

# Can Religion be used to create Ecological Awareness? The case of Islam

Danial Hassan<sup>1\*</sup> Sadeeq Ali<sup>2</sup>

1. Dept. of Science & Technology Studies, Faculty of Science, University of Malaya, KL, Malaysia
2. Dept. of Biomedical engineering, Faculty of Engineering, University of Malaya, KL, Malaysia

\*Email of the Corresponding author: [de.danial@yahoo.com](mailto:de.danial@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Religion being a comprehensive body of knowledge couldn't be neglected on the topic of ecology. Many researchers have explored ecological teachings of religion. One dimension which has not been explored is the possibility of using religion to create awareness about ecology. This paper is an attempt to fill this gap by presenting the case of Islam. Two main areas were looked into, first, support for ecological concern in the authentic sources of knowledge in Islam which are Quran and teachings (Hadith) of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), second, channels of communication to spread the message of ecology in a religious perspective. Islam has enough support for ecology, based on Quran and Hadith. In general people in Muslim countries take religion as an important aspect of their lives, which is a strong confirmation to building a case of Ecological perspective of Islam, in addition to that traditional and modern modes of communication are quite active to spread the message, such as speeches and sermons in mosque, TV Channels, Radio station, and Internet all could be leveraged to create ecological awareness.

**Keywords:** Religion, Islam, Ecology, Awareness

## 1. Introduction

United Nation's Population division estimated world population at around 6.8 billion (UN, 2010), around 84% of humans believe in some kind of religion, only 16% do not believe in religion which includes Agnostics, Atheist, and Secular Humanists etc<sup>1</sup>. Adherents of Islam stand around 1.5 billion close to 21% of the total world population<sup>2</sup>. Religion is body of knowledge which provides answers to every aspect of life and death, such as the purpose of creation, how to live, life after death, ethics and morals, role of humanity, and much more.

Religion being a comprehensive body of knowledge couldn't be neglected on the topic of ecology, many researcher have explored ecological teachings of religion. One dimension which has not been explored is the possibility of using religion to create awareness about ecology. Managing Environmental degradation and its associated problem would be more effective through increased awareness about ecology. A case of Islam is presented to fill this gap.

This paper is divided into three main section, first section summarize definition of ecology with some brief explanation, the second section does a literature review of Ecology in Islam, The third section which is the main contribution to the body of knowledge looks into the question, Can Islam be used to create Ecological awareness? Importance of religion and channels of religious communication are explored along with impediments in religious awareness campaign are discussed.

## 2. Ecology

Elton (1927) defined Ecology as "the study of animals and plants in relation to their habits and habitats", Haeckel in 1866 first coined the word Ecology, and he defined it as "the domestic side of organic life" (Arvid, 2011). Roots of the word Ecology can be traced back to Greek Word "Oikos", which means "Home", or "House", or "Household", and "Logos", which means "Knowledge". In lucid terms Ecology means effect of living organism on the environment and effect of environment on living organisms, or the mutual relationship between plants, animals, humans, and the environment the live in. The subject of Ecology has evolved enormously to a wider scope. It contains phenomena that result from the interaction of organisms with their environment and other organism. Phenomenon such as dispersal of species, the special mechanism itself, population growth, life in communities, modification of the habitat, soil formation, nutrient cycling, the sources of energy, the maintenance of earth as a life support system, are few topics of the broad scope of Ecology.

To make more sense of ecology it is worth mentioning some questions Ecologists deal with e.g. questions of diversity, every species, balance, organization, life forms, physical pattern, food supplies, risk to life on earth, limitation of energy consumption, atmospheric risk etc. An Ecologist may study the impact of building a dam on the environment with possible areas of inquiry such as dam's impact on trees, plants, wild life, and how the change would affect the whole ecosystem. Few more example of ecological studies include studying the impact

<sup>1</sup> The facts are taken from website Adherents.com, [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

of leaf-eating insects on the growth of tree, investigating how spraying of insecticides to control mosquitoes affect local frog population, impact of weather timings on bird migration, how traffic noise affects humans and other living organisms etc.

The Encyclopedia of Earth has outlined four reasons for the importance to study Ecology, first, it is pleasurable to understand our environment because we live to some degree in natural or semi natural ecosystem, just as one might learn to appreciate art better through an art course similarly understanding ecology might help us appreciate our environment in a better way. Second, human livelihood is largely dependent on the exploitation and management of nature. Applied Ecology is used in modern day forestry, fisheries, range management, agriculture and so on. For example in Argentina for many circles Ecology and Agriculture are synonymous. Third, Ecological perspective helps us understand human societies clearly, for example, population dynamic, food and fossil energy flow etc. Fourth, lifestyles are constantly changing, Ecology helps us to understand these changes, the impact of these changes, and how we can intervene in either human economies or in nature to mitigate or alter these changes.

