - in a manner of speaking. The cheetah chasing down the gazelle and the gazelle fleeing from the cheetah are behaving not just as God decreed but more so, as He ordered.

"To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth. All are obedient to Him." (Quran 30:26)

It is only because creation follows precisely the course that God sets out for it that we have balance and harmony throughout the universe, what is more commonly known as "the laws of nature" or "the natural order of the universe". This obedience of the world around us to the Divine through its acting according to its imbued nature is, in and of itself, a state of perpetual servitude and worship. Numerous passages of the Qur'an point to this reality.

"See you not that it is God Whose praises are celebrated by all beings in the heavens and on earth, and by the birds with extended wings? Each one knows its prayer and glorification; And God is aware of what they do." (Quran 24:41)

"The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorify Him and there is not a thing but that it glorifies His Praise - but you do not understand their glorification. Truly, He is Ever Forbearing, Oft-Forgiving." (Quran 17:44)

"There is nothing in the heavens and the earth but comes unto the Most Beneficent (God) as a slave." (Quran 19:93)

Fitra - The Primordial Nature of Man

Humans too are created upon a **natural Islamic disposition**, known as the *fitra*. If left alone to follow their *fitra* or "nature", all human beings would be believers in *Tawheed* (Islamic monotheism), instinctively recognising their Creator and inclined towards worshipping Him and towards performing good deeds in general. God says in the Quran:

"So set you your face towards to the religion of monotheism, the

***fitra* (natural religion) of God according to which He created mankind. Let there be no change in the creation of God (i.e. do not reject your Islamic nature): this is the upright religion, but most among mankind do not understand." (Quran 30:30)**

Thus, it can be justifiably argued that Islam and, by extension, all that is deemed good, including environmental consciousness, is not something that necessarily needs indoctrinating, but simply awakened from deep within the conscious of man. Only then would humanity be in sync with the rest of the universe. After all, every human soul that has ever lived and that ever will live has at least once already sworn to have recognised its Creator.

"And (remember) when your Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed (i.e. his offspring) and made them testify as to themselves (saying): 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes! We testify,' - lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: 'Verily, we have been unaware of this.'" (Quran 7:172)

The Creation of an Environmental Conscience (part 2 of 4): Man - God's Steward on the Earth

Description: Man, bearing the burden of moral responsibility, is responsible for utilizing the earth's resources with due consideration - resources which God has subjected to his every need.

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"Behold thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a *khalifa* on earth.' They (the angels) said 'Will You place therein one who will make mischief and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Your praises and glorify You with praises and sanctify Your (Name)?' He (God) said: 'I know what you know not.'" (Quran 2:30)

Mankind, through the father, Adam, was sent to earth as its *khalifah* - a term which simultaneously means: successor, steward, trustee, viceroy, and guardian. That is, man was made responsible for utilising the earth's resources with due consideration; resources which God has subjected to his every need.

"God is He Who has created the heavens and the earth and sends down (rain) water from the sky, and thereby brought forth fruits as provision for you; and He has made the ships to be of service to you, that they may sail through the sea by His Command; as (likewise) He has made rivers to be of service to you. And He has made the

sun and the moon, both constantly pursuing their courses, to be of service to you; and He has made the night and the day, to be of service to you." (Quran 14:32-33)

"See you not (O humanity!) that God has subjected for you whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and has completed and perfected His Graces upon you, (both) apparent and hidden? Yet of mankind is he who disputes about God without knowledge nor guidance nor an illuminating Book!" (Quran 31:20)

Thus, the earth has been created with a definite cause and affect: to facilitate humans in fulfilling the purpose with which they were themselves created: to worship and serve their Creator.

"And I (God) created not the *jinn* (spirit-like creatures) and humans except they should worship Me (alone)." (Quran 51:56)

Although the creation of the heavens and the earth is actually greater than the creation of humanity in the Sight of God [see Quran 40:57], humans bear a responsibility that the heavens and earth do not. In fact, God did offer to entrust to the heavens and the earth moral responsibility. However, they understood the weightiness of what was being asked and so respectfully declined. Adam, however, accepted to bear moral responsibility on behalf of humanity. Alas! unlike their father, many of Adam's descendants were and are unfaithful, incompetent and unwilling to remain true to their obligations.

