

Islam and Peaceful Coexistence with the Environment

In Islam, all things have been created with purpose and in proportion and measure, both qualitatively and quantitatively, (al-Qamar, 49). Concerning the environment, which is also God's creation, its role is dual: to worship its Creator and Master and to be subjected to man whom it surrounds.

As for the former, God says, for example: "Seest thou not that to Allah prostrate all things that are in the heavens and on earth, - the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals, and a great number among mankind? But a great number are (also) such as unto whom the chastisement is justly due. And such as Allah shall disgrace, - none can raise to honor: for Allah carries out all that He wills". (al-Hajj, 18)

"Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, declares the Praises and Glory of Allah: for He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise". (al-Saff 1)

As regards the subjection of the environment by God to man's use, it is certainly a manifestation of God's immeasurable mercy over man.

Lest he shall become unable to smoothly and responsibly carry out his duties as *khalifah* (vicegerent). God did not send man to the earth until he became fully prepared for his life mission, nor did He send him before the earth became fully equipped and set to accommodate him.

The Holy Qur'an says: "O ye people! worship your Guardian Lord, Who created you and those who came before you that ye may become righteous; Who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rain from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then set not up rivals unto Allah when ye know (the truth)". (al-Baqarah 21-22)

"It is Allah Who hath created the heavens and the earth and sendeth down rain from the skies, and with it bringeth out fruits wherewith to feed you; it is He Who hath made the ships subject to you, that they may sail through the sea by His Command; and the rivers (also) hath He made subject to you. And He hath made subject to you the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses; and the Night and the Day hath He (also) made subject to you. And He giveth you of all that ye ask for. But if ye count the favors of Allah, never will ye be able to number them. Verily, man is given up to injustice and ingratitude". (Ibrahim 32-34)

"And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect". (al-Jathiyah 13)

The relationship between man and the environment should be as sincere and upright as practical and rightly poised. Any deviation from this sensible and middle-path philosophy will invariably result in pushing man to the extremes on either side, all of which, however, are resolutely rejected by Islam.

Not only does this doctrine apply to man's relationship with the environment, but also to everything else related to each and every segment of his existence. This is so because Islam as a universal code of life, and with it the whole Islamic community (*ummah*), is made justly balanced, "that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves". (al-Baqarah 143)

Man must respect the environment in that he is dependent on it. As God subjected the environment to man, He likewise made it an indispensable field of the vicegerency activities entrusted to man. In other words, man cannot but coexist with the environment, giving away and receiving in return proportionally to what he offered. From this partnership, man is bound to attain peace, happiness and prosperity in this world, plus salvation in the Hereafter, or frustration, disgrace and chastisement in both worlds.

For this reason will it be apt to depict this world as a plantation, or a farm (*mazra'ah*), which must be diligently taken care of, should its owner harbour any hope of an abounding harvest on the Day of Judgment.

The Qur'an proclaims: "But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief". (al-Qasas 77)

Man's rights over nature are rights of sustainable use based on moderation, balance and conservation. Nature's rights over man, on the other hand, are that it be safe from every misuse, mistreatment and destruction. Greed, extravagance and waste are considered a tyranny against nature and a transgression of those rights.

Ali b. Abi Talib, the fourth Muslim Caliph, once told a man who had developed and reclaimed abandoned land: "Partake of it gladly, so long as you are a benefactor, not a despoiler; a cultivator, not a destroyer".

The creation of nature and its perfect equilibrium preceded the creation of man. Nonetheless, no sooner had man come into existence than he became an integral part thereof. The guardianship

of nature, besides, became placed in his care, constituting the essence of his vicegerency assignment.

Inasmuch as he is endowed with the power of free will and the other outstanding capacities, such as intelligence and knowledge, man is capable of steering his own bark. Provided he uses his abilities and talent rightly, man furthermore puts himself in a position to attain, to some extent, mastery over the forces of nature and subdue them to his services.

If the perfectly executed environmental equilibrium is sustained, man should be commended for that, for he lived up to the demands of his reputation as the vicegerent and custodian of the earth. But if the same becomes disturbed and damaged, it is man again who must be held responsible for the disorder, in that he committed a breach of the sacred trust put on him. The state of the earth is a testimony of man's either success or failure while on it.

