

The Rebirth of Islamic Environmentalism: The Emergence of Al Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth

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This narrative encompasses the historical period that began in the 1960s when we began to discover that our global village, in its attempts to “progress”, has caused grievous bodily harm to planet Earth, our only home. Since then geologists and environmentalists have been arguing whether to call this period the Anthropocene¹³ to replace the current Holocene¹⁴, to give weight to the fact that the human race has become a force of nature. I have been part of this journey of discovery, asking questions particularly about the Muslim contribution to this process, and seeking Islamic answers in mitigation of what we have wrought. What I discovered was that Islamic teachings affirm the embedded essence of the human community in the natural world and, as such, we have a profound responsibility to maintain the balance (*al-mizan*) that holds our world together.

A Wake-Up Call

Environmentalism emerged as a major issue in the modern world in the early 1960s, stimulated by the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*¹⁵. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF, later renamed the Worldwide Fund for Nature) was created in 1961, Friends of the Earth in 1969, Greenpeace in 1971, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) in 1972. The only exception to this was the creation of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1948 under the auspicious of UNESCO—perhaps a reaction to the severe damage inflicted on the natural world in the destructive Second World War which ended in 1945. There were significant contributions by Muslims such as Mustapha Tolba of Egypt who headed the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) from 1975 to 1992, and S. M. Idris of Malaysia who was a recipient of the

Alternative Nobel Prize called the Right Livelihood Award in 1988.

To match up to the initiatives of the secular world, the late Prince Philip initiated multi-faith environmental activism in the 1980s while he was President of the WWF. His motivation was to give a voice to three quarters of the world’s population who adhered to one faith tradition or another. He brought together world religious leaders in 1986 in Assisi, Italy, out of which emerged the Assisi Declarations on Nature¹⁶. There were contributions from leaders of the five major religions of the world, and the Muslim Declaration on Nature was delivered by Abdullah Omar Nasseef who was at that time Secretary-General of the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-‘Alam al-Islami). This was the beginning of the faith-based environmental movement which under Prince Philip’s patronage was developed by the International Consultancy for Religion Education and Culture (ICOREC). I contributed to this movement as an associate of ICOREC until the year 2000.

One of the first fruits of this collaboration was an invitation to co-edit *Islam and Ecology*¹⁷ in 1992 which was part of a major series on Faith and Ecology sponsored by the WWF. I was subsequently invited to chair an international workshop of faith-based environmental activists and organisations in Japan in 1995, which had as its objective the discovering of common ground between nine different faith traditions. The outcome of this was the Ohito Declaration for Religion Land and Conservation (ODLRC)¹⁸ named after the town where this gathering took place. This workshop produced ten environmental principles and ten areas of action in which the faiths found common ground. In the same year ICOREC morphed into the Alliance of Religions



and Conservation (ARC) and continued its work as the hub of faith-based environmental activism and promote ODRLC. Having chaired the workshop that produced this declaration, I was invited to promote it internationally. I thus slipped into the role of a roving ambassador for ARC and conducted this work for five years.

Discovering the Islamic Heritage

A common question, particularly from young Muslims, levelled at me when I started this work was, “Has Islam really something to say about the environment?” This in a sense underscores a vital gap in the way Islam is being taught today and reflects a secularisation of the Islamic ethic under the hegemonic European colonial period since the 15th century. By and large, the curricula of the madrasas in the Islamic world today confine their teachings to the basics such as learning to read the Quran, a rudimentary insight into hadith literature, knowledge of the five pillars, and not a great deal beyond that. This subject does not appear to figure with the urgency that it deserves even at the seminaries that turn out imams and Friday preachers. Nevertheless, signs of positive change are now emerging, led by the rapid growth of the teaching of ecological ethics through the lens of Islam in the Indonesian madrasa movement.

It is also, it would seem, a matter of language at another level. An encounter with an *‘alim* of my acquaintance in the early days of my work described the increase in environmental awareness as nature worship. And another, at a political level, described the growing interest in environmental issues as, “Their problem; they created it; so let them solve it”, meaning the west created the problem thus absolving Muslims of any responsibility for the current state of planet Earth.

