

Islamic Perspectives of Man-Environment Relationships and Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

The paper reviews the contemporary explanations or theories of the man-environment relationship and compares it with the Islamic viewpoint. The secular concepts of determinism and possibilism are deviants of the Islamic perception as they may form foundations of certain forms of disbelief. Islam neither views the man-environment relationship as a man having dominion over the environment (possibilism) nor the environment having dominion over man (determinism). Islam considers the environment as a “trust” given to man to use its resources and protect and preserve it for future generations’ use. Man will be accountable for this task in the hereafter. This is the Islamic perspective of sustainable use of the environment.

Keywords: *Human, environment, behaviour, relationship, concept, Islam, secular, possibilism, determinism, capitalist.*

Introduction

Islam is a comprehensive religion that deals with all aspects of human endeavors. The Glorious Qur’an, the primary source of Islam states thus:

“Nothing have we omitted from the book” (6:38).

Therefore, it contains guidance and knowledge that govern human existence on earth. Man does not exist on earth in isolation. He explores his surroundings to meet his basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. The man’s total surroundings with which he relates to meet his basic needs is termed as the environment.

The environment is an important factor in man’s sojourn on earth, as man constantly interacts with elements in his physical environment to meet his basic needs of life. Considering this significance, issues on man environmental relations now occupy a prominent place in political, economic and intellectual discourse at both national and global levels, especially in the last two decades. Many conferences and summits have been convened to address outcomes of man-environment relations; such conferences include Stockholm’s 1972, the Rio Summit of 1992 and that of Kyoto, 1996, all convened under the auspices of the United Nations. In all of such conventions, the issues of sustainable human use of the environment were echoed most. Hence, the paradigm shifts towards sustainable use of environmental resources or the principle of sustainability or sustainable development.

Thus, the principle of environmental sustainability becomes prominent in academic and political discourse. Environmental Sustainability is the ability of the environment to continue

to function properly indefinitely (www.advc.org/sustdvv/definitions.htm). This involves meeting the present needs of humans without endangering the welfare of future generations.

Most of the concerns shown about the environment did not consider religious ethics. Economic pursuance and materialistic tendencies cloud the implementation of most of the resolutions of the environment's summits, particularly by the developed countries. This is manifested by the emphasis given to 'meet the present needs' of the developed capitalist economies to the detriment of the 'welfare of the future generations' of the developing economies. It is believed that such an attitude is guided by capitalist philosophy. Therefore, current concepts and theories that explain man-environment relationships all have that philosophical undertone. Such concepts include environmental determinism and possibilism. This paper, therefore, compares these perceptions of man-environment relations with those of the Islamic religion.

The Concept of the Environment

The environment is the total of all the external factors that influence the life of an organism. These include air, water, vegetation, soil, light etc. It also involves the complex social or cultural conditions that affect an individual or community. The environment, therefore, can be divided into three components.

- The physical environment, which consists of all non-living parts of the earth and its atmosphere.
- Biological environment which comprises all living organisms including man; and.
- The social environment which is the created or man-made environment (Ayuba 2005).

All the components outlined above fall within the realm of the mixture of gasses surrounding or enveloping the earth (atmosphere); the world of water which exists in the form of rivers, lakes and oceans (hydrosphere); the biologically active part of the earth where plants and animal are found (biosphere) and the solid portion which contains rock and soil materials (lithosphere). The environment in a nutshell is the part of nature man inhabits and fashions to meet his aspirations (manzoor, 2003). These are the components of the earth with which man continues to interact to source his means of sustenance on earth. Since man interacts with the environment to survive on earth, their interaction has been perceived in different ways; hence conceptualizing the man-environment relationship becomes compelling from the on-set.