### 3. Islamic Perspective of Ecology

Islamic world view is based on two main sources of knowledge, first, The Quran, which is the word of Allah (God), sent to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as guidance for the whole humanity, second, The Hadith, teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Almost all studies done on the topic of Ecology and Islam have used these two main sources of knowledge to build their case. Some studies which were looked into for this paper are Agwan (1997), Ahmad (1998), Ajmal (1984), Farooq (2006), Ahmad S. (1999). The purpose of this section is to present support for ecology in Islam, which is off course a well written topic; this section highlights some important aspects.

Allah says in the Quran "It is He who has made the sea subject, that you may eat thereof flesh that is fresh and tender, and that may extract there from ornament to wear; and you see the ships therein that plough the waves, that you may seek (thus) of the bounty of God and that you may be grateful" (Quran, 16:14). A human centric view is presented in Islam at the center of it are humans and all other species have been subjected to his benefit. Human are perceived as the trustees of the earth. Trusteeship implies particularly that he is not supposed to cause corruption in any form on earth (i.e. environment). Life on earth entails great responsibilities. This test implies accountability. It is followed by either rewards or punishment. Allah says in the Quran "it is He who has made you (His) vice regents, inheritors of the earth: He has raised you in ranks, some above others: that he may try you in the gifts he has given you: for your lord is quick in punishment: yet he is indeed oft-forgiving, Most Merciful" (Quran, 6:165).

Than the Quran further say in the famous verse which ordains the preservation of environment: "then we made you heirs in the land after them, to see how you would behave" (Quran, 10:14). The same message is implied in the Sunnah of the prophet: "Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vice regents therein; he will see what you will do. So be careful of [what you do in] this world and [what you do to/with] women, for the first test of the children of Israel was in women!" (Nawal, 2010).

It is the superiority of human knowledge that enables human beings to remain care takers of the environment in which they live and have inhabited it for thousands of years. Humanity must behave in such a way that would maintain the balance that exists within in the environment ultimately for the survival of the human race. Allah says in the Quran "And the earth we have spread out; set therein mountains firm and immovable; and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance" (Quran, 15:19). Allah further explains the relationship in another verse in Quran " That has created pairs in all things, and has made you ships and cattle on which you ride, In order that you may sit firm and square on their backs, and when so seated, you may celebrate the (kind) favor of your lord, and say, " Glory to him who has subjected these to our (use ), for we could never have accomplished this (by ourselves), and to our Lord, surely must we turn back!" (Quran, 43:12-14).

Islamic perspective on Ecology starts with the creator, Allah says in the Quran "...we made from water every living thing..." (Quran, 21:30). Allah further says in the Quran "And God sends down rain from the skies and gives therewith life to earth" (Quran, 30:24). In another verse Allah say "And we send down from the sky rain charged with blessing, and we produce gardens and grain for harvest" (Quran, 50:9). Allah is creator of everything, It is also very clear from the verses in Quran that human are created by Allah for worship and everything else has been created for the benefit of mankind. So the role of humans in this world is of vice regents who are trustees of this environment. This environment has been created in due balance as mentioned in the verse quoted earlier. Allah has made humans as vice regents because He has endowed them with qualities which are suitable to be vice regents. This vice regency is not but with a huge responsibility of taking care of this environment as Allah says in the Quran "then we made you heirs in the land after them, to see how you would behave!" (Quran, 10:14). Further analysis of Quranic verses shows that Allah is talking about sending down rain and therewith producing harvest, here Allah (SWT) is referring to a cause and effect relationship of an ecological phenomenon.

### 3.1. Role of vice Regent

Allah has made human the vice regents on earth, with this vice regency Allah has cautioned human about their duty towards it as Allah says in the Quran "Do you (O human being) not consider that God has created the heavens and the earth in truth? If he will, he can remove you and bring a new creation. And this is nothing hard for God" (Quran, 14:19-20). In another verse Allah says "If you show ingratitude, you and others on earth, God is free of any need (of any of you), worthy of every praise" (Quran, 14:8). Further it is mentioned "O humankind! It is you who are needy. God is free of any need, worthy of all praise. If he so pleases, he could blot you out and bring in a new creation" (Quran, 35:15-16, cf. 3:97). If we human fail to fulfil this responsibility Allah can replace us with other creation. Taking care of the environment is one of the responsibilities human have. In practice, the vice Regency of humans on earth and their slavery to God are manifested as follows:

Human beings are bound morally on right and wrong as personified in the law of God (Shari'ah) which is eventually determined by the nature of human beings themselves, and by the purposes for which God has created them and the universe. Analysis of this moral right and wrong is decided by whether an action improves life in the long term or whether it harms it. It is important to mention here that Shari'ah literally means a way to a watering place, a source of life. Every human activity, be it public, economic or political, is subject to a moral judgement to see whether is right, wrong, or neutral.

