

Theme 1 – Searching for the Common Ground

Presentation: Personal and Institutional Responsibility

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Personal responsibility and the Islamic perspective

In a world characterised by interdependence and all encompassing global 'civilisation', as well as by diversity and unique individuality, shared ethical principles governing the interactions of human beings and their world are essential, if the well-being of the larger community of life, upon which we all depend, is to be protected.

One of the great moral and spiritual issues of our day is the massive and increasing destruction of Creation. At the same time we are witnessing a spiritual (in the widest sense of the word) re-birth and need to re-discover communion with nature. The growth of the Green movement is but one manifestation of this trend, yet the philosophy of sustainable use lacks a moral and ethical underpinning that would give it credibility, integrity and consistency.

Only if there is a widely diffused ethical concern, which individuals deliberately make part of their own consciousness and seek to transmit to their children, is there a chance of re-creation of the balance between Humankind and nature. Religion, far more than governmental bodies or pressure groups, has a fundamental role to play in this respect. The Faiths can speak to their believers with more authority than conservation alone and while the implementation of environmental management depends on the existence of appropriate legislation, legislation becomes more effective, enforceable and useful when it emanates from a nation's creed - when it represents its cultural and intellectual heritage.

All the great religions of the world - as well as the spirituality of first peoples - have maintained a tradition of conservation, respect for nature and the environment, and kindness to other living creatures. These tenets of 'environmental theology' are little known and seldom discussed, much less widely observed or practised. They are, however, perhaps more relevant today than ever. Ancient wisdom, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Master Eckhart, St. Francis of Assisi, Ibn al A'rabi and mystics of all Faiths speak of the family of Man as a link in the chain of all beings on this Earth. Indeed, mystics always tend to relate to each other in a spirit of true ecumenism, due to their common bond with Creation. And Creation is nature.

The essence of Islamic teaching is that the entire Universe is God's creation. Not only does Islam mean submission to the will of Allah; the root of the Arabic word also means peace. Each individual must find peace with Allah, with himself, with humanity and all Creation. Islam promotes the integrity of the Earth. Unity cannot be had by discord, by setting one need against another or letting one end predominate over another; it is maintained by balance and harmony. Therefore Muslims say that Islam is the middle path and we will be answerable for how we have walked this path.

The injunctions of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions about the balanced order of nature were expounded in an ethic of ecology in Ikhwan al-Safa in its famous epistle on animals and Man. Several chapters of the Qur'an are named after animals, and many hadiths of the Prophet commend kindness to them. Mohammed is reported to have said, 'all creatures are God's dependants and the most beloved to God, among them, is he who does good to God's dependants.'

The inherent relationship between faith and the environment finds symbolic expression in the various regular rituals. Prayer is timed according to the Earth's planetary movement; Hajj, or pilgrimage, is timed according to the seasons and water is an essential element used to prepare the believer both physically and spiritually.

Indeed, water - the focus of our symposium - is recognised by Islam as the basis of all life on our planet. Even the word Shariah - the Islamic law which guides human interactions - means the road to the watering place. Water is the source of life and the Shariah is the source of knowledge about life, death and the Hereafter.

For the Muslim, Humankind's role on Earth is that of a khalifa, vice-regent or trustee of God. We are God's stewards and agents on Earth. In the words of the Prophet, 'the world is green and beautiful and God has appointed you his stewards over it.' The khalifa is answerable for his or her actions, for the way in which he or she uses or abuses the trust of God. This concept of planetary trust and stewardship is recognised by Judaism and Christianity as well as by many other religions. It is also explicit and implicit in major instruments of international law and has been adopted extensively by secular thinkers as a metaphor to describe the role of Humankind.

For the Muslim, each generation of Humankind is ethic-bound to leave behind a wholesome, sustainable environment. 'He it is who has made you inheritors of the Earth' says the Qur'an. 'It is He who produces gardens and crops diverse. Eat of their fruits. pay the due thereof. and be not wasteful.' Nor does the status of vice-regency give ground for arrogance or tyranny: 'And walk not in the earth with insolence; certainly thou wilt never tear the earth open.'

Humans are but the managers and the administrators and the Qur'an warns that fasad, or corruptions, will be prevalent on Earth as a result of human disobedience of God. Muslims believe that all creation follows one law, the Law of Allah. If this law is not obeyed, the balance of creation is disturbed and according to Qur'an interpreters, disobedience will lead to:

Tribulations, catastrophes both on land and sea. dryness of the land, many fires, many drowned and a reduction in the blessings of God. lower crops in both food, plants and fruits.

These sobering and sadly topical words may be instructively contrasted with the Biblical warning:

The Earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the Earth. The Earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant' (Isaiah 24:4-5).