"Truly, We did offer the trust and moral responsibility to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of (failing to discharge) it. But man bore it. Verily, he was unjust (to himself) and ignorant (of the results)." (Quran 33:72)

When man does faithfully discharge his trust by obeying and worshipping God in accordance with his primordial nature, he attains God's Pleasure and reward; when he does not, he is in need of His Forgiveness. Incidentally, the only reason a person does succumb to false and oppressive desires is because that person is allowing himself to be misled from his nature; straying away from the straight path and onto the crooked road taken by the enemy of God and man alike: Satan.

"He (Satan) said: 'See! This one (man, Adam) whom You have honored above me, if You give me respite till the Day of Resurrection, I will surely seize and mislead his offspring - all but a few!" (Quran 17:62)

"And he (Satan) said: 'I will take an appointed portion of your slaves; I will surely mislead them, and surely, I will arouse in them false desires; and I will surely order them to slit the ears of cattle, and surely, I will order them to change the nature created by God.' And whoever takes Satan as a protector instead of God has surely

suffered a manifest loss. He (Satan) makes promises to them and arouses in them false desires; and Satan's promises are nothing but deceptions." (Quran 4:118-120)

So, after learning a most important reality about the natural environment and our place in it, which is that, other than mankind (and the *jinn*), all the creation, animate and inanimate, is inherently obedient to God and in harmony with itself, we also learn how man can reclaim his innocent natural state: by serving and obeying God. And from the great many and praiseworthy acts of obedience is our behaving responsibly with the world around us. A world that, for the purpose of this discourse, can be divided into two principle realms or resources: the subjects of the animal kingdom and their natural habitats.

"God is the One Who has subjected to you the sea, that ships may sail through it by His Command, and that you may seek of His Bounty and be thankful. And (just like) He has subjected to you all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth; it is all as a favor and kindness from Him. Verily, in it are signs for a people who think deeply." (Quran 45:12-13)

The Creation of an Environmental Conscience (part 3 of 4): Animal Rights and Wrongs

Description: The ethical treatment of animals in Islam; from the Quran and authentic narrations of the Prophet Muhammad.

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"God has created every moving (living) creature from water. Of them there are some that creep on their bellies, some that walk on two legs, and some that walk on four. God creates what He wills. Verily! God is Able to do all things." (Quran 24:45)



Throughout the revealed texts of Islam, we find that God has animals playing not insignificant roles in the fate of nations. After all, in the above verse we are informed of our common origin: water.

In the story of the People of Thamud, for example, we are given an indication of Islam's enforcing of ethical treatment of animals, or more precisely, the severe consequences of mistreating them. For it was only after Thamud slaughtered the she-camel miraculously sent to them by God as a Sign, after they had already oppressed the beast by denying her water to drink, that God destroyed the nation in one single mighty blast.[\[1\]](#)

"(The People of) Thamud denied (their Prophet, Salih) through their transgression, when the most wicked man among them went forth (to kill the she-camel). But the Messenger of God (Prophet Salih) (had) said to them: Be cautious! That is the she-camel of God! (So do not harm it) and bar it not from having its drink (of water)! Then they denied him and they killed it. So their Lord destroyed them because of their sin, and made them equal in destruction!" (Quran 91:11-4)

In order to best appreciate just how seriously Islam champions what in modern times are popularly referred to as "animal rights", and how seriously Islam criminalises any wrong done to animals, one need venture no further than the authentic narrations (ar. ahadith) of the Prophet Muhammad. No detailed commentary will be necessary as the words of the Prophet, often highly charged with emotion and empathy for the suffering of birds and beasts alike, speak loudly for themselves as they vividly illustrate Islam's unprecedented "humanistic" regard for man's fellow creatures. From amongst the many sayings of the Prophet Muhammad are:

"Whilst a man was walking on a road, he was overcome with severe thirst. So he found a well, descended into it, drank (his fill), and then came out. Then he saw a dog panting hard and eating the moist earth. So he said: 'Verily, this dog is overcome with thirst like I had been.' So he (again) descended into the well and filled his leather socks with water. Grasping his socks in his mouth, he came out of the well and then quenched the dog's thirst. Therefore, God thanked the man and forgave him his sins." The Companions asked: 'O Messenger of God! Do we really get reward for (being kind even to) animals?' The Prophet replied: 'There is reward for (showing kindness to) every living thing.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, Abu Dawood*)