The Contemporary Secular Explanations of Man-Environment Relationship

The two most important schools of thought explain the man-environment relationship. These are environmental determinism and environmental possibilism. These two schools are shaped by Western thought. Determinists were of the view that human activities and culture are profoundly influenced and constrained by the natural environment in other words, the environment controls man's behavior and activities. The promoters of this idea include Hackle, Buckle, Demolins and Semple (Onokerhoraye, 1984). Semple in particular was known to be an astute proponent of the determinists' school of thought when she declared that:

Man is a product of the earth's surface. This means not merely that he is a child of the earth, dust of her dust; but that the earth has mothered him, fed him, set him tasks, directed his thoughts, confronted him with difficulties that have strengthened his body and sharpened his wits given him his problem of navigation and irrigation at the same time whispered hints for their solutions. (Jensen, 1999)

Determinists, therefore, see all human actions and characteristics are being dictated by the physical environment. Thus, occupational traits and physical appearance in the form of colour or dressing of people are greatly influenced by the climatic conditions of the place they live and so on. This idea, therefore, placed the environment above man, since it controls the behaviour of the latter. In this sense, the environment constrains man (Jensen, 1999,) and he cannot change environmental phenomena to suit his needs.

The second school i.e. possibilism, was first conceived by Lucien, a French geographer (Jensen, 1999). The concept is a direct opposition to determinism which stresses that the environment is a product of man's desires through his manipulation. It emphasizes the importance of choice in humans rather than limitations to choose. This school stressed that man has a choice and is capable of changing the environment to suit his needs. Man is capable of overcoming the constraints and challenges presented by the environment. The outlook of the environment is, therefore, determined by how man makes use of the environment. However, the changes effected by man are greatly influenced by civilization. The more advanced the people in terms of science and technology, the less they depend on the environment. It should be noted that in such an environment there is the likelihood of devastation due to industrial emissions, therefore entails the supremacy of man over the environment.

The two concepts have some religious implications. The determinist's dominion of the environment over man laid the foundation of nature worship or 'idolatry'. Manzoor, (2003) opined that the dominion of nature over man has an imprint on religions that centred on nature worship. To such worshipers, the trees, rocks, and some scenic edifice in the physical environment are pure and sinless, hence curving wood and rock to serve as deities that link to the almighty Creator.

Further, the 'possibilist' dominion of man over nature has a semblance of judo-Christians' perceptions of the environment. Quoting Lynn White Manzoor (2003) stated:

Man according to the biblical tradition is above nature. He is a special creation of God and has been commanded to have dominion over nature: (to replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the seas and over the fowl of the air over everything that moveth upon earth)

The possibilists' thinking is therefore akin to monotheist religions where all things on earth are created for man's comfort. This notion is however being exaggerated to the level of unwise exploitation of the environment to the detriment of sustainable use of the resources of the environment. The two concepts therefore have shaped thinking and beliefs on the environment, culminating in the current concerns on the environment such as environmental protection, environmental sustainability, and environmental impact mitigation (EIM) etc.

Behaviour Towards Environmental Sustainability: Islamic Views

Most religions in the world emphasize human interactions with the environment from various perspectives. Jews, for instance, celebrate a special new year for plants and crops known as Tu Bishewat. Similarly, Christians are always exposed to fish, birds and wildlife (as per Genesis) while Christmas and Easter songs are always related to animals and plants. Sikhs on the other hand, believe that their God lives on the tree, dreams of animals and wakes amongst humans. Meanwhile, Buddhists celebrate several occasions by praying for a harmonious environment. This in a way reflects the close interaction between humans and the environment as the content of most religions in the world. In Islam itself, human interaction with the environment is mentioned various times in the Holy Quran, supported by Hadith and

further explained in detail by companions and scholars. The verse in the Holy Quran regarding the assignment of humans as the Caliph started with the general interaction between humans and the earth and is supported by many other verses.

According to the details by previous Muslim scholars, human interaction with the environment can be concluded into a more specific interaction; such as interaction between humans and God (as worshippers), interaction amongst humans (as human beings in a society) as well as interaction between humans and other entities. (Narrated by Bukhari dan Muslim)

Islamic way of life is perfect when there are two main interactions; namely (human interaction with Allah), (human interaction with human beings and human interaction with the environment). The detailed principles of interaction occur naturally as guided by the wahyu.