A Muslim awakening to the burgeoning environmental crisis has had something of a longish period of maturation. The field was led by Seyyed Hossein Nasr who has a reputation in the academic world as a pioneering Muslim thinker and who wrote about the natural world from an Islamic perspective. One of his early works, *Man and Nature*¹⁹, was first published in 1968. Another source, *Environmental Protection in Islam*²⁰, was jointly published in 1983 by the Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration (MEPA) of Saudi Arabia and IUCN.

The poetry of the Sufis had much to convey about the natural world. The compositions of Jalal ud-Din Rumi²¹, which are popular amongst western audiences, are perhaps the best-known amongst them. There are others like Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Al Habib²² of Morocco, who eulogise nature in his poems. The

following is a section from 'Reflections,' one of the *qasidas* (poems) from his *Diwan*²³ (a collection of poems):

Reflect upon the beauty of the way in
which both the land and sea are made,
and contemplate the attributes of
Allah outwardly and secretly.

The greatest evidence to the limitless
perfection of Allah can be found
Both deep within the self and the distant horizon.²⁴

If you were to reflect on physical bodies
and their marvellous forms
And how they are arranged with great
precision, like a string of pearls;

And if you were to reflect on the earth
and the diversity of its plants
and the great varieties of smooth
and rugged land in it;

And if you were to reflect on the secrets
of the oceans and their fish,
and their endless waves held back
by an unconquerable barrier;

And if you were to reflect on the
secrets of many winds
and how they bring the mist, fog and
clouds which release the rain;

And if you were to reflect on all
the secrets the heavens –
the Throne and the Foot-stool and the
spirit sent by the command -

Then you would accept the reality of
tawhid²⁵ with all your being,
and you would turn from illusions,
uncertainty and otherness;

Whilst one can take comfort to the existence of
deep ecology in Islamic teachings, how does one
express them in the global village we now live in?

There were two individuals from whom came much
of the inspiration since the earliest days of my activism.
They were the late Al-Hafiz B. A. Masri whose book
*Animals in Islam*²⁶ was published in 1989. Although
frail of health when I met him in 1990, he was full
of enthusiasm for his chosen subject and campaigned

tirelessly for animal welfare from an Islamic perspective. The second was Othman Llewellyn²⁷ who has
been pioneering Islamic environmentalism in Saudi
Arabia since the early 1990s.

Encouraged by these initiatives, I founded the Islamic
Foundation for Ecology and Environmental
Sciences²⁸ (IFEES/EcoIslam) in 1994. Its objectives
were to raise awareness in the Muslim world and
beyond of the existence of a deep ecological ethic
prevalent in the foundations of Islam by developing
teaching resources based on the Quran and the sharia,
and giving practical expression to them in real
time. The first of these resources, *Quran, Creation
and Conservation*²⁹ was published in 1999. Its efficacy
was demonstrated a year later when it was used to
persuade Zanzibari fishermen to stop using dynamite
in their fishing activities as it had the effect of destroying
the coral reefs where the fish spawned. This initiative,
known as the Misali Island Marine Conservation
project, represented two firsts. The first was the
establishment of a marine hema³⁰ in modern times
and the second was the appointment of Ali Khamis
Thani to the post of Islamic environmental officer to
manage the project³¹. This project was subsequently
accepted as a "Sacred gift to the Earth" from Islam at
a major gathering in Nepal in 2000 organised by the
WWF and ARC. Since then, *Quran, Creation and
Conservation* was the key resource that featured in
the workshops we set up for the *ulama* and madrasa
teachers from the West Coast of Africa to Indonesia.

The summation of what I had gathered thus far is
consolidated in my book *Signs on the Earth – Islam
Modernity and the Climate Crisis*³².