"A woman was punished on account of a cat. She imprisoned it until it died, so was entered into Hellfire. She neither fed it nor quenched its thirst whilst she held it captive, nor did she leave it be to eat from the insects of the earth." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, Ibn Majah*)

"Whoever kills [even] a sparrow without good reason, God will question him about it on the Day of Resurrection." (*Ahmed*)

"Do not use living creatures for target practice." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

"An earlier Prophet of God was stung by an ant and so, in anger, ordered the entire ants nest be burned. At this, God reprimanded this Prophet with the words: 'Because one ant stung you, you have burned a whole community which glorified Me.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

"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 a pasture or a garden. Such a person will get a reward equal to what the horse's long rope allows it to eat in the pasture or the garden. And if the horse breaks its rope and crosses one or two hills, then all marks of its hoofs and its dung will be counted as good deeds for its owner. And if it passes by a river and drinks from it, then that will also be regarded as a good deed on the part of its owner." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

"Do not clip the forelock of a horse, for decency is attached to its forelock; nor its mane, for it protects it; nor its tail, for it is its fly-swatter." (*Abu Dawud*)

"While a man was riding a cow, it turned toward him and said: 'I have not been created for this purpose; I have been created for plowing.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Abdullah ibn Abbas narrated:

"God's Messenger forbade inciting animals to fight each other." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, at-Tirmidhi*)

Abdur-Rahman ibn Abdullah ibn Mas'ud narrated:

"We were on a journey with the Messenger of God, and he left us for a while. During his absence, we saw a bird called Hummara with its two young and so we took the young ones. The mother bird was circling above us in the air, beating its wings in grief, when the Prophet came back and said: 'Who has hurt the feelings of this bird by taking its young? Return them to her!'" (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Jabir ibn Abdullah narrated that the Prophet, upon seeing an ass which had been branded in its face pass him by, became so upset that he exclaimed:

"May God curse the one who branded it." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

The Prophet's wife, A'isha, narrated: "I was riding a restive camel and turned it rather roughly. The Prophet said to me:

'It behooves you to treat animals gently.'" (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Yahya ibn Said narrated:

"The Prophet was seen wiping the face of his horse with his gown. When asked why he was doing that, he replied: 'Last night I was reprimanded by God for having neglected my horse.'" (*Muwatta*)

Abdullah ibn Ja'far mentioned that when the Prophet passed by some children who were shooting arrows at a ram, he rebuked them, saying:

"Do not maim the poor beast." (*an-Nasai*)

Even a cursory reading of the Prophet's words above will have revealed how harming, abusing or disfiguring animals carries stern censure in this world and severe penalty in the Hereafter; while protecting animals and showing mercy and kindness to them is

rewarded by God, a path to forgiveness, and expiation of one's sins. It is clear also that Islam acknowledges the pain and suffering felt and experienced by animals - both physical and psychological - and how they instinctively recognise when injustice is done to them. Quite remarkably, Islam also recognises animals as possessing a conscience, natural dignity, and even unique individual identities (a bird named "Hummara", a donkey named "Uqayr", and so on).

"And the earth He has put for the living creatures. Therein are fruits and palms producing sheathed fruit-stalks; and also corn, with (its) leaves and stalks for fodder, and sweet-scented plants. Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you deny?" (Quran 10:10-13)

Endnotes:

[1] The destruction of the She-Camel in itself is not the reason God destroyed the nation. Rather, it is the destruction of His Special Sign which had been sent to them, such destruction symbolizing their utter denial of God as the One to whom they will return, and Tawheed as the religion that he ordained. Similarly, when a man hurts any animal without just cause, he is denying one of the aspects God has ordained mankind should act on, which is mercy. When a man denies an animal (or vegetation) its right to mercy, then the right to mercy the man has from God is similarly withdrawn, and he will be punished. Furthermore, if a man intentionally performs a mercy to an animal, vegetation (or person), then God will reward him out of His mercy.

The Creation of an Environmental Conscience (part 4 of 4): God's Green Earth

Description: The believing Muslim as a champion of ecology and environmental consciousness.

