

EDITORIAL

Islam and the Environment

As early as 1927 René Guénon predicted in his book, *La Crise du Monde Moderne*, that unless attitudes towards the use of the physical world around us change, with science and technology progressing at such a rate without little consideration for the natural environment, we would soon find ourselves in a state of terrible crisis. This concern has been repeatedly voiced by many since then, and now we find that departments of environmental studies have been established in major universities in the West, their aim being to prevent further exploitation of nature and to save natural life from uncontrolled scientific advancement and technological innovations. In addition to this, many environmental organizations have been set up in recent times to deal with animal welfare, preservation of the countryside, organic food and farming, search for alternative sources of energy, ethical consumer research, nuclear weapons and disarmament, environmental pollution, recycling, wildlife conservation, intermediate technology, and so on. Most of these organisations are secular in nature; only a few are religious. They share similar concerns in many areas allowing them to work in close collaboration but they also differ in their perception and philosophical positions about the natural world.

In the articulation of the environmental problems and their solutions, as in other fields, the religious perspective is often neglected. An important concept, which is not taught to pupils in science lessons, is that the natural world, which is so diverse and complex, has been created by God. The Qur'ân says that whatever is on the earth has been created for human beings. This command to have dominion over creation does not mean the plundering of natural resources, as the Qur'ân repeatedly reminds us that whatever is in the earth or in the heavens belong to God. Human beings are only responsible trustees charged with caring for all creatures as well as the natural environment. In using natural resources, human beings should realise that they are not the real owners—ownership lies with God. We have been given almost endless opportunities to make use of the world around us, but should do so with caution to avoid becoming a threat to the sustainability of the material environment.

Care for environment and the living world is therefore a religious responsibility for Muslims. Prophet Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) instructions regarding the protection of the environment and the preservation of the ecological balance are quite clear. After the conquest of Makkah in 630 CE he told his followers, "The fresh herbage of Makkah shall not be cut, its trees shall not be felled". He only made an exception of the *idhkhir* plant,

which was used by blacksmiths, jewellers, and the inhabitants of the town as a means of cleansing houses. The first and second Caliphs of Islam instructed their military commanders, in their conquest of foreign territories, not to harm specially the elderly and the children, and not to destroy crops and trees in the natural environment. The Qur'ân categorically prohibits the wasting of resources.

As a result of the growing over-consumption of resources by the richest countries of the world, increasing amounts of resources are being wasted, leading to a widening of the rich-poor divide. The rich are wasting resources while the poor remain deprived.

In light of the fact that humankind is hastening towards an impending disaster as a result of environmental degradation, environmental education is becoming more important in the school curriculum. Human beings have, with their enormous ability, harnessed nature for their benefit as well as to their own detriment. Over-exploitation of natural resources has threatened the bio-diversity and the climate on which all living creatures including human beings depend for their existence. As a result of intensive farming, for example, many important minerals, so vital for the functioning of the human body, have disappeared from soil with the result that they are not found in many fruits and vegetables. Modern methods of food processing and preservation also destroy essential ingredients in food products leading to diseases. Indeed, humankind offers a great danger to its own existence and also to that of other biological species. The Qur'ân says, "[Since they have become oblivious of God,] corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste [the evil of] some of their doings, so that they might return [to the right path]." (30:41). As an explanation of this verse, Asad writes in his *The Message of the Qur'ân*, "Thus, growing corruption and destruction of our natural environment, so awesomely—if as yet only partially—demonstrated in our time, is here predicted as 'an outcome of what men's hands have wrought', i.e., of that self-destructive—because utterly materialistic—inventiveness and frenzied activity which now threatens mankind with previously unimaginable ecological disasters: an unbridled pollution of land, air and water through industrial and urban waste, a progressive poisoning of plant and marine life, all manner of genetic malformations in men's own bodies through an ever-widening use of drugs and seemingly 'beneficial' chemicals, and the gradual extinction of many animal species essential to human well-being. To all this may be added the rapid deterioration and decomposition of man's social life, the all-round increase in sexual perversion, crime and violence, with, perhaps, nuclear annihilation as the ultimate stage: all of which is, in the last resort, an outcome of man's oblivion of God and, hence, of all absolute moral values and their suppression by belief that material 'progress' is the only thing that matters." The Qur'ân and HadTMth exhort human beings to exercise restraint and show a willingness to live more in harmony with the natural world as the creation of Allah.

In March 2001 the Islamic Academy organised a seminar on "Environment, Education and Religion" in co-operation with the School of

Education, University of Cambridge in order to examine the contribution of religion to the environmental debate that has been either largely ignored or misrepresented. The seminar sought to explore the contributions of different religions to the debate and how the insights and attitudes encouraged by religion might be more fairly integrated into a vigorous and enlivened environmental education in schools. People of various faiths, some of whom are deeply involved with environmental issues and curriculum designing, attended this seminar. It is worth reporting here the resolutions that were agreed upon by the members:

1. That environmental education in schools and colleges should take more seriously religious perspectives on environmental issues and embody their study more adequately in syllabuses and teaching;
2. That greater weight should be given to questions of aesthetic and moral values in environmental education and that in this context there should be a fairer representation of the viewpoints of the religions;
3. That pupils should be encouraged to actively debate and discuss the pressing environmental challenges of our times and that in these debates a proper place should be found for the voice of religions;
4. That the continuing efforts by specialist religious groups to formulate approaches to and produce materials for use in environmental education that adequately take account of the religious perspective should be encouraged and supported especially by the religious communities themselves;
5. That there should be greater transparency in environmental decision making and that members of the religions should be encouraged to actively participate in such processes;
6. That ordinary members of the religions should become better informed and at a deeper level about environmental issues and that churches, gurdwaras, mosques, temples, synagogues, etc., should see this as part of their wider educational task;
7. That schools and colleges should provide for informed and balanced participation in environmental based activities as part of environmental education and that religious groups should actively encourage their young people to engage in such tasks;
8. That the injustices and inequalities that often lie at the heart of causes of environmental degradation should be more bravely faced and addressed and that in this debate the various religious communities should make clear that the religious perspective demands that they side with the neglected and oppressed as well as with the care and protection of the living world.

We are constantly required to make value judgements in our rapidly changing technological world. Some such judgements involve complex ethical issues, and require serious reflection on the framework of values that we hold. In making informed choices with regard to these complex matters, we need to align ourselves with the will of God and make use of our resources with humility and gratefulness. If we seek only material comfort and power, and be oblivious of all spiritual values, we will simply destroy ourselves.

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