

## Preserving Environment through Religion: A Study of Muhammad's *Sunnah*

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### ABSTRACT

Environmental degradation forms one of the main concerns of humanity world-wide. Environment receives high proportion of toxic waste in each possible form - solid, liquid, and gaseous, each passing day. All this should call upon the attention of human beings to think on the grave issue of environmental pollution. Every year June 5 is celebrated as the World Environment Day (WED) under the aegis of United Nations, intending to raise awareness about the environmental issues within the global society. Seminars, Symposia, and conferences are held world-wide to seek strategies and tools to minimize the harmful effects of environmental pollution. There is no denying of the fact that all such human endeavors bear fruits. However experts at such events fail to invoke the teachings of religious scriptures. As the post-modern man still believes in the inviolability of nature, which forms the trust of God in the hands of man, to call upon the religious teachings on the environmental preservation and protection will help a lot to build our healthy relationship with the environment. In the paper my venture is aimed to explore the Prophetic *Sunnah* of Muhammad where in the conservation and care for the environment is deeply cherished. The study could prove useful to both religious and ir-religious in drawing vital insights and handy conclusions for the preservation of the environment that we all are part of.

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### 1. Introduction

When the entire global environment is suffocating at the hands of mankind, it is crucial to save it from slow but certain death. We need to be serious about the deteriorating state of environment consisting of both biotic (animate) and abiotic (inanimate) factors. We should invoke the help through all possible means to safeguard the deteriorating conditions of our environment and the consequential misery of mankind and other creation. There is no doubt that seminars and conferences are organized world-wide where strategies, policies, and proposals are put forward to ensure the safety of the environment. However despite such efforts no satisfactory results have come out. There may be certain lackings yet one of the important reasons is the negligence and or/underestimation of religious teachings with respect to nature and environment. While majority of mankind believes in God, His wisdom in the creation of the universe, and the sacredness of nature, religion thus can induce the careful and virtuous attitude in an individual towards his surroundings. Religion ascertains the mutual dependence of man and environment. It thus would be wise to invoke the help of religion for the rectification, restoration and future well being of the global environment. Religion may serve as a moral compass in guiding the actions and behaviors of individuals and groups, the world over. The need is for crafting a strategy that will help individuals imbibe in their lives the perennial wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions. The entire fraternity of scientists and environmentalists, religionists should come hand in hand to work for the betterment and protection of the environment.

Nevertheless a new United Nations report warns that pollution and global warming are causing millions more deaths than conflicts. The UN's environment agency has called for an urgent roll-back on harmful substances and fossil fuels. In its report "Healthy Environment, Healthy People", the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the World Health

Organization and several other environment organizations said that, in 2012, an estimated 12.6 million deaths were attributable to deteriorating environment conditions. The largest numbers of deaths took place in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific regions, followed by sub-Saharan Africa, where around a quarter of deaths were likely caused by air pollution chemicals, climate change and a lack of access to sanitation.

"By depleting the ecological infrastructure of our planet and increasing our pollution footprint, we incur an ever-growing cost in terms of human health and well-being," said UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. He added that humanity's life support systems had been compromised by globalization and powerful economic interests. UNEP estimated that an extra 250,000 deaths could occur each year between 2030 and 2050 as a result of climate change, leading to malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress. Between them air pollution and a lack of access to clean water and sanitation cause almost 8 million premature deaths each year. Environmental impacts are responsible for the deaths of more than one quarter of all children under the age of five, the report states.<sup>1</sup>

It is beyond belief and conjecture that if the present trends continue, a great catastrophe would be unleashed. The greater share of this havoc wreaked on the environment is the result of our un-reined passions. Nothing but religion optimizes Syed Hossein Nasr can pacify our ever increasing desires and passions. According to him, vast majority of people who believe in God and the afterlife, still fear the consequences of their evil actions in their lives in this world. If it were to be told to them that pollution and destruction of the environment is a sin in the theological sense of the term they would think twice before indulging in it. For the ordinary believer the wrath of God and fear of punishment in the afterlife is the most powerful force against the negative tendencies of the passionate soul.

