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Environmental Protection in Islamic Culture

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Abstract: This article discusses the problem of environmental pollution in two parts, of which the first one will look at the theoretical implications. The main reason for environmental destruction and the mishandling of valuable natural resources is a new view that has been adopted after the scientific developments and the industrialization in modern times. The natural sciences of our age look upon nature as lifeless matter that man is allowed and able to manipulate and control in whatever way he wants. This is the very starting point of the problem of the encroachment upon nature. On the other hand, in traditional eastern cultures, especially in Islamic and Shiite concepts and ideas as well as in pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian Iran, nature is a divine gift that man is obliged to respect, uphold its holiness and keep its equilibrium intact. As a result, rather than imitating purely scientific methods, one should take a spiritual stance on this issue. The second part of this article deals with the question of possible educational measures, i. e. the practical aspects of the necessary spiritual and ethical attitude, as well as the drafting of adequate laws.

Keywords: environment; corruption on earth; nature; international laws; Islamic culture; war; Persian Gulf.

The most troubling global issue of recent decades has been the environmental destruction and its effects on man's life, the crises arising from uncontrolled consumption, the wasting, spoiling and prodigal handling of natural resources. Paying serious attention to this widespread phenomenon is a relatively new attitude that was taken after industrialized man realized the problems resulting from the new means of production, first in the industrialized western world, followed gradually by the countries of the Third World. But let us not forget that there is a long standing tradition of warnings by prophets and divine teachers pointing out that the world has been trusted into man's hands in an intact and immaculate condition free from all pollution and must not be spoiled and polluted but should be cultivated and attended with care, has a long standing tradition, which according to holy texts goes back to the early days of man's creation.¹ At any rate, it is no exaggeration to call the environmental issue the main problem of contemporary man.

Today, devastating wars led with the help of advanced weapons and the latest achievements of science and technology show how man spoils and destroys his natural resources and his life as well.

It is astonishing that on the one hand man expresses his shame at the face of his ugly behavior in distant times when he burned and destroyed the crops and fields of his conquered enemies, and calls those days the period of his childhood, immaturity and even wildness, while on the other hand in our days, exactly parallel to the development and hasty course of the sciences, of technology and the explosion of information, man, entangled with wars and armed struggles, so rigorously exploits his natural household and environmental resources and ruins them that he makes a mockery of his so called wild ancestors. To find an example, we don't have to go very far: It was only some years ago that during the

¹ The Koran, Surah al-Bagara, Ayah 30 ff.

atrocious wars waged by the dictator of Baghdad in the area of the Persian Gulf such horrible environmental catastrophes were caused that no similar case would have been possible in earlier times.

Prof. Hobbes, of the department of Space Sciences of the University of Seattle in Washington who in May 1991, about three month after the withdrawal of the Iraqi forces from Kuwait and the explosion of over 600 oil wells there, flew over that country together with a team of experts, writes: "Some 500 oil wells were still burning and a black and suffocating smoke had spread thousands of feet so that the delegation that wanted to inspect the area had to use oxygen-masks. The thick smoke like a black cloud had hindered the sunrays way down to Bahrain, some 250 miles away, and had darkened the sky totally, causing a fall of temperature by about 7 degrees. The Iraqis had opened the caps of the Kuwaiti oil tankers and so, according to some reports, let about 6 million barrels of oil leak into the sea – the highest oil leakage in the world. To me this was an exact portrayal of Dante's hell. In my view, even if the war ends as soon as possible, its environmentally destructive impacts will remain for a very long time."

At one point of his article, published in the "Science Journal" ..of 1992, Hobbes (?) says: "The smoke issued daily by the burning oil can be said to equal 3 million heavy diesel tankers moving at a speed of 30 mph." And further on he says: "Besides setting fire to the oil wells, the Iraqis destroyed the sewage system of Kuwait's factories, and this has caused daily 65 thousand square yards of fluid factory waste to flow onto the shores of Kuwait."