### 3.2. Teaching with Direct Relevance to Ecological Relevance

In addition to providing the above general perspective which enable and obligates human beings to treat the environment with sensitivity and responsibility, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also imparted some specific teaching which more directly contribute to the achievement of that objective. This type of teaching can be divided into three parts: 1) prohibition of waste; 2) concern for non-human forms of life; and 3) references to land, air and water.

#### 3.2.1. Prohibition of waste

One source of damage to environment is wastefulness, which the Qur'an strongly condemns "(Believers are) those who, when they spend, are neither prodigal nor grudging, but (take a course) which is between the two (Quran, 25:67). Give the kinsman his due, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and squander not in wantonness. Lo! The squanderers are brothers of the devils and the devil is ingrate to his Lord (Quran, 17:26-27). O Children of Adam! Look to your adornment at every place of worship, and eat and drink, but be not prodigal. Lo! He loves not the prodigals (Quran, 7:31)."

In this world God has put a limit on the amount of resources available to living creatures. The above passages teach that we should be neither niggardly nor wasteful in the use of these resources and any surplus should be shared with others so that all the inhabitants of the earth may have what they need, although not necessarily what they want. There will come a time when unlimited resources will become available to the humans and probably other creatures, so that they will be able to have what they want (Quran, 39:10, 40:40, 41:31, and 43:71). But until such a paradise comes into being the limited resources must be used efficiently, responsibly, and without waste. Indeed, paradise is only for those who show necessary restraints in this world (Quran, 26:88-91 etc).

#### 3.2.2. Concern for non-human forms of life

The large scale destruction of forests and massive pollution of water and air are the products of the modern technological age and therefore sources of Islam do not deal with such problems in a direct way. Animals, however, have always existed in close proximity to human and so both the Qur'an and Hadith have a great deal to say about them. And what they have to say gives value to animals and enjoin sensitivity towards them. Allah says in the Quran "There is not a moving (living) creature on earth, nor a bird that flies with its two wings, but are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book, then unto their Lord they (all) shall be gathered" (Quran, 6:38). In the story of Prophet Suleiman (AS), who was able to communicate with these "peoples" from the animal world, they, along with humans form something like a single kingdom in which they contribute to the realization of Suleiman's prophetic mission Quran chapter 27 verses 17-28. The story makes the point that all creatures, human and non human, are linked together in a single divine plan, whether we can perceive this or not. Many Surah (chapters) of the Quran are named after the animals mentioned in them: Surah 2 (The cow), Surah 6 (The cattle), Surah 27 (The bee), Surah 27 (The Aunt), Surah 29 (The Spider), Surah 105 (the elephant). The Quran allows killings of some animals for food but requires that such slaughtering be done after recitation of the name of God, which signifies that human beings do not have any inherent right over these creatures of God. They become lawful food only by Allah's permission (Quran, 6:121).

Prophet Muhammad reportedly said about the slaughtering of the animals for food: "God has indeed prescribed goodness (ihsan) in all things. Therefore, if you kill, kill well, and if you slaughter, slaughter well. Let each of you (who intends to slaughter an animal) sharpen his blade and let him spare suffering to the animal he slaughters" (Ahmad S., 1999). In another Hadith quoted in Sahih Bukhari the Prophet said: "Narrated By 'Abdullah bin 'Umar: Allah's Apostle said, "A lady was punished because of a cat which she had imprisoned till it died. She entered the (Hell) Fire because of it, for she neither gave it food nor water as she had imprisoned it,

nor set it free to eat from the vermin of the earth" (Sami, 2010). In one of the Hadith Prophet mentioned reward for doing good to non-human creature quoted in Sahih Muslim "For doing good to every creature with wet liver there is rewards" (Ahmad S. , 1999). A creature with a wet liver evidently means a living creature which can feel pain.