For nearly all people on the earth who continue to pollute the air and the water, and whose lifestyle entails the destruction of the natural environment, what is it that is going to act as a break against the ever-growing power of the passions except religion?<sup>ii</sup> The argument of Nasr holds a considerable weight for despite the wave of secularization; religion bounces back now and then.

Besides, it is an established fact that the vast majority of people in the world do not accept any ethics which does not have a religious foundation. This means says, S.H. Nasr, in practical terms that if a religious figure, let us say, a *Mulla* or a Brahmin in India or Pakistan, goes to a village and tells the villagers that from the point of view of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) or the Law of *Manu* (Hindu law) they are forbidden to cut this tree, many people would accept. But if some graduate from the University of Delhi or Karachi, who is a government official, comes and says, for rational reasons, philosophical and scientific reasons, that it is better not to cut this tree, few would heed his advice. So from a practical point of view the only ethics which can be acceptable to the vast majority, at the present moment in the history of the world, is still a religious ethics. The very strong prejudice against religious ethics in certain circles in the West which have now become concerned with the environmental crisis is itself one of the greatest impediments to the solution of the environmental crisis itself.<sup>iii</sup>

Religion promises to help in controlling the great passions within us which have now been fanned by, first of all, the weakening of religion and, secondly, the substitution of another set of values derived from a kind of pseudo-religion whose new gods are such idols as "development" and "progress." But such notions do not have the power to help us control our passions. On the contrary they only fan the fire of those passions. We have been witness during the last generation alone to the ever greater debunking of the traditional religious attitudes towards the world, especially what we call in Arabic *rida*, that is contentment with our state of being, a virtue which is the very opposite of the sin of covetousness.<sup>iv</sup>

Advocating in favor of religion as the finest of the tools to check the growing rate of environmental pollution, let us explore briefly the religious teachings of Islam through the person of Muhammad (SAAS) and see where it helps us in stabilizing the tottering ecology.

## 2. Environmental Teachings of Islam

The essence of Islamic teaching is that the entire universe is Allah's creation. Allah makes the waters to flow upon the earth, upholds the heavens, makes the rain fall and keeps the boundaries between day and night. The whole of the rich and wonderful universe belongs to Allah, its maker. It is Allah who created the plants and the animals in their pairs and gave them the means to multiply. Then Allah created mankind - a very special creation because mankind alone was created with reason and the power to think and even the means to turn against his Creator. Mankind has the potential to acquire a status higher than that of the angels or sink lower than the lowliest of the beasts. The success story of a human being is contained in the word 'Islam' itself.

The word 'Islam' has the dual meaning of submission and peace. Mankind is special, a very particular creation of Allah. But still we are Allah's creation and we can only properly understand ourselves when we recognize that our proper condition is one of submission to Allah who made us. And only when we submit to the Will of Allah can we find peace: peace within us as individuals, peace between man and man, and peace between man and nature. When we submit to the Will of Allah, we become aware of the sublime fact that all our powers, potentials, skills and knowledge are granted to us by Allah. We are His servants and when we are conscious of that, when we realize that all our achievements derive from the Mercy of Allah and when we return proper thanks and respect and worship to Allah for our nature and creation, then we become free. Our freedom is that of being sensible, aware, responsible trustees of Allah's gifts and bounty.<sup>v</sup>

The primary text of Islam- al-Qur'an abounds in the verses to establish the equilibrium and the state of tranquility between man and his environment. The primordial character of Qur'anic messages visualizes man and the cosmos in a state of harmony that reaffirms man's inner bond with the natural world. Certain verses of the Qur'an address natural forms as well as human beings, while God takes non-human members of His creation, such as plants and animals, the sun and the stars to witness in certain other verses. The soul which is nourished and sustained by the Qur'an does not regard the world of nature as its natural enemy to be conquered and subdued but as an integral part of man's religious universe sharing in his earthly life, and in a sense, even ultimate destiny.