The question is how to confront the environmental problem and how to solve it. As one possible way, the following method is herewith suggested:

First, the problem must be exactly known and its fundamental causes be found out. Thereafter, possible practical methods and managerial measures that can be realized should be studied, such as making and enactment of suitable laws and rules, the drafting of internal programs and the ratification of international protocols and agreements. And finally, it has to be thought about how to guarantee the practical enforcement of the international agreements and treaties.

The first part of this article, the theoretical one, is of main importance. In two earlier articles we have pointed out that to limit the main cause of the environmental crisis to external and material issues and to seek a solution for them on this level, in other words to view all themes related to the environment from their material side alone is a fundamental mistake. This view will never lead us to our goal, because the environmental crisis of contemporary man is in essence a spiritual one and not a material one. It is rooted in man's worldviews and his attitudes, in the way he sees and interprets nature. As long as the view that contemporary man has of the world of being is not based on a non-materialistic foundation and as long as his relation to his environment is not deeply changed, he will not be saved from the claws of this crisis.

Man's scientism together with his anthropocentrism, which essentially fosters egoism, are among the main reasons for his strive in recent centuries to dominate nature. Thus, this man who in a Pharaonic manner sees himself as the undisputable master of the earth rebels against God, all spirituality, the laws ruling over the world and even against himself, fancies that he is entitled to change and manipulate nature in any way he wishes. Despite his technical, material and scientific progress, man has degenerated spiritually and is entangled in a kind of idolatry. He has placed his science like an idol on top of everything he produces and kneels down in front of it. And it is interesting that this idol has itself

come to believe in its holiness so that it is living in self-delusion. Any term that somehow connotes "spirit" or "soul" and that will not kowtow before it and surrender unconditionally to it, this idol will strike with its sword without trial.²

This worldview conceives nature as lifeless matter that has no meaning and that can be dominated and possessed in any possible way in order to render wealth and satisfy our passions and desires; whereas from a divine point of view nature is an intelligent being endowed with life, meaning and a celestial aura. It is ruled by laws whose violation will lead to a struggle of the whole world with the violating element, a struggle that will lead either to the amelioration of the respective element or to its extinction – even if it be man himself.³

In other words, a divine worldview is a spiritual interpretation of the word, and it cannot conceive nature and the world of being and its various parts as void and without intelligence. Religious man does not view the creator of being as a material apparatus devoid of intellect, purpose and meaning, but looks upon it as a living organism that is sensitive, self-conscious, and reasonable, that has volition, knowledge, an aim and that is creative. In his view nature is a harmonious composition of phenomena and entities with an exact scientific order that strives for a supreme goal.

Because of this duality of views, many themes that are related to the way of dealing with nature, such as prodigality, protection, moderateness, and even the laws governing the environment can have a twofold definition, according to one's worldview. In other words, different worldviews will produce different definitions of these principles, which apparently are accepted by everyone.

² Mohaghegh-Damad, "Theology of the Environment" in: Name-je Farhangestan-e Olum-e Iran, No. 17, 1380.

³ Tabatabai, Al-mizan, vol. XX, p. 14.

We hold that the main reason for the failure of the programs offered by groups, associations, and real or legal persons of western countries must be sought in the fact that they do not change their dominant worldviews. Western man tries to solve the environmental problems within the framework of a worldview and of concepts that themselves create those problems, – a task which of course is impossible to solve. It can be stated with certainty that an amelioration of the existing situation will not set in except by a change in the view on the world of being.

The interesting point is that in Third World countries, due to differences in cultures and worldviews, disparity of industrial developments, diversity of climatic conditions, and inequality of scientific and economic capacities, each country and nation finds its own solutions, even though these countries may have some themes and issues in common. But whatever their aspired solutions may be, the Third World nations should abstain from repeating and imitating what is happening in other countries, and they should have in mind that the worldview and culture of those countries could spill over and spread throughout their own country, whose culture and worldview might be opposed and contrary to their own one. They should be wary of this point, because the adoption of different methods, measures, and products will entail the