This closely mirrors the foreboding of the Apocalypse of St John. The Christian scriptures also state that Mankind's fate depends on protecting and preserving the Earth's life-support systems:

For that which befalleth the son of men befalleth beasts, even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other, yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no pre-eminence above a beast' (Ecclesiastes 3:19-21).

Islam teaches us that we have been created by God and that we will return to God for judgement: that we are accountable for our deeds as well as our omissions. The khalifa will render an account of how he treated the trust of God on the Day of Reckoning. The notion that describes the accountability of the khalifa is akhira. Islam is the guidance of how to live today so that we can face the akhira; it is the message which informs us of what will be involved in that reckoning. The Qur'an states specifically that the responsibility of vice-regency will be checked by God himself to see how it has been performed.

Unity, trusteeship and accountability (tawheed, khalifa and akhira), the three central pillars of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. These notions must not be reduced to matters of personal piety: they must guide all aspects of life.

The most positive potential impact of the Shariah may, indeed, be in the field of the environment where it has a uniquely strong and comprehensive tradition on which modern Muslim legislators might build. Let us not forget that Muslims had formulated a bill of legal rights of animals as early as the thirteenth century and in Turkey Muslims had established environmental and cultural associations and initiated work on environmental issues long before the Ministry of Environment was established.

Islam should be a complete way of life, an ethical system providing the bearings for all our actions. We must integrate true Islamic values into our very being. We must judge our actions by them. They furnish us with a topical world-view which enables us to ask environmentally appropriate questions, draw up the right balance sheet of possibilities, properly weigh the environmental costs and benefits of what we want and what we can do within the ethical boundaries established by God, without violating the rights of His other creations.

As the late Professor Al-Hafiz Masri noted:

It is a thousand pities that, while Islam has a wealth of guidance to offer, our Islamic countries are going on blindfold repeating the mistakes that the West had initiated after the Industrial Revolution.

It is my heartfelt hope and belief that Muslims will yet create a true Islamic alternative, a caring and practical way of being, doing and knowing. The philosophical and spiritual bases do exist, but more guidance needs to be available to the faithful and those who govern them. There is, for example, a relative paucity of practical information about conservation in Muslim countries compared to the proliferation of such materials available in the West.

Institutional responsibility

In spite of the warnings and sound intentions broadcast by the Club of Rome, the Brundtland Commission, the Earth Summit and a host of similar initiatives, the institutional response has consistently proved frustratingly inadequate to meet the challenges of our times.

The current fascination - almost to religious fervour - with globalisation will not replace development aid, yet the balance of power seems to be shifting dangerously from the hands of elected representatives towards mega-corporations and a new breed of anonymous globocrats.

With precious little accountability or public scrutiny, decisions are being made in the name of progress and liberalisation which carry highly negative side-effects for human health, quality of life, the environment and our collective conscience. The new values place the emphasis firmly on money and conspicuous consumption. Governments and non-governmental organisations tend to follow the corporations in applying management criteria and profits and taxes have replaced the common good.

Globalisation is the opposite of bio-diversity. It brings in its wake the dangers of discord and disparity - the erosion of the middle path so crucial, as we have seen, to the Islamic concepts of unity, harmony and the integrity of the Earth. True happiness is based on spiritual as well as material values and there is clearly a need to counterbalance economic interests with parallel emphasis on the social, environmental and ethical perspectives. Why could there not be a codification of environmental conventions - or even a new World Environment Authority vested with the same level of prestige, efficiency, authority, credibility, means and influence as the World Trade Organisation? Why is it that Environment Ministers are currently all too frequently viewed as poor cousins to their Trade counterparts?

I have, however, been greatly encouraged by the new, more forceful language which is creeping into documents like the report of the Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection of the European Parliament prepared for the recent United Nations General Assembly Special Session to review Agenda 21. This underscores the reciprocity between economic and social development and protection of the environment which is vital to any truly viable concept of sustainable development.

More importantly, the report recognises the need for the European Union to set an example, notably in terms of financial commitment, and highlights the importance of clearly defining priorities, setting precise targets and creating specific tools for achieving measurable results, thus moving beyond rhetoric towards an operational phase which is already tragically overdue. It also proposes an International Environment Court to give teeth to environmental legislation.

In the Black Sea region, as elsewhere, most of the problems, and the analyses needed to design remedies for them, are known. The tragedy is that this knowledge is not adequately applied - either because there is no economic interest or capability, or because concerned individuals feel powerless to intervene. There is an outstanding legacy of marine research which must be revitalised. There is a wide range of institutions that could be actively involved, including schools, churches and businesses. There is also the need for specific leadership from inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. For all the many merits of the Black Sea Strategic Action Plan, success in the Black Sea regions will ultimately depend on individuals, singly and collectively. The greatest potential rests with human will and in this respect the message of Islam is wholly pro-active. As the prophet says, 'On Doomsday, if anyone has a palm shoot in hand, he should plant it'.