

Environmental Perspectives: Islam and Ecologism

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Introduction

The current state of the world is such that not only is there a need for us to reflect deeply on our relationship with the environment, but there is also a clear need for us to reflect on our relationships with each other.

Both violence in the name of religion and environmental degradation have become major issues of concern. Sir David King, chief scientist to the government, has stated that "climate change is the most severe problem we are facing today, more serious even than the threat of terrorism" (King, 2004: quoted in the Guardian). In his sentence he points out the seriousness of a major environmental problem and reinforces his comment by stating that it is more serious *even* than the threat of terrorism, thus implying that terrorism itself is, at least, perceived to be a major threat to the world.

It is unfortunate that 'terrorism' is largely through the media, associated in many people's minds with Islam. The word 'Islamic' is frequently placed side-by-side with the word 'terrorist', 'fundamentalist' and 'militant'. Rather than promoting constructive dialogue and understanding, this kind of representation fuels fear by planting unchallenged negative stereotypes regarding Islam and Muslims in people's minds.

This paper aims to compare and contrast ideas from two different ideologies. It is likely that whilst some differences will come to light, so too will commonalities – and that both will provide a platform for greater dialogue, understanding and mutual learning between Muslims and those in the environmental movement, which tends to be spearheaded by people who are not Muslims. The motive for bringing these two viewpoints into the same piece of writing is firstly, to take Islam out of the negative stereotype that it is often fixed into. Secondly, embedded within Islam are a strong set of environmental values and principles and it would be interesting to compare them with those that are prevalent in ecologism, which has been described as the conscience of the environmental movement. Thirdly, by discussing these two ideologies together, dialogue between Muslims and other groups would be enhanced.

Regarding the environment, not only are few *non-Muslims* aware of the extent to which Islam refers to it within its teachings, but what is surprising is that so few Muslims are aware of this too. As more dialogue on the environment takes place and includes a wider range of people, it is hoped that this will translate into more fruitful action, such that more people will be drawn in, to coherently participate in helping to solve some of the greatest problems that humanity currently faces.

Intrinsic value, interdependence and oneness

In the book, 'Green political thought', Dobson (1995) states that:

"A belief in ecocentrism (for example) serves to distinguish ecologism from other political ideologies" [p.7] - "this ecocentric politics explicitly seeks to decentre the human being, to refuse to believe that the world was made for human beings" [p.11] -

“and even if [the environment] cannot be made a means to human ends it still has value.”
[p.20]

The viewpoint of ecologism, according to Dobson, thus considers each aspect of the non-human world to have intrinsic value regardless of whether or not it is of benefit to human beings.

This idea is reinforced by Pepper, (1996, p.15), who explains ecocentrism as starting from, “concern about non-human nature and the whole ecosystem, *rather than* from humanist concerns... the nature of intrinsic worth, in its *own* right, regardless of its use value to humans.”

When describing the ecocentric approach, Eckersley, (1992, p.45-46), talks of preservation of large tracts of wilderness, regardless of whether it is of value for human beings, even in terms of whether or not it has aesthetic value to humans.

Taking the writings of these authors together, it is clear that from the perspective of ecologism, human beings are not central to the world, and that the non-human world has intrinsic value, which by definition means that it has value regardless of whether or not human beings derive value from it for themselves. However, the world-view of modern society is one in which human beings are seen as the central part of the world, and this is embedded deeply in societal consciousness, highlighted by the extent to which the success of policies is measured by economic growth, employment and crime, for example. The emphasis is almost entirely on the human-made economy and factors directly relating to human beings, with the health of the non-human world having lesser value.

The idea of ecologism is thus relatively alien to the society in which we live. Mainstream strategies in dealing with environmental problems would come under the label of environmentalism and Dobson goes to great length to distinguish environmentalism from the more radical ecologism. He explains environmentalism as a managerial approach to dealing with environmental problems, whereas ecologism requires “radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life” (Dobson, 1995, p.1). There is thus a need for transformation of our perspective – how we view, and relate to, the rest of the world – if ecologism is to be more than just another theory in society.

In addition, radical green politics has been described as, “a spiritual experience in that it is founded on a recognition of the ‘oneness’ of creation and a subsequent ‘reverence for ones own life, the life of others and the Earth itself’” (Dobson, 1995, p.1).