Attitudinally Islam always advises on human hygiene and cleanliness of the water, human body surrounding and general environmental well-being as symbolized in the importance of purification and cleansing (*istinjah*). Similarly, the environment is to be kept clean by the prohibition of littering and human health is to be maintained by sanitary practices as a part of the important entities in the environmental ecosystem. (Danish, et al 2022) maintain that Keeping your environment clean not only benefits your health but also protects the planet. By reducing the amount of waste that is created, you can help reduce the amount of energy that is used to produce it. By preventing damage to natural resources, you are helping to preserve our planet for future generations. Lucchi, et al (2022). We are also advised to consume good food (*tayyibat*) and prohibited from consuming dead animals, blood, etc. These examples demonstrate that Islam is very concerned about human interaction with the environment and is the main focus in performing *ibadah* in daily life.

Several other principles of *ibadah* and *akhlak* are also in congruence, for example; the human interaction with flora, fauna, metaphysical entities and amongst humans themselves. For example, Islam was first introduced with its contents that bring a manifestation of equality and justice. Many shreds of evidence accentuate the importance of interaction amongst humans that should be meandered in harmony and full of respect. Traditionally, the social lifestyle of the Muslim society is known as.

Wen, et al (2022), behaviourally advise Human beings to Avoid cutting, shearing or causing the plants to die without a reasonable excuse, because in some parts of the world, people have the behaviour of failing down the plantation and that can affect the environment, therefore, people are urged to make use of the plants appropriately.

The Islamic View on Man-Environment Relation

As defined earlier, the environment is the component of the earth within which man continues to interact for his sustenance. Man is endowed with intellect and, therefore, shouldered with responsibilities not vested in his interacting partners (element in the physical environment). The Islamic perspective of man-environment relations is derived from the position of man as vicegerent of Allah on earth. The earth was chosen for a man among the multiple planets of the solar system. The Qur'an states:

“Behold thy lord said to the angles I will create vicegerent on earth” (Q2:30).

As vicegerent of Allah, therefore, man is entrusted with all the things contained on earth. As a trustee, he has a responsibility to manage what is entrusted to him. In this regard, Kamal (2006) observed that man has been given a responsibility by Allah on this earth and that he

will be accountable to God for his actions and the trust placed in him. The prophet of Islam said: “Every one of you is a guardian and responsible for them” (Sahih Bukhari). In this respect, therefore, the man-environment relationship is that of trustee-trust in which man is accountable.

Allah said in the Glorious Qur’an: *It is he who has created for you all things that are on the earth (2:29)*. So, all things in the environment are created by Allah for man’s use (similar to the judo-Christian conception). However, these things were given to man to keep as trust. Tyabo (2004) observed, the man-environment relation based on the Islamic perspective.

He interacts with it in a shallow layer of life, lying at the contact between the atmosphere and the ocean surface. There is a kind of exchange of energy and matter; in which man and other life forms participate in the processes of life layer. Organisms receive from their physical environment energy and matter is stored in organic tissues to be released to the physical environment. Thus, the process in the earth is in due balance.

The interaction in the environment, therefore, involves an exchange of materials and energy with man at the centre. These exchanges kept the environment in due balance. Allah declares in the Qur’an:

“And the earth we have spread (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable and produced there on all kinds of thing in due balance”. (Al-Hirj: 19).

The responsibility given to man as viceroy of Allah is therefore manifested in maintaining that due balance in the process of environment interaction. Hence, man as an intelligent being is responsible for the environment’s protection. The Qur’an also states:

It is he who has made the earth manageable for you so traverse ye through its tracts and enjoy the sustenance which he furnishes, but unto him the resurrection (al-Mulk-15).

It is understood from the above verse that the environment (in this case the entire earth) was divinely pre-designed for man’s occupation as a dwelling place before his final abode in the hereafter, where he gives account of his actions and inactions.

Islamic beliefs, traditions and values provide an effective and comprehensive solution to the current environmental challenges faced by the human race. Islam has a rich tradition of highlighting the importance of environmental protection and conservation of natural resources. According to Islamic law, the basic elements of nature – land, water, fire, forest, and light – belong to all living things, not just human beings.