The Qur'an makes use of environmental theme in encouraging humankind to be moderate, "*It is He who produces gardens, both cultivated and wild, and palm trees and crops of diverse kinds and olives and pomegranates both similar and dissimilar. Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit and pay their dues on the day of their harvest, and do not be wasteful. He does not love the squandering*"<sup>vi</sup>. The Qur'an refers to creation or the natural world as the signs (*ayat*) of Allah, the Creator, and this is also the name given to the verses contained in the *Qur'an*. *Ayat* means signs, symbols or proofs of the divine. As the Qur'an is proof of Allah so likewise is His creation. The Qur'an also speaks of signs within the human self and as Nasr explains, "...when Muslim sages referred to the cosmic or ontological *Qur'an*...they saw upon the face of every creature letters and words from the cosmic *Qur'an*...they remained fully aware of the fact that the *Qur'an* refers to phenomena of nature and events within the soul of man as *ayat* ...for them forms of nature were literally *ayat Allah*".<sup>vii</sup> The *Qur'an* says, "*There are certainly signs (ayat) in the earth for people with certainty; and in yourselves. Do you not then see?*"<sup>viii</sup>

Delving upon the Quranic statements, we thus arrive at a position where we see that the universe we inhabit is a sign of God's creation as is the environment of our innermost selves. They both emanate from the one source and are bonded by only one purpose, which is to serve the divine will. This bonding of the cosmic to the inner core of each individual is the profound ecology of Islam. The *Qur'anic* view holds that everything on the earth was created for humankind. It was

God's gift (*ni'mah*) to us, but a gift with conditions nevertheless. The tests are a measure of our acts of worship (*ihsan*) in its broadest sense. That is living in a way that is pleasing to Allah, striving in everything we do to maintain the harmony of our inner and outer environments.<sup>ix</sup> Prophet Muhammad states that every human individual is born on *Fitrāh* i.e. as a Muslim (One whose disposition is towards submission to his Creator).<sup>x</sup> In the same manner all natural entities are patterned on *Fitrāh*. To alter such order may breed disharmony and chaos in the personality of a human being and the nature surrounding him.

The heavenly bodies, the earth and its ecosystems all work within their own limits and tolerances. Islamic teaching likewise sets limits to human behavior as a control against excesses.

In the *Sunnah*<sup>1</sup> of Prophet Muhammad we have practical reflections of the above mentioned principles and guidelines. We have countless pronouncements and above all his acts that stimulate and convince a believer to maintain a healthy relationship with his/ her surroundings. The glorious Prophet was deeply concerned for the well being of both flora and fauna. He was equally striving for the purity of physical environments as earth, water, and air. At the very outset earth, *Wal Ardi Wama Tahaha* as Almighty Allah uses the words for it (earth), was declared as Mosque for the Prophet. Muslims could offer their prayers where ever they are on the surface of the earth. This declaration sanctioned the sacredness of earth and the responsibility of believers to ensure the purity and cleanliness of earth as is maintained in a mosque. The Prophet's appreciation of the earth's natural endowment is espoused, in the following *Hadith*, with a challenge: "The world is green and pleasant and God has put it under your charge to see how you will manage."<sup>xi</sup> We have an instant answer in the Qur'an as, The earth is inherited by those of God's servants that do good works and fulfill their responsibilities.<sup>xii</sup> The good you give to the earth, the best will it give to you. It has been well said that plants are to earth what clothes are to man. In order to add to the beauty of the earth and to maintain its decorum, planting of trees becomes inevitable. In a very inspirational *Hadith*, Prophet exhorts his followers as: "If the day of resurrection comes upon any one of you while he has a seedling in his hand, let him plant it."<sup>xiii</sup>

Prophet had a special concern for earth and he could lose no chance to ensure the greenery of earth and its rightful and judicious use; thus the encouragement in a *Hadith*, "One who reclaims barren land is entitled to own it."<sup>xiv</sup> The act of plantation not only counts the benefits of the worldly life but registers the blessings of hereafter. In this respect the saying of the Prophet runs as "Anyone who plants a tree or sows a field, and a human, bird or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him."<sup>xv</sup> Prophet used to remind his followers at every step that beauty is dear to God. Prophet said: "God is beautiful and He loves beauty."<sup>xvi</sup> In a widely quoted *Hadith*, the

