

How Green is Islam?

By
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The Selective Religious

It is interesting to observe how selective the religious can be in choosing when to be very vocal and when not to. Some seemingly trivial matters are debated like as if they are the fundamental essence of religion itself, while silence befalls the most crucial of problems.

Be in any Muslim religious e-group and it'll be hard not to miss the annual bickering on whether it is permissible to celebrate the *Maulid*. I have frequently experienced participants of these groups condemning each other, just because they cannot agree on certain issues, such as, if asking the holy dead for favors is Islamic or Pagan in origin, or whether some things are *bid'a* or not. We can still remember some parents making headlines for not wanting to send their children to school because their daughters were not allowed to wear the '*tudung*'. The list of things the local religious Muslims are vocally passionate about goes on.

The Absence of Green Issues

But while these are issues that they seemed to be very concerned with, there are some other issues that they do not seem to be bothered with at all. Or even if they are bothered with these issues, these problems seemed not to be as successful in bringing out the vociferousness of the pious, like how the other popular issues could.

I think, the most unpopular of these issues is the conservation and management of our local natural habitats. You can hardly notice any posting in the religion oriented e-groups about the reclamation of Chek Jawa or the plans to construct a casino on the southern islands that could destroy the coral community there. I find the lack of representation of the religious Muslim community in conservation efforts disappointing. This made me ask myself: How important are the issues of conservation of nature in our religion? Should the more religious people of the religion be as concerned with habitat destruction as they are with *Maulid*, *Bid'a* and *Tudung*?

This lack of noise in conservation issues is as if, a conclusion has been made to say that protection of Nature is not that important an issue in the development of a religious and spiritual person. Many religious Muslims seemed happy to just dedicate their time and efforts to those things that might be deemed by some as of 'eternal significance'.

This is not surprising since many popular religious writings concentrate on the impending destruction of the world as '*Qiyamah*' approaches. But that the Earth will ultimately be destroyed does not diminish our responsibility as stewards of God's Creations. This obsession with the end of days could very well be one of the causes that make the end of our days on this planet even earlier.

The teachings of Islam certainly do have a mandate for the hereafter, but that does not mean that it is the only thing we need to be concerned about. Dismissing the importance of our role to take care of this Earth as a low priority is definitely dangerous, especially given our current global situation.

The Need for Environmental Consciousness

Nature today is troubled by many man-made problems: pollution, overexploitation of natural resources, habitat destruction, global warming, sea-level changes, and exhilarating rate of species extinction, among many others. These problems are real and often serious. The past few decades have seen increasing human activities with the increase of global human population. As a result, we have either destroyed or polluted many natural habitats of other species that share this planet. These problems deserve to be major concerns for all people, including Muslims. Action is now desperately needed more than ever.

In fact, it is only logical to say that these more pious Muslims must be the most concerned about nature and its conservation. The religion has taught us to view life on this Earth as a test, a chance to prove that they are worthy of God's Heaven. Some Muslim writers have rightly pointed out that the Earth itself is a trust, or the *al-Amanah* (Al-Quran 33:72) that forms part of this test. They point out that as *Khalifah* (Al-Quran 6:165, 25:39), we have been appointed as stewards of the environment, to care for His Creation. Some went further to point out that the Islam has concepts that are suitable to be the pillars of environmental ethics. Yasin Dutton, for example, says that Islam offers practical solutions through its three traditional categories of *Aqa'id* (beliefs), *Fiqh* (legal judgments) and *Tasawwuf* (personal spiritual development).

One other example, points out to *Tawhid* (unity of Man and Nature), *Khalifah* (Trusteeship) and *Akhirah* (accountability). These pillars have been translated, in the past, into practical injunctions in the Shari'ah (Islamic Law). For example, *hima*, or nature reserves, formed the main method of environmental management in classical Islamic legislation. In the thirteenth century, a classical Muslim jurist, Izz ad-Din Ibn Abd as-Salam, formulated the legal rights of animals, using religious concepts and injunctions.

Perhaps the existence of examples from the past such as these, is why some Muslim writers today believe that Islam already has the solution to environmental problems. But having the solution and actually finding ways to apply these worthy Islamic principles to solve modern problems of the environment are two different things.