There are some traditions or Hadith of prophet (PBUH) which allows the killing of animals like Scorpion, Snake, Lizard, Crow and the Kite etc. In any case, what really is significant about the prophetic traditions is that they regard the question of treatment of animals as a religious and moral question. Consequently, they aim to establish some guidelines as to when and how one can kill animals and they do so with the understanding that a wrong way of treating animals can lead to hell while a kind way can lead to heaven.

It is not only the sentient beings about which books of Hadith have something to say. They also contain traditions about trees and plants. Bukhari Records the saying of the Prophet (PBUH): "some trees are as blessed as the Muslim himself, especially palm tree" (Ahmad S. , 1999). Another Tradition reports the Prophet Saying "If anyone cuts down a lote tree, God will lower his head in hell." After recording this tradition Abu Dawud says that this is an abbreviated saying and then clarifies that it is only when the tree is cut down wrongfully, unjustly, and with no benefit to the person and when the tree provides shade for travelers and animals that it's cutting will lead to hell (Ahmad S. , 1999). If some traditions condemn the cutting of trees others encourage their planting. One Tradition says: "when doomsday comes if someone has a palm shoot in his hand he should plant it" (Ragheb, 2011).

### 3.2.3. Land, Water, and Air

When we think of ecology we also think of air, water and land and the need to prevent their pollution. There is little doubt that large-scale pollution of the environment is prohibited in Islamic law, The sanctity of life in all its forms which is taught in Islam requires that water, air and the land be not polluted, for such pollution inevitably causes death and injury to untold number of living creatures which is prohibited.

The Quran and Hadith have several statements about water, air, and earth. Although not directly relevant to ecology, it seems interesting to briefly review these statements. The Quran often points out that human actions are preserved in the universe and will one day be manifested again for judgment. In one such statement the Quran focuses on the (planet) earth and talks about her as if she is a living entity. Whatever happens on her or is done to her is preserved by her like so many well-kept secret chronicles which will one day come forth: "When the earth is shaken to her (utmost) convulsion, And the earth throws up her burdens (from within), And man cries (distressed): 'What is the matter with her?'- On that Day will she declare her tidings: For that thy Lord will have given her inspiration. On that Day will men proceed in companies sorted out, to be shown the deeds that they (had done). Then shall anyone who has done an atom's weight of good, see it! And anyone who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it." (Quran 99:1-8).

As mentioned earlier Quran talk about Rain and subjecting the sea to humans, the reference to air in the Quran always occur under the term "The winds". Three functions of wind are mentioned in the Quran: Fecundating, raising and moving clouds, and providing energy for transportation by ships."And we send the fecundating winds" (Quran, 15:22),"Among his signs is that he sends the winds as heralds of good tidings as a taste of his mercy, that the ships may sail by his command and you may thus seek of his bounty in order that you may be grateful"(Quran, 30:46 )." It is God who sends the winds, and the raise the clouds which, we then drive to a land which is dead, and thus revive the earth after its death. Even so (will be) the resurrection (of the dead) (Quran, 35:9)". "Behold...In the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of humankind; in the rain that he sends down from the skies, and the life which he give therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts that he scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth; -- here indeed are signs for people who are wise" (Quran, 2:164; see also 7:57,25:48,27:63,30:40,45:5).

An implication which can be very easily drawn from these Quranic verses and sayings of prophet is that, it is the will of Allah that we should keep the land, the air and water clean so that worshippers of Allah can always find abundant clean water to purify themselves, the rain may always bring life-giving water to enough pollution-free land and forest for all the forms of life that God has created to stay in existence and flourish, and the sea may always be a source of fresh and tender food.

There is a form of modern ecological concern with which Islam does not agree. It is believed by some that if human beings did not do something to take care of the environment, life may forever be destroyed and the universe return to the mindless, pointless state that it had before the emergence of life and human beings. Such a view is a manifestation of the same overestimation by human beings of their own position in the universe which is the cause of ecological problems in the first place. According to Islam, God is in complete control of the universe and the purpose for which the universe he has created it cannot in anyway be frustrated by what human beings do or do not do. If humans do not move do not move in a direction he wants them to, he could easily blot them and achieve his just purpose through other means. In Islam, therefore, ecological concerns cannot proceed from the idea that life has somehow emerged in the universe by chance and now its survival or otherwise rests in

the hands of human beings. Rather, they proceed from the view that we have been honored by God to be his vice-regents on earth and that one day we will stand before him to answer how we feared.