Prophet (peace be upon him) declares that "Cleanliness is half of faith."<sup>xvii</sup> The cleanliness of one's own self and one's surroundings forms the characteristic trait of a believer. "He who goes to bed at night with his hands unclean should only blame himself (if he falls ill), says Prophet."<sup>xviii</sup>

Muslims have a special relationship with water. It is one of the great signs (*ayat*) of God in nature, and it has been mentioned specifically in the verses of the Qur'an. Water is indeed a sign of Allah that is everywhere in one of its many forms. For everyday Muslims, water is nothing more than an expression of the covenant, or trust, (*amanah*) we have with God, for with it we ritually purify ourselves to begin each act of worship. Prophet (peace be upon him) warned his followers of the consequences for withholding water: "There are three persons whom Allah will not look at on the Day of Resurrection, nor will he purify them and theirs shall be a severe punishment. One of them is a man [who] possessed superfluous water on a way and he withheld it from travellers."<sup>xix</sup> Islam strongly dislikes the wastage of resources. It prefers moderation in every act. But waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters, says Quran.<sup>xx</sup> Muslims are expected to be humble and judicious in their words and deeds. Arrogance and haughtiness is prophesied as doom and destruction in Islam. The special feature of believers is recorded in the Qur'an as, "And the servants of the All-Merciful are they who walk on the earth gently (*hawnan*)."<sup>xxi</sup> At another place Qur'an states, "O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and every place of prayer: *eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters.*"<sup>xxii</sup>

Animal cruelty is forbidden in Islam. There are many examples from the time of the Prophet Muhammad that support this prohibition — for example: "No human being kills a sparrow or [something] larger, without right, except that Allah will ask him about it on Judgment Day." Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) directed us to treat animals with love. They are not to be disrespected, denied food or water, or hurt in any way. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) once told the story of a woman who was punished because of a cat she had imprisoned until it died. "She entered the (Hell) Fire because of it, for she neither gave the cat food nor water as she had imprisoned it, nor set it free to eat from the Earth."<sup>xxiii</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

The precepts drawn from both the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* exhort mankind to be a peace with one's own self and towards nature and society. Islam holds that the earth and the cosmos are set in equilibrium, and to alter such balance may summon harm and imbalance in our lives. Qur'an warns us in such words as, "Do no mischief on the Earth after it has been set in order; but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good".<sup>xxiv</sup> Indeed Qur'an and the example of Prophet urge us to partake in the beautification and maintenance of worldly order. On the contrary "There is near total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilization which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate with it."<sup>xxv</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Literally the word '*Sunnah*' means habit, practice, customary procedure, action, norm, or usage sanctioned by tradition. However in Islamic technical sense it refers to Prophet Muhammad's sayings, practices, and habits. Whenever *Sunnah* is mentioned, it refers to the sayings, doings, and living habits of Muhammad (PBUH)

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Whoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand [by taking action]; if he cannot, then with his tongue [by speaking out]; and if he cannot, then with his heart [by hating it and feeling that it is wrong] — and that is the weakest of faith." The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was urging humanity to take action and speak out, and at the very least, recognize in our hearts when something is wrong.<sup>xxvi</sup> The words of the Prophet echo the words of Allah, "...Help you one another in *Al-Birr* and *At- Taqwa* (Virtue, Righteousness and Piety); but do not help one another in sin and transgression.

And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is severe in punishment.<sup>xxvii</sup> Thus the destiny of one's own self and of the environment lies in the hands of mankind. All the ugly consequences bore by humanity resulting from the depletion of natural resources and the pollution cum contamination of air, water, and soil is the work of the hands of mankind itself. To beautify or to blemish our planet rests on our own actions for Qur'an openly declares, "*Corruption has appeared in both land and sea because of what people's own hands have brought about so that they may taste something of what they have done, so that hopefully they will turn back*"<sup>xxviii</sup>.

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