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"With Him are the keys (to the treasures) of the Unseen that no one knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the earth's shadows, not a thing, freshly green or withered, but it is (inscribed) in a clear record." (Quran 6:59)

The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, once said:

"The world is green and beautiful, and God has appointed you his guardian over it."(*Saheeh Muslim*)

Keeping the earth green, productive and of benefit to man and beast is a most noble concern according to Islam. We learn from the Prophet that:

"There is none amongst the believers who plants a tree, or sows a seed, and then a bird, or a person, or an animal eats from it, except that it is regarded as having given a charitable gift (for which he can expect God's Pleasure and Reward)." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

The planting of vegetation is such a virtuous endeavour in the Sight of God that it is encouraged even if it be a person's final act on Earth. The Prophet said:

"Even when the Day of Judgement comes (upon you), if any one has a palm-shoot in hand, he should plant it." (*Ahmad*)

As for the question of who has rights over herbage and the other resources that are vital to the survival and well-being of humankind, the Prophet explicitly stated:

"The people are partners in three things: water, herbage and (fuel for) fire." (*ibn Maajah*)

It is a given in Islam that if the vital resources of the earth are not shared equitably, societies will be polarized between the haves and the have-nots. Hence, those Muslims who find themselves in control of provisions beyond their means are encouraged to be charitable and compassionate towards the less fortunate one on the one hand, and censured for hoarding and wastefulness on the other. In any event, the obligatory Islamic institution of *zakah* (alms-giving to the poor), the prohibition of *riba* (usury in all its wicked forms), and the ethical economic system of Islam in general, all ensure that the gap between rich and poor does not remain insurmountable or, in any case, is highly porous.

"It is He Who produced gardens with and without trellises; and date-palms and crops with produce of all kinds; and olives and pomegranates of similar and different variety: eat of their fruit in their season but render the dues (i.e. pay the *zakah*) that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. And waste not by excess: for God does not love the wasteful." (Quran 6:141)

The cause of sustainable development - the ability of current generations to develop without compromising the needs of future generations - is itself in complete harmony with the teachings of Islam. Today, less than 25 percent of the world's population are consuming over 75 percent of the world's resources. It is this misappropriation, misuse, abuse and overuse of the world's resources that makes for unsustainable resource consumption. As for those guilty of such abuse, for them will be a severe comeuppance in the Hereafter, as was alluded to by the Prophet when he said:

"(Among the)... three types of people with whom God, on the Day of Resurrection, will neither exchange words, nor look at ... is the one who possesses an excess of water but withholds it from others. God will say to him: 'Today I shall withhold from you my grace as you withheld from others the excess of what you had not yourself created.'" (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

"And it is He Who has made you successive (generations) in the earth. And He has raised you in ranks, some above others, so that He may try you in that which He has bestowed on you. Surely your Lord is Swift in retribution, and certainly He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Quran 6:165)

In reality, the accelerated loss of biodiversity, the destruction of natural habitats, the pollution of and damage to eco-systems, and the general environmental erosion, damage and degradation, not to speak of the wide scale oppression suffered by many of the world's inhabitants, are all from the manifest signs of corruption and villainy in the earth.

"If only there had been among the generations before you, persons having wisdom, prohibiting (others) from corruption and villainy in the earth, except a few of those whom We saved from among them." (Quran 11:116)

If man fails in his duty and responsibility towards the One (God) greater than he, how can he be expected to be dutiful and responsible to that which he deems lesser than himself? If there is ingratitude to the Creator, how can man show gratitude towards his fellow man - let alone for the dumb beasts of the earth? If man cares little for the balance of his good deeds before His Lord, why should he be expected to care for the balance of the world around him?

"Truly, he (the wrong-doer, will have) thought that he would never return (to His lord for reckoning)! By no means! His Lord has been ever watchful over him!" (Quran 84:14-5)

Therefore let all humanity take heed! For it is certainly true that we reap what we sew. Everything we do in life will revisit us after our death; we, the human beings who have had the whole earth and its creatures subdued for a just cause. That fact alone should make us responsible in our preparation for that one fateful day, the Day of Judgement.

"When the Earth is shaken with a violent shaking, and the Earth throws out her burdens, and man says: 'What has befallen her?' - on that Day she shall tell her story!" (Quran 99:1-4)

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