#### 4. Islam for Ecological Awareness

Islam has enough support to be ecologically concerned as evident from the preceding section which presented few verses of Quran and some teaching of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). However can this support for ecology be leveraged to create awareness? In this section some facts to build a case that sufficient support to create awareness is present in the form of mosques, TV channels, importance of religion etc. Table 1 show statistics about some Muslim countries, it is clear from the data that religion is an important aspect of peoples life e.g. in Malaysia 93 % of the Muslim feel that religion is very important.

Importance of religion has to be coupled with practice of religion, Islam requires its adherents to pray five times a day. Table 2 present data about Muslims praying five times a day, though the percentage is not as high as Table 1, but a considerable majority prays, which is a sign of religion shaping the lives of human in Muslim countries. Table 3 present data about mosque attendance in selected Muslim Countries; Mosques are not only used for praying but for religious discourse as well specially on Friday religious sermons are held, which could be an important channel for ecological awareness. Statistics show that a significant percentage of population visit mosques at least once a week, majority visit for Friday prayer, Friday prayers are usually preceded by a sermon or a religious talk which could be on any topic such as religion, society, ecology etc.

With traditional channels of religious communication like sermons and speeches in the mosques a new form of media has emerged in the form of TV channels, Radio, Internet. It is hard to get data on the number of Islamic Channels, Radio stations, and Website because, but is a known fact that Islamic media is growing popularity and the viewership is increasing day by day, which is evident by reports on Islamic media in the popular press. Almost all Islamic countries and few non Islamic countries (e.g. UK, USA) have Islamic channels etc. These new forms of media can be leveraged to create awareness for ecology as there is considerable support for ecological concern in Islam.

#### 5. Conclusion and Discussion

Islam has considerable support to build a case on ecological awareness based on Quran and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Statistics show that Muslim do consider Islam an important aspect of their lives and participation in religious activities is quite high such as mosque attendance, prayers etc. with traditional modes of communication new forms of media are spreading the message of Islam such as TV channels, Radio Station, and Internet. With enough support for ecology and modes of communication both traditional and modern it is suggested that religion can be used effectively to create awareness about ecology.

Religion has a better approach towards environmental awareness, as it links all deeds to the Day of Judgment and quality of life in this world. Religion tries to tackle the issue of environmental concerns by attacking our characters and mischief in the society which is of course due to human actions. Religion has a better approach it would not only solve our environmental problems but make us better humans. However there is need for a debate to align ecological goals to religious goals, which has started. We can see religious leaders talking about environmental concerns, once the goals are aligned with religious goals; Environmental concerns would take the status of worship and than religion can play an active role.

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**Note**

All the Verses of Quran mentioned in this paper are taken from the Quranexplorer.com with their English translation. Available at: <http://www.quranexplorer.com/>

**Table 1: Importance of Religion in selection Muslim Countries**  
 % Muslims who think Religion is Important

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Turkey     | 67% |
| Indonesia  | 93% |
| Malaysia   | 93% |
| Pakistan   | 94% |
| Bangladesh | 84% |
| Morocco    | 89% |
| Jordan     | 85% |
| Tunisia    | 78% |
| Egypt      | 75% |

Source: The Pew Forum, Religious Commitment Poll

**Table 2: Percentage of Muslims praying**

|            | Pray five times | Pray several times, but not all Five | Net |
|------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Turkey     | 39%             | 3%                                   | 42% |
| Indonesia  | 72%             | 7%                                   | 79% |
| Malaysia   | 71%             | 6%                                   | 77% |
| Pakistan   | 42%             | 8%                                   | 50% |
| Bangladesh | 30%             | 9%                                   | 39% |
| Morocco    | 67%             | 2%                                   | 69% |
| Jordan     | 54%             | 14%                                  | 68% |
| Tunisia    | 63%             | 2%                                   | 65% |
| Egypt      | 53%             | 7%                                   | 60% |

Source: The Pew Forum, Religious Commitment Poll

**Table 3: Mosque Attendance**

|            | More than once a week | Once a week for Friday prayer | Net |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| Turkey     | 19%                   | 25%                           | 44% |
| Indonesia  | 50%                   | 22%                           | 72% |
| Malaysia   | 35%                   | 22%                           | 57% |
| Pakistan   | 44%                   | 15%                           | 59% |
| Bangladesh | 35%                   | 18%                           | 53% |
| Morocco    | 28%                   | 26%                           | 54% |
| Jordan     | 27%                   | 35%                           | 68% |
| Tunisia    | 38%                   | 9%                            | 47% |
| Egypt      | 25%                   | 36%                           | 61% |

Source: The Pew Forum, Religious Commitment Poll

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