The Glorious Qur’an and Sunnah are a guiding light in promoting sustainable development in Islamic countries as well as around the world. Allah (S W T) commands human beings to avoid doing mischief and wasting resources as these acts cause degradation of the environment. The privilege to exploit natural resources was given to mankind on a guardianship basis, which implies the right to use another person’s property on the promise that it will not be damaged or destroyed.

The first principle which guides Islamic teaching on environmental sustainability is the concept of trusteeship. Being a khalifa (or guardian), a man should take all necessary steps to ensure that the entrusted property is passed on to the next generation in as pure a form as possible. According to Islam each man is the custodian of nature and must live

in harmony with other creatures. All Muslims must respect, nurture and care for the environment.

Corruption of all kinds, including environmental corruption, which includes industrial pollution, environmental damage, and reckless exploitation and mismanagement of natural resources is disliked by Allah (S W T). Allah says in the Glorious Qur'an

“And do no mischief on the earth after it has been set in order: that will be best for you if ye have Faith” (Surat Al A'raf, 'the Heights', verse 85)

Eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters (Surat Al-A'raf 7: 31).

“And do good as Allah has been good to you. And do not seek to cause corruption in the earth. Allah does not love the corrupters”, (Surat Al Qasas 28:77)

“Children of Adam, dress well whenever you are at worship, and eat and drink (as we have permitted) but do not be extravagant: God does not like extravagant people.” (Surat Al-A'raf 7:31)

Prophetic Traditions (Hadith) on Environmental Sustainability

Hadiths or the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) also deal extensively with various aspects of the environment including resource conservation, land reclamation and environmental hygiene. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) discouraged overconsumption, luxury and lavishness and encouraged moderation in all walks of life. The most popular Hadith on environment states “The earth is green and beautiful and Allah has appointed you his stewards over it” which reiterates the Quran's teaching that human beings have been given the responsibility of guardianship over the natural environment. The Prophet (SAW) forbade the destruction of trees and crops even during war times as long as their existence remains advantageous to the enemy. The Prophet (SAW) gave a high degree of importance towards sustainable cultivation of land, waste minimization, humane treatment of animals, preservation of natural resources and protection of wildlife. Some of the sayings of the blessed prophet Muhammad (SAW) on environmental sustainability are:

“The world is beautiful and verdant, and verily God, be He exalted, has made you His stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.” (Muslim)

“If a Muslim plant a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as a charitable gift (sadaqah) for him.” (Bukhari)

“Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded,” (Musnad)

The Prophet (SAW) recognized that natural resources should not be overexploited or abused. To protect land, forests and wildlife, the Prophet created inviolable zones, known as *Haram* and *Hima*, in which resources were to be left untouched. *Haram* areas were drawn up around wells and water sources to protect the groundwater from over-pumping. *Hima* applied to wildlife and forestry and designated an area of land where grazing and woodcutting were restricted, or where certain animal species (such as camels) were protected.

Conclusion

Man, and the environment are inseparable; their relationship could best be described as symbiotic. Man-environment relationship from the Islamic perspective is not different from other revealed religions, though with slight modification. The modification is shown by the viceroy role of a man who is entrusted with the earth for the use of future generations. The secular concepts of determinism and possibilism that explain man-environment relationships could not be thorough in their attempt at comprehending the relationship. This is because the wishes of the Creator of man and the environment were not highlighted, so also the purposes for which the two were created. Determinism when taken to the extreme leads to the worshipping of the environment (idolatry) while possibilism leads to unguided exploitation of the environment. With the trust element portrayed by the Islamic perspective, the environment should be considered as a trust given to man by his creator to use as a means of his sustenance and to preserve it for future generations. Man will be accountable for abuse or misuse of the environment in the hereafter. This paper believes that it is this trustee-trust relationship between man and the environment that accommodates the global call for the sustainable use of the environment. Environmental sustainability cannot be attained unless man is conscious of the accountability he will render for his actions and inactions. This is the only panacea for preserving the environment for the use of future generations.

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