In most cases, however, it is they who rebelled against God and His will that rebel against, and ill-treat, the environment and the flawless forces that govern it. They thus intend to satisfy their personal delirious greed and secure some societal short-term gains at the expense of the long-term vision and objectives of the whole of mankind.

When consequently God's wrath descends on such men, and when the favourable position in which God has placed them, changes, there is no turning back. Only a substantial change in their conduct and attitude may give those men a reasonable hope of God's clemency, and a possible turnaround in their fortunes.

The Holy Qur'an is pretty clear about this: "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the meed) that the hand of men have earned, that (Allah) may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from evil)". (al-Rum 41)

"If the people of the towns had but believed and feared Allah, We should indeed have opened out to them (all kinds of) blessings from heaven and earth; but they rejected (the truth), and We brought them to book for their misdeeds". (al-A'raf 96)

Isma'il al-Faruqi, while discoursing on the theme of "the principle of the economic order", concluded that Islamic responsibility demands that no damage occurs to nature in the process of man's utilization of it. He said: "Islam teaches that nature's materials and forces are gifts granted by God to us. The gift, however, is not transfer of title. It is a permission to use for the given purpose. The owner is and always remains Allah. As the Mesopotamian used to say: 'He is the Lord of the manor, and man is merely the servant.' This attitude is perfectly Islamic as well. The gift then must be returned to the

Creator at our death or retirement, improved and increased through our production. At the very least, it must be returned intact, as it was when received. The Qur'an has emphatically reiterated that to Allah everything in creation returns".

From the Islamic perspective, man's treatment of the environment is closely related to his faith. The more is he attached to the normative teachings of Islam in carrying out his daily acts, the healthier is his relationship with the environment. Similarly, whenever a person distances himself from Islam and its beliefs and value system, his behaviour degenerates. This deeply affects his surroundings -- comprising all animate and inanimate beings -- and his fellow human beings.

So significant is man's relationship with the environment in Islam that in some instances the same is capable of taking precedence over the other deeds of a person, placing him then on the highest, or dragging him to the lowest, point of existence.

For example, under certain circumstances certain noble environmental acts can obliterate a person's past misdeeds and ensure him Paradise. On the other hand, some atrocious environmental acts of a person under certain circumstances can make his past good deeds gain naught, promising him nothing in return in the Hereafter except Hellfire.

On the subject of animals, for example, the Prophet (pbuh) once said: "A woman was sent to the Fire because of a cat. She imprisoned her and neither fed her nor set her free to feed upon the rodents of the earth". (*Sahih al-Bukhari*)

The Prophet (pbuh) also related the story of a woman from among the Children of Israel guilty of fornication, who found a dog near a well panting with thirst. She took off a shoe, tied it with her veil, and then managed to collect some water for the dog which it drank. The dog quenched its thirst, and, as a result, God forgave the woman her sin. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*)

Lastly, the environment stands for a source of man's spiritual enlightenment too, provided his treatment of it is apt and derived from the teachings of revelation, in that the environment in its totality is an expression of God's oneness, mercy and omnipotence. By the power of reason and insight that has been conferred on him to subdue the forces of nature, man will at the same time be able to penetrate through and grasp properly its countless mysteries and phenomena. Consequently, this will lead to a considerable enhancement of his physical well-being, and the expediting of the process of his spiritual advancement.

On this the Holy Qur'an says: "Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of Night and Day, - there

are indeed Signs for men of understanding, - men who remember Allah standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the (wonders) of creation in the heavens and the earth, (with the saying): "Our Lord not for naught hast Thou created (all) this! Glory to Thee! Give us Salvation from the Chastisement of the Fire". (Alu 'Imran 190-191)

What's more, the environment, in a sense, participates in revealing truth to man; it, in fact, is a revelation itself. Therefore, in addition to having the composed or written Qur'an (*al-Qur'an al-tadwini*), there is a cosmic or ontological "Qur'an" (*al-Qur'an al-takwini*) as well. Both revelations complement each other, as it were, in furnishing man with the necessary substance, so as not to let him betray the trust of inhabiting the earth, which he had wittingly accepted.

It follows that those who fully submit to the Divine Will and read, understand and apply the written Qur'an, easily distinguish upon the faces of every creature, letters and words from the pages of the cosmic Qur'an. For this reason the Qur'an refers to the phenomena of nature as signs or symbols (*ayat*), a term that is also used for the verses of the Qur'an. Indeed, both the Qur'an and nature in their own respective ways testify to the same truths.