Lack of Environmental Participation

Muslims today seemed to be more preoccupied with other things about the religion. In these trying times, nobody can blame some Muslims that seemed to be more interested in the spiritual aspects of the religion. Compare the attendance of Muslims in spiritual seminars and *majlis dzikir*s with those of reforestation activities and habitat surveys.

Muhammad Iqbal, in his celebrated *Payam-I-Mashriq*, once proclaimed: “The mountains, the sea, the setting of the sun: There I saw Allah without his veil.” If being spiritual is to feel humbled with God’s greatness, what better way to do this than to allow the majesty of his creations humble us?

In the Qur’an, it is written: “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 celebrate the praises of Allah, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the wonders of creation in the heavens and the earth, (saying): Our Lord! You have not created all this in vain! Glory be to You! Give us salvation from the penalty of the Fire.”(Surah Al - Imran: 190-191)

If being spiritual is doing what is pleasing to God, does that not make caring for His creation a spiritual activity?

Thus, as put forth by Asghar Ali Engineer (“What I Believe”, *Islam and The Modern Age*, July 1999): “the real spirituality lies in serving the people, in fact serving the whole creation. Therefore, even the act to protect environment from destruction is also a spiritual act. It is only in proper environment that life - whether human, animal or plant life - can thrive.”

How can any spirit be truly clean and healthy when it is ignorant of the fate that its fellow creations are suffering from? I have no problems with spirituality but if only the spiritual people are more proactive and focus that much needed spiritual energy into helping to minimize the damage that we are causing to this planet. Has spirituality been unfairly translated only into things that provide personal solace? Can it be possible to attain a pure God-centered spirit in this increasingly polluted world where millions die from diseases and hunger?

There is a saying of the Prophet: “If any Muslim plants something or sows seed from which a man, a bird or an animal eats, it counts as a charity for him.” (Related by Anas, in Bukhari and Muslim)

But popular Islam today rarely quotes such hadith: those that enthuse Muslims with nature. Perhaps that is why we tend to see very few Muslims going for nature related activities. In an email interview, Dr Vilma D’Rozario, Chairperson of the Education Group of Nature Society Singapore, wrote: “I have noticed too that very few local Muslims go for nature walks or nature related activities”. This under representation of the very people that claim to be the *Vicegerent* of the Earth is strange indeed. Should not the Stewards of the Trust spend some time to make frequent rounds to see how what they are trusted with are doing? They seem to not mind spending time deliberating on other issues. Some Muslims can spend a huge amount of their time to study the finer intricacies of the *Shariah* and *Sunnah* and seemed not to mind debating what they have learnt with other Muslims.

Some of these debates that I’d encountered include:

- 1) Are beards compulsory for Muslim men? How long should the beard be? Can beards be dyed?
- 2) How many levels and categories of innovations in religious rituals are there? Which categories are permissible?
- 3) Should *basmalah* in the daily prayers be recited aloud or softly? Are they part of the Surah or are they not?
- 4) Can we dedicate the night before Friday for reciting the chapter *Yasin*? Is this a tradition of the Prophet, or is it an innovation?

5) Is Jesus, the Prophet of God, dead or still alive? If he is dead, where is his tomb? If he is alive, where is he now?

I must say that it is not wrong to think about these issues and these debates do indicate that we Muslims do have lots of time on our hand. But would it not be wiser to spend this time and intellectual energy at solving the problems of the *Amanah* that we have been entrusted upon? Would it not be better to display the relevancy of religion in these modern times to those who have yet to believe?

Our Duty

Shabbir Akhtar once wrote: “The Koran constantly emphasizes the religious significance of the created natural order. Indeed, it contains ten times as many verses about the signs (ayat; ayah, singular) of God than it does about religious law – a particularly surprising circumstance in view of Islam’s justified reputation as a law centered faith.” (*A Faith for All Seasons*)

Perhaps it is time to rethink how we profile a religious person. Perhaps, given the current state of affairs on this planet, the pious should be imagined to be more than just the bearded and the traditionally dressed. Perhaps it is time for the Vicegerents of the Earth to really start carrying out its God-given role on this planet.

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