The Covenant

The global village was in something of a quandary
when we began to realise that we were devouring nature
on a massive scale by the heedless exploitation of
life-giving sources into resources for profit. Belatedly,
the Earth Charter movement was born in the late
1990s, recognising the absence of a secular ethic that
protected the natural world. I was part of this movement
and contributed to the development of the
Earth Charter³³ which was launched in Amsterdam
in 2000.

Although faith-based activism demonstrating environmental
concerns was on the rise, a comprehensive faith-based
response to the emerging crises was yet to emerge from
this movement. IFEES/EcoIslam attempted to mobilise
support for an Islamic Environmental Charter in 2013 but
this received no support from Islamic countries and
institutions. Operating

on a shoestring budget, this was way beyond the scope of our activities to go it alone. In 2015 the late Pope Francis launched *Laudato Si*³⁴, articulating the Christian position on the environment. In the same year we launched the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change³⁵ with the support of Islamic Relief.

It was a frustrating position to be in. Islamic teachings on human relationships with the natural world had much to offer, but how to bring this to the fore? A rare opportunity arose when I was invited to speak at the Eighth Islamic conference of the Ministry of Environment in Rabat, Morocco in October 2019. What is often said about conferences is that the important decisions are made during informal meetings between delegates, and so it happened that a discussion over dinner between Abdul Majid Tribak, who was part of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) Directorate and Iyad Abu Moghli, who was the Director of the Faith for Earth division at UNEP, and myself agreed to work on launching an Islamic resource for the protection of the environment. What was vital about this arrangement was that we had the backing of the resources of UNEP thanks to Iyad Moghli, in the absence of which this initiative would have floundered.

Thus, 27 February 2024 was the historic occasion when dormant Islamic teachings concerning the in-eradicable connection between man nature emerged as the *Al Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*³⁶ (the Covenant) which was officially launched at the 6th United Nations Environmental Assembly (UNEA-6) in Nairobi. It had taken five years to put together by an eminent group of twelve Islamic scholars and environmental activists spread from Indonesia to the States. Much to my own relief, Othman Llewelyn took on the role of lead author in the production of the Covenant.

What was also notable in this endeavour was the comprehensive consultation process that went into consolidating the draft of the Covenant. The first draft was circulated to more than three hundred Islamic institutions worldwide for comment, and a further review was carried out with the assistance of twenty-eight eminent experts and academics from various countries, including Cairo-based Al-Azhar scholars.

The Covenant is spread over 40,000 words, consisting of five chapters and an annex, as follows -

- Chapter 1: An Appraisal of the Earth
- Chapter 2: Signs of God in the Heavens and the Earth

- Chapter 3: The Ecological Ethos and the Ethics of Islam
- Chapter 4: Equity, Fairness and Justice in Sharing the Sources of Life
- Chapter 5: Principles and Practices for Tending the Earth
- Annex: A Way Forward

Whilst the first chapter encapsulates the current state of planet Earth, the other four chapters are drawn exclusively from teachings in the Qur'an and the consequent evolution of Islamic jurisprudence (Shariah) in relation to human relationships with the natural world. The Covenant provides ample evidence of the existence of an integrated ecological ethic from the beginnings of Islam and its evolution as Islam spread into numerous ecological systems from West Africa all the way to China. This realisation issues a challenge to the Muslim world to join in the leadership that is attempting to save the planet from further destruction.

The annex to the covenant lays down the way forward. The most important of these recommendations is education. In reiterating my earlier observations, this needs to start at the very bottom, the madrasa system, as increasing urbanisation and consumerism is distancing children from the natural world. Those who deliver the Friday sermons and the scholarly community also have a profound responsibility to normalise the understanding and application of Islamic creation theology. There has been an encouraging increase in the volume of dissertations and research studies appearing in academia concerning the Islamic environmental ethic since the 1990s. It is hoped that those who are armed with this knowledge will form the vanguard of teachers and activists reaffirming the human role as Khalifa, leaving a livable Earth for future generations.

Reaching out - I extend an invitation to those who wish to support the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences in promoting *Al Mizan A Covenant for the Earth* to contact me for further information.

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