

# Islam and the Environment

*By Gar Smith / Earth Island Journal (Summer 2002)*

*Transgress not in the balance, and weigh with justice, and skimp not in the balance. And earth — He set it down for all beings, therein fruits and palm trees with sheaths, and grain in the blade, and fragrant herbs. Of which your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?*

Qur'an 55: 1-12.

Despite the apocalyptic premise of Samuel Huntington's provocative book *The Clash of Civilizations* (which prophesies an inevitable war between the armies of the God and the armies of Allah), Islam and Christianity have much in common.

In their view of the natural world, both the Bible and the Qur'an share many of the same concepts. But there are some differences. The Qur'an might even be said to be the "greener" of the two holy books.

The word "Earth" (*ard*) appears no less than 485 times in the holy book of the Qur'an. Shari'a, the word for Islamic Law, literally means "source of water."

One familiar story from the life of the Prophet recounts how, during a journey, one of Muhammad's companions removed some baby pigeons from a nest. Muhammad confronted the thief and gently returned the birds to their nest. The Prophet once assured a follower that "for charity shown to each creature with a wet heart, there is a reward."

In his essay on "Islamic Environmental Ethics, Law and Society," Mawil Y. Izzi Deen notes that "Although the various components of the natural environment serve humanity as one of their functions, this does not imply that human use is the sole reason for their creation."

In the centuries following Mohammed's passing, Islamic scholars introduced the idea of *hima* — a protected zone. Many Islamic countries now set aside certain wild areas that cannot be developed or cultivated — these have become modern wildlife reserves.

According to The Exalted, "There is not an animal in the earth, nor a creature flying on two wings, but they are nations like you." (CH6; v 38)

Australian Mufti Imam Tajuddin H. Alhilaly argues that all living things "are partners to man in existence and they deserve their own respect." Without wild animals, Alhilaly observes, "it would not be possible for man to live."

"Everything in existence was created by Allah for the use of humans. Allah has made subservient to humans all animal life, bird life, plant life, water bodies, inanimate objects, and other creations. The human's duty is to deal with these as a loving and caring friend... so that he can benefit from it, without stopping others from this benefit.

As befits a faith born in the desert, water is honored as "the secret of life." Islam forbids the wastage of water "and the usage thereof without benefit...The preservation of water for the drinking of mankind, animal life, birdlife and vegetation is a form of worship which gains the pleasure of Allah."

Imam Alhilaly infers from this passage that "Islam also forbids sewerage and factory outpours to go to waterways or to the ocean, as this would pollute the water and threaten marine life."

The Qur'an does, however, endorse the transformation of wilderness into agriculture and cattle pastures. "Let man consider his food: How we pour water in showers, then split the earth in clefts and cause the grain to grow therein and grapes and green fodder, and olive trees and palm trees. And garden closes of thick foliage and fruits and grasses: Provision for you and your cattle" (80: 24-32).

The Qur'an proclaims that it is Allah who "sends down water from the sky, and therewith we bring forth buds of every kind. We bring forth the green blade from which we bring forth the thick-clustered grain; and from the date-palm, from the pollen thereof, spring pendant bunches, and gardens of grapes, and the olive and the pomegranate."

The Prophet said that any Muslim who plants a crop that feeds another person, animal or bird, will receive a reward in Paradise. Cutting down trees is seen as an

abomination. How important is the planting of trees? In the words of the Prophet: "When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hands, he should plant it."

"The earth is our first mother," says Imam Alhilaly. "On it we live, and from the bounties on it we eat. Therefore it has certain rights over us. One of these rights is making it come alive with green vegetation and other plant life and in encouragement to this, the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him) said that one who revives dead land, the land becomes his."

"We must deal with animals with utmost beneficence and compassion and strive to ensure the preservation of the different species on animal life," Imam Alhilaly instructs. "We must also not be extravagant in hunting animals in play or sport.... It is forbidden in Islam to kill a animal for mere play. Islam has forbidden wastage of animals and plants in peacetime and in war time."

"The Prophet said that he who is kind and merciful towards animals, Allah will be kind and merciful towards him."

Tradition has it that if someone kills a bird for amusement, the bird will demand justice from that man on judgment day.

"Air is the property of Allah the Exalted.... Hence, contaminating the air with smoke is an encroachment on nature and a threat to the life of mankind and all other living things.

"True Muslim countries would put forward to the UN as a primary consideration – after human rights – the protection of the atmosphere by demanding stronger resolutions against polluting the air.

