

Eco-Justice and Divine Stewardship: An Islamic Ethical Framework for the Environmental Justice Movement

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Abstract

The Environment Justice is a global social movement (Originating in United States in 1980's) that critically scrutinises the environmental crisis through the interconnected lenses of social justice, human rights, and equality. The movement gained significant momentum (globally) by advocating for the fair treatment of all people regardless of race, socioeconomic status, concerning environmental policies and their impacts. The movement, rooted in challenging the disproportionate burden of environmental hazards on marginalized communities worldwide. While profoundly shaped by secular frameworks, Islamic teachings provides a comprehensive ethical and moral foundation that profoundly resonates with the principles of environmental justice. This paper investigates the intricate intersection of environmental justice and Islamic ethics, drawing upon Qur'anic injunctions, Prophetic traditions (Sunnah), and classical Islamic jurisprudence. It argues that core Islamic concepts such as *Tawhid* (Oneness of God), *Khalifah* (stewardship), *Mizan* (balance), and *Amanah* (trust) provide a robust theological and ethical framework for advocating for environmental justice. Through an examination of historical Islamic practices and contemporary Muslim environmental activism, this study aims to demonstrate how Islamic principles not only align with but also substantially enrich the broader discourse on environmental justice, thereby offering a unique spiritual and moral imperative for informed and invigorated engagement towards social and ecological equity.

Keywords: Islam, Environmental Justice, Islamic Ethics, Tawhid, Khalifah, Mizan

Introduction

Environmental justice communities are composed of marginalized racial/ethnic, low-income/poor, rural, immigrant/refugee, and indigenous populations that live in areas disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards, unhealthy land uses, psychosocial stressors, and historical traumas, all of which drive environmental health disparities. The global environmental crisis disproportionately impacts the world's most vulnerable populations, highlighting a profound crisis of justice. The environmental justice movement, originating in the United States in the 1980s, emerged to address this inequity, advocating for the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies (Bullard 1990). While often framed within secular human rights discourse, the principles of environmental justice find deep roots in diverse religious and ethical traditions worldwide.

Islam offers a robust and holistic framework for understanding and addressing environmental justice. With over two billion adherents globally, the comprehensive Islamic tradition, encompassing the Qur'an, the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), and centuries of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), provides a powerful ethical imperative for environmental stewardship and social equity.

Theoretical Framework: Islamic Environmental Ethics

Islamic environmental ethics are predicated on a holistic worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of all creation and humanity's distinct role within it. Several foundational concepts form the bedrock of this ethical system: A comprehensive framework for environmental ethics is provided by Islam (a faith that permeates all aspects of life). Islamic environmental ethics is based on six core principles: Tawhid (Oneness of God), Mizan (Balance), Caliph (Vicegerent), Amanah (Trust), and Masuliyah (Accountability). Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit." (Musnad, Vol 5, Hadith No. 415).

Tawhid

Tawhid, implies the absolute Oneness and Unity of God, is the cardinal doctrine of Islam. It entails that all creation from the smallest atom to the vast cosmos, originates from a single Divine Creator and is subservient to Him alone. This perspective eradicates any notion of human sovereignty over nature, emphasizing that humanity is merely a trustee, not an owner, of the earth's resources. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993) argues, "The world is not just a collection of inanimate objects but signs (*ayat*) of God's presence and power." This inherent sacredness of nature, derived from *Tawhid*, demands respect and prohibits wanton destruction or exploitation. The recognition of creation as signs of God fosters a sense of humility and reverence, counteracting anthropocentric tendencies that might lead to environmental degradation. As Allah says in the holy Qur'an Suarh Al-Rahman, verse 09: "And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance. That you not transgress within the balance. And establish weight in justice and do not make deficient the balance." The theoretical underpinning of Islamic environmental ethics centres on the concept of Tawhid, emphasizing the interconnections of the cosmos and the intrinsic value of all creation. Islamic environmental ethics are rooted in the belief that Allah created the Earth as a balanced and harmonious habitat for all living beings. . The Qur'anic verse says, "There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on God: He knows the time and place of its temporary deposit: all is written in a perfect Record." (Al-Quran, 11-6) Another verse of the Qur'an says, "And whatever creature that is in the skies and that is in the earth and the angels bow down to Allah and they do not consider themselves great. They fear their Fosterer above them and do what they are commanded".(Al-Quran, 16:49-50) This perspective views the world as a living organism, where the well-being of both humans and the environment is interdependent. The Qur'an and Prophetic traditions underscore the importance of nature, emphasizing the obligation for people to protect and preserve it. Muslims believe that everyone is born with an inherent sense of morality, extending to nature. Islamic environmental ethics stress the need for harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, reflecting the innate responsibility Muslims feel toward the planet. The centrality of the natural world in Islamic cosmology forms the basis for Islamic environmental ethics, emphasizing the belief that the Earth was created as a balanced and harmonious habitat for all living beings. References to environmental stewardship in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions further highlight the imperative to protect and preserve the natural environment in Islamic theology.