The theme of the ‘oneness of creation’ and reference to radical green politics as a spiritual experience is a convenient first meeting point between ecologism and Islam. The principle of Oneness in Islam is called ‘tawheed’ in Arabic, and is the fundamental principle of the religion. Embedded in this principle is the message that everything in creation comes from one source, which is God (‘Allah’ in Arabic). This is articulated in the following verse of the Qur’an:

“To Him belongs whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth, all obey His will. And it is He who originates creation” (Qur’an 30:26).

From an Islamic perspective, the oneness of creation is a reflection of the Oneness from which all of creation is said to have originated from i.e. God/Allah. Whilst creation consists of numerous diverse parts, both living and non-living, with numerous and complex interactions between them, each part is considered to have its place in the wider scheme of things and together a coherent and united ‘whole’ is formed. This seems

to parallel Dobson's writing when he talks of the natural world as "an interlocking system of independent objects" (Dobson, 1995, p.27)

Thus, ecologism and the Islamic perspective of the world appear identical, except for one difference, and that is that Islam points to a Creator, whereas ecologism, whilst touching on the spiritual, tends not to articulate one, even though an 'ecologist' might believe that a Creator exists.

The Qur'an also says:

"He is Allah, the Creator (Khaliq), the Bringer-into-Existence (Bari') and the One-who-gives-physical-form (Musawwir)" (Qur'an 59:24).

The term Musawwir is described by Yunus Negus as, "Allah when He gives to the created thing every detail of its complicated spiritual and physical existence, and ensures that it fits perfectly into the rest of creation" (see Khalid & O'Brien, 1992, p.40).

The meaning of the term 'Musawwir' reveals that from an Islamic perspective, that the created thing has a spiritual existence. If a thing has spiritual existence, then does it mean that it also has intrinsic value in the sense that it has value, regardless of whether or not human beings derive benefit from it? The fact that a 'thing' fits perfectly into the rest of creation would certainly mean that the thing has value in that it has a unique role to play in the whole, aside from any value that the thing may or may not have for humankind. After all, it says, "fits perfectly into the rest of creation", as opposed to suggesting that it was created solely for humankind, which is but a part of creation.

In the same essay Yunus Negus writes, "everything in creation works properly and the whole creation fits together in a meaningful way. Creation is therefore sacred" [p.38]. The implication of this message is that the world is not solely for human beings and that the non-human world has worth regardless of whether human beings derive value from it or not.

There are a number of other verses in the Qur'an that 'decentralise' humankind from creation. For instance:

"Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is a greater (matter) than the creation of men: Yet most men understand not" (Qur'an 40:57).

According to the commentary on this verse by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, "The heavens and the earth include mankind and all other creatures and millions of stars. Man is but a tiny part of creation. Why should he be so egocentric? The whole is greater than a part of it."

Islamic teachings are thus clear in presenting human beings as a part of creation, and place importance on the value that each aspect of creation has in contributing to the overall whole. It can thus be concluded that Islam does not view human beings as central to creation, and the world is not solely for humankind and it seems safe to say that the non-human world does have intrinsic value. Thus from this perspective too, there is a similarity between ecologism and Islam.

Corruption of the environment and human transformation

Going back to the "interlocking" view of the world, described by Dobson, from an Islamic perspective, the ability of the parts of the world to 'interlock' requires them to 'submit' to the 'Oneness' which unites them i.e. to submit to God. It is only by being in 'submission to the will of God', that each part of creation is able to find its true place in

the bigger picture, behaving as it is meant to behave, which means behaving within certain limits, and consequently fitting in with the rest of creation, as though creation, itself, is one.

'Submission to the will of God' is in fact the meaning of the term 'Islam'. All of creation is said to have been created such that it is in submission to, is worshipping God. However, in Islam humankind is said to be unique in that it is the one aspect of creation that has the ability to choose *not* to submit to Gods will (Khalid, 1999). Humankind is thus the only species that is able to behave out of harmony with the rest of creation and in so doing risks causing problems both to the other aspects of creation and also to itself – in other words humankind can corrupt what Dobson describes as the 'interlocking system of interdependent objects'. This 'corruption' will be discussed again in a moment.