"If Muslims could exert influence over the UN, we would require that natural resources be rationed. We would require protection of forests. We would eliminate the use of goods which destroy the atmosphere or in the very least reduce these to the most essential minimum. We would ensure that countries rich in forest resources are given... financial and other assistance so that they are not forced to burn down their forests to create grazing lands.

With such strong environmental concerns, why is it that the Muslim world hasn't been seen as a major participant in the global environmental movement?

"The majority of Moslems are living in third-world conditions. We have had a number of generations that could not read or write and the so-called Moslem countries war being governed by oppressive semi-secular regimes that only practice Islam for a TV camera to fool their population.

"I am happy to add that, as more of our brothers and sisters learn about our faith, we are quickly going back to the progressive society which will (Insha Allah) achieve these objectives."

In an essay on the "Significance of Environment in Islam" in the April 1998 issue of the *Islamic Voice*, Akhtar Mahmood, a Professor of Bio-Chemistry at the University of Punjab, notes that "Islam discourages luxurious and lavish living. It is a general observation that luxurious life-styles lead to weakness among nations and eventually to their downfall. The existence of luxury is also an expression of social injustice, as few can afford luxurious items at the expense of the deprived masses."

The Qur'an says "When we intend to destroy a township, we permit its luxury-loving people to commit wickedness therein. Then the word is proved true against it and we then destroy it utterly." (Surah Al-Isra 17:16).

In an article posted on Islamicwell.com, F. Kamal notes that the two fundamental books of Muslim faith – the Qur'an (the Holy Book) and the Hadith (the parables and examples from the life of the prophet) – both teach that kindness to animals is an "article of faith for Muslims."

Allah's Apostle recalled the story of a woman who "was tortured and was put in Hell because of a cat which she had kept locked till it died of hunger." In another story from the Prophet's life, a prostitute's sins were washed away because she gave drinking water to a thirsty dog.

The Prophet advised people never to curse their beasts of burden and commanded his followers to treat these animals with gentleness and kindness.

Kamal observes with some pride that this was a story "from 1,400 years ago – long before it became fashionable or 'politically correct' to care about animal rights."

"Much of the foundations of modern science are built on Muslim scientific roots," Kamal states. "But it was a science intertwined with seeking the Glory of Allah, not a cold pursuit devoid of any ethical considerations. It was not a confrontation against Nature but a search for Allah's (swt) signs, limitless bounty and Mercy."

"One of the most destructive causes of pollution is consumer waste," Kamal notes. "Needless and wasteful consumer packaging unnecessarily fills our landfills. Vast tracts of tropical rainforests... are heedlessly destroyed through neglect, mismanagement, laziness and greed."

The Qur'an states (17:27): "Lo! the squanderers were ever brothers of the devils and the devil was ever an ingrate to his Lord." Devout Muslims, Kamal says, "do not disorder their world... in search of self-gratification, greed, waste and ingratitude to their Lord."

In his article "Islam and the Environment," Dr. Arafat El Ashi, Director of the Muslim World League in Canada [191 *The West Mall, Suite 1018, Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 5K8, Canada, (416) 622-2184, <http://www.al-muslim.org>*] argues that Islam "makes it incumbent on every Muslim to contribute his/her share in improving greenery. Muslims should be active in growing more trees for the benefit of all people." Even during battle, Muslims are required to avoid cutting trees that are useful to people.

"In no other religion, philosophy or ideology... do we find a unique attitude toward nature," says El Askhi. All sports and games that are hurtful to animals and birds are forbidden in Islam.

"Human life is sacred in the sight of Islam. No one is permitted to take the life of another person except as life-for-life. Suicide is a crime in Islam."

Islam smiles on breastfeeding children for a full two years. Islam frowns on homosexual and lesbian activities. Islam requires bathing once a week (mandatory

for men; optional for women). In Islam it is an act of worship to remove dirt and obstacles from public roads. Neighbors are to be treated with kindness.

Pullquote:

*"Lo! We offered the trust unto the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. And man assumed it." Sura 33:72, Qur'an.*

**Resources:**

*Is There An Islamic Environmentalism?* by Richard Foltz.

*Environmental Protection in Islam*, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Online book.

*Towards an Islamic Theory of the Environment*. Chapter in a book [Title?] by Ziauddin Sardar.

*Guardians of the Natural Order* by Fazlun Khalid.

*Islam and Ecology Bibliography* by Richard Foltz.

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science. New website ranging from religious instruction to information on organic gardening and solar energy.

*Islam and Ecology*, 1998 conference at Harvard University.

*Islam and Vegetarianism* [501 Front St., Norfolk, VA 23510, <http://www.islamveg.com>].