Khalifah (Stewardship/Vicegerency)

The Qur'an declares humanity as *khalifah* or vicegerent on Earth (Qur'an 2:30). This concept implies a divine trust (*amanah*) bestowed upon humans to care for creation and maintain its balance. Being a *khalifah* is not a license for domination but a weighty responsibility to manage the Earth's resources justly and sustainably, for the benefit of all living beings and future generations. Muhammad al-Ghazali (1993) highlights that this vicegerency entails both authority and accountability: humans are empowered to utilize resources but are simultaneously answerable to Allah for their actions. This notion directly challenges exploitative models of development by framing human interaction with nature as a sacred duty. The Qur'an describes such people as: "They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not and ears wherewith they hear not they are like cattle-may more misguided: for they are heedless of warning." (Al-Quran, 7:179) This interaction between creatures and their environment symbolically reinforces the Islamic belief that God created this interconnected system, emphasizing the importance of nurturing and maintaining all its elements. Therefore, every living being shares a connection with humans in their existence and shared submission to God. Consequently, it is incumbent upon humanity to show compassion towards animals and actively work towards the conservation of diverse species.

Mizan (Balance and Proportion)

The word 'Mizan' literary means balance, measures or scale reforming to a 'Divine Order' or equilibrium established by Allah (S.W.T). The Qur'an frequently emphasizes the concept of *Mizan*, or balance and proportion, in creation. Verses like "And the heaven He raised and set the balance (*Mizan*), that you may not transgress the balance. And establish the weight with justice and do not make the balance deficient" (Qur'an 55:7-9) underscore the divine order and ecological equilibrium inherent in the universe. This principle extends to human actions, urging moderation (*wasatiyyah*) and discouraging extravagance (*israf*) and corruption (*fasad*). Disrupting the *Mizan* is seen as a transgression against Divine Will and a form of injustice (Izzi Dien 2000). The maintenance of ecological balance, therefore, becomes a religious obligation, aligning directly with the environmental justice goal of ensuring equitable distribution of natural benefits and burdens. All things in the created world, from sub-atomic particles to distant galaxies, are united as creations of God and are utterly dependent upon Him in all aspects of their being. "Say: He is God, the One, God the Self-Subsisting All Sustaining" (112:1-2). "He is God – the Creator, the Maker, the Giver of form..." (59:24). The natural world affirms the Divine. This central axiom is emphasised time and time again in the Qur'an (3:190, 30:17-27, 41:53, etc.) reminding us of God's omnipresence: "All that is in the Heavens and the Earth belongs to God. And God has ever encompassed all things" (4:126); "To God belong the east and the west. Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of God; God is Vast, All-Knowing" (2:115). He is the Provider, "Is there any creator other than God providing you sustenance from the sky and the earth?" (35:3); He it is Who brings lifeless matter to life and cycles it between life and death, "God it is that sprouts the seed and the fruit stone, brings forth the living from the dead and brings forth the dead from the living: That is your God – how are you turned away?" (6:95). Maintaining equilibrium and harmony in daily life is crucial, forming the basis for responsible and sustainable use of natural resources, as well as the preservation of biodiversity. In Islamic cosmology, the balance of the natural world is considered fundamental to the overall harmony of the cosmos.

Masuliyah (Accountability)

Being a khalifah entails both authority and accountability. Prophet Muhammad (SAW) emphasized the accountability of humans in their role as guardians of the Earth. Believers are reminded that they are appointed as God's guardians over the beautiful and verdant world, with their actions being observed. This principle underscores the importance of ethical behaviour in the treatment of the environment and the consequences of neglecting one's responsibilities.

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said, "The world is beautiful and verdant and God has appointed you as His guardian over it. He sees how you acquit yourselves (behave)." (Muslim)

Islamic environmental ethics, grounded in Tawhid, Ayat, Mizan, Khalifah, Amanah, and Masuliyah principles, offers a holistic and profound approach to environmental stewardship. By weaving together spiritual values and practical guidance, Islam guides believers toward a harmonious relationship with the Earth. The principles encourage an ethical and sustainable lifestyle, fostering a sense of responsibility and accountability in the care of the environment. As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, these principles provide a timeless guide for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to foster a deeper connection with the natural world and work towards its preservation.