Eckersley (1992, p.17-21) describes three major ecopolitical preoccupations, the last of which is the belief that the environmental problem is a "crisis of culture and character and as an opportunity for emancipation." She quotes thinkers who, in their writings, view the environmental crisis as an opportunity for humanity to look within - that rather than viewing this crisis as a bitter disappointment, it could be seen as a welcome opportunity, a means to evaluate our place in the rest of nature, and an opportunity to make us better human beings.

This kind of position also resonates with that of Islam. There is the following verse in the Qur'an

"Corruption has appeared in the land and sea, because of what the hands of men have earned, that God may give them a taste of some of their deeds, in order that they may find their way back" (Qur'an 30:41).

Al-Hafiz B.A. Masri writes:

"The worldly-wise experts can help us with facts and figures, but it is faith that can bring about within us a change of heart and a revolution in thought. The most important factor is a complete change in our character in the way we think and act" (See Khalid & O'Brien, 1992, p.20).

Thus, whilst human beings can cause environmental problems and disrupt the unity on the planet, the resultant 'corruption' that appears provides an opportunity for humanity to 'find their way back', and this would at least include finding their way back to their pure state, 'a complete change in our character in the way we think and act' and as Dobson puts it, would mean "radical changes in our relationship with the non-human natural world, and in our mode of social and political life" (Dobson, 1995, p.1).

With regards to the change that is needed, in Islam everything has been created in a state of 'fitrah'. Whilst this is a difficult term to translate into English, Khalid concludes it to be:

"the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation including the human in its new born state" (see Khalid, in Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature).

In order for human beings to 'find their way back' as it were, would ultimately mean finding their way back to the original and natural state of purity into which they were born. The natural result of this would be human beings 'fitting perfectly into the rest of creation.' Spirituality would act as a vehicle for human beings to re-establish themselves in this pure state.

Both Islamic teachings and voices in ecologism view the environmental problems on the planet as an opportunity for human beings to transform and better themselves. There may

be differences, however, in the means by which this can happen most effectively. Also, there is no commonly held view within the literature of ecologism of anything similar to the concept of fitrah, or that humankind was created in a pure state from which it has departed. There is thus, perhaps a greater emphasis on the need for humans to go back to something that is *natural* to them in Islamic teachings compared to what is voiced in ecologism. Both articulate a need for fundamental change, but one speaks of going back to a state into which humans were created and the other, in the writings referred to, does not mention such a concept.

Equality

It seems quite evident from writings on ecologism and Islam that both place humankind's relationship with the rest of the world as central to a fulfilling existence and that both regard nature as being a system of interconnected parts fitting together.

Ecocentrism also places an emphasis on 'equality', that human beings are a part of an interlocking system and are thus no more important than other life-forms.

For instance, Dobson points out:

"The view of the natural world as an interlocking system of interdependent objects (both sentient, and non-sentient) generates a sense of equality, in that each item is held to be necessary for the viability of every other item. In this view no part of the natural world is independent and therefore no part can lay claim to 'superiority'" (Dobson, 1995, p.27).

Eckersley (1992, p.28) states that according to ecocentric theorists the environmental crisis itself, is seen as evidence of, among other things, "an inflated sense of human self-importance.."

She also says:

"From an ecocentric perspective, to single out only our special attributes as the basis for our exclusive moral considerability is simply human chauvinism that conveniently fails to recognize the special attributes of other life-forms: it assumes that what is distinctive about humans is more worthy than, rather than simply different from, the distinctive features of other life-forms" (Eckersley, 1992, p.50).

There is a difference, however, between this and Islamic teachings. From an Islamic perspective, human beings are "considered to be higher in rank than the other animals" (Al-Hafiz in Khalid & O'Brien, 1992, p.1). This elevation in rank of human beings appears to directly contradict the 'equality' message of ecologism, as presented by Eckersley. However, when one examines the Islamic teachings more carefully, it becomes clear that the basis of this elevation is because human beings have the unique ability to choose between right and wrong and that the net outcome of this, rather than fuelling the environmental crisis, provides an awareness that can help prevent or worsen it.

In fact Al-Hafiz goes on to say :

"Our freedom of choice, based on knowledge and intelligence, puts on us the added responsibility of caring for the rest of God's creation and for those very resources of nature which help all kinds of life on earth to stay alive."

Whilst the elevation implies superiority, it appears however, in this instance, to be more a means to capture the difficulty of being a human being and emphasises the tremendous challenge for them to behave as equal partners with the rest of creation.