Environmental Justice Principles within Islamic Law and Tradition

Beyond these foundational ethical concepts, Islamic law and tradition provide concrete directives that support environmental justice.

Right to a Clean Environment

While not explicitly articulated as a "right" in modern secular terms, the Islamic emphasis on cleanliness (*tahara*), public welfare (*maslahah*), and the prohibition of harm (*darar*) implicitly establishes a communal right to a healthy environment. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) famously said, "Cleanliness is half of faith" (Muslim 223), extending beyond personal hygiene to encompass public spaces and the natural world. Islamic legal maxims such as "Harm should not be inflicted, nor reciprocated" (*La darara wa la dirar*) are frequently invoked to prevent actions that cause environmental degradation and harm to others, including future generations (Kamali 2008). This maxim directly addresses the core concern of environmental justice regarding disproportionate burden.

Historical and Contemporary Manifestations of Islamic Environmentalism

While the term "environmental justice" is modern, the underlying concerns are deeply embedded in Islamic history and practice. Historically, Islamic cities were renowned for their sophisticated water management systems, public gardens, and attention to sanitation, reflecting an awareness of communal well-being tied to environmental quality (Faruqi 1980). The *waqf* (endowment) system, for instance, often supported public amenities like water fountains and gardens, ensuring access to essential resources for all segments of society, regardless of wealth.

In contemporary times, a growing "Eco-Islam" movement is actively working to bridge traditional Islamic teachings with modern environmental challenges, including environmental justice. Organizations like the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEE) and GreenFaith's Muslim initiative are at the forefront of translating Islamic principles into tangible action. Muslim environmental activists and scholars are drawing upon the Qur'an and Sunnah to advocate for climate justice, sustainable development, and the protection of marginalized communities from

environmental harm (Gade 2019). Examples include advocacy for clean energy, resistance against polluting industries in Muslim-majority communities, and promotion of sustainable agricultural practices based on Islamic principles of moderation and balance. These efforts demonstrate the living and evolving application of Islamic ethics to contemporary environmental justice issues.

Conclusion

The Environmental Justice Movement, while a relatively recent phenomenon in its modern formulation, finds a profound and resonant framework within Islamic teachings. Core Islamic concepts such as *Tawhid*, *Khalifah*, *Mizan*, and *Amanah* provide a robust theological and ethical foundation for advocating for fair environmental practices and addressing disproportionate environmental burdens. These principles, deeply ingrained in the Qur'an and Sunnah, underscore humanity's role as responsible stewards of God's creation, entrusted with maintaining ecological balance and ensuring equitable access to natural resources for all, including future generations and non-human life. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized conservation, stating, "If a Muslim plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person, or an animal eats from it, it is regarded as charity" (Bukhari, Muslim).

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) discouraged wastefulness: "Do not waste water, even if performing ablution on the banks of a flowing river" (Ibn Majah). To protect environment, the efforts also need to be cumulative and consistent. A self-centric secular worldview encourages the self-centric use of private property resources. However, even small things done collectively and consistently can have a larger effect. The two-worldly view of life in Islam encourages socially responsible behaviour as one of the prime determinants of salvage in the life hereafter. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: "If the Resurrection were established upon one of you while he has in his hand a sapling, then let him plant it." (Musnad Ahmad, Hadith No. 12491).

By examining Islamic jurisprudence and historical practices like the *Hima* system, it becomes evident that the pursuit of environmental justice is not merely a secular ideal but a spiritual and moral imperative within Islam. Contemporary Muslim environmental movements and scholars are actively engaged in translating these timeless principles into actionable strategies for addressing modern environmental crises. Understanding the Islamic perspective on environmental justice enriches the global discourse, demonstrating how faith traditions can offer powerful moral guidance and inspire collective action towards a more just and sustainable world. This interdisciplinary approach not only strengthens the environmental justice movement but also highlights the intrinsic ecological wisdom embedded within Islam, making it a vital voice in the global struggle for environmental equity. The intrinsic value of all forms of life, promoting a sense of reverence for the environment. Muslims are encouraged to view the natural world with profound respect. As Quran says "And there is no creation on the earth or bird that flies with its wings except (that they are) communities like you"(6:38). This verse emphasizes the responsibility bestowed upon humans to manage the earth sustainably. It implies that environmental degradation and the irresponsible use of resources are violations of this sacred trust.

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