Khalid says:

“Man was then quite naturally subjected to Allah’s immutable laws as was the rest of creation. In this sense human beings are equal partners with nature” (See Haleem, 1998, p.21).

In the commentary of the Qur’an by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the fact that humans have free will, albeit limited, also provides them an opportunity to purify their will and motives, and when both are purified, they are “capable of much greater heights than a creature not endowed with any free-will” (Qur’an: commentary no. 3557).

Thus, the message seems to be that being human makes it difficult to reach a state of behaving in partnership with the rest of nature, yet if humans become pure enough, they are capable of much greater heights than other forms of life.

Further evidence of Islamic teachings, which emphasise equality and not exploiting the non-human world, is contained in the following sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), peace be upon him:

For instance

“A good deed done to a beast is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being” (Miskhat al-Masabih).

“All creatures are like a family of God and He loves the most those who are the most beneficent to His family” (Shu’ab al-Imam).

When these references are taken together, one can see that Islamically other aspects of creation have rights and that human beings must not exploit them. This can only mean that the terms ‘higher in rank’ and ‘great heights’ that humans are capable of, rather than giving permission to destroy or harm non-human aspects of creation, suggests a greatness in humans that reflects meeting a challenge that does not present itself to the non-human world. Thus, whilst a special attribute is indeed being singled out, it is one that is unique in a spiritual sense. Eckersley is right when she says that all forms of life have special attributes; however the special attribute that Islamic teachings declare that makes humans ‘higher in rank’ are not just any one of the special attributes that humans have that makes them unique. It is one that is much more primordial in its nature, and for this reason gives human beings a uniqueness that their other unique qualities would not.

Conclusion

This essay aimed to compare and contrast the Islamic viewpoint on the environment with that of ecologism.

Both viewpoints regard nature as an interconnected whole with human beings located within it, and both express value in the different parts of nature regardless of whether human beings derive benefit from that part or not. There is a slant towards the spiritual in some voices within ecologism. In Islam, spirituality is voiced very strongly, that creation was created to be in a state of oneness, all parts created to submit to the Creator.

Both ecologism and Islam regard the state of the human being as a fundamental aspect to applying the respective ideology, the need for humans to undergo a radical change in the way they view the rest of nature. The environmental crisis is viewed as an opportunity by some ecologists to motivate change. Islam, in addition, strongly voices a spiritual

dimension, that human beings were created in a pure state and that 'corruption' appearing 'in land and sea' is a feedback mechanism in order for human beings to find their way back to that pure state, because the presence of that corruption suggests that humankind has lost its way. Thus whilst both talk of the need to change, Islam refers to the existence of a pure state, as well.

Both perspectives refer to equality, but In Islam, human beings are referred to as being 'higher in rank' than other animals. However it is the challenge of 'right action', behaving as though one is a part of the world and not exploiting it, that humans are said to have been given by God, and that other forms of creation have not, which gives humans this higher rank. From a practical point of view, in terms of the attitude with which human beings would exist with the rest of the world, there appears to be no fundamental difference between Islam and ecologism.

This essay has used various pieces of work and the overall conclusions are the opinion of the author of this essay. Islam is a complex religion and a challenge in interpreting a religious text is that there can be more than one way to interpret it, and the meaning of the overall message can change when taken with other verses that may not have been included in the research. There may thus be a certain amount of scope for development and clarification of the interpretations that have been made here.

Both Islam and ecologism are vast ideologies and an essay of this length cannot do justice in comparing them fully. Thus, for example, issues like science and technology, the economic system, and the structure of an ideal society were not covered in this short piece. However, with the ground covered and the conclusions drawn, fundamental similarities between the two ideologies are apparent and the reader may conclude that there might be plenty of room for people in both camps to not just learn from each other but also work more closely together. From this perspective, this essay can be viewed as a starting point for further discourse and action.

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Dr Muzammal Hussain is an environmental activist, and is the Founder of the London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE), the UK's first local Islamic environmental group. Whilst being amongst the first to mobilise the UK Muslim community on climate change and GM foods, he has also been successful in developing strong links with the wider environmental movement. Along with outward campaigning he believes in the necessity, for individuals and groups, to integrate in themselves the very values that they wish to see in the world around them. Muzammal is also a medical doctor and has worked in the field of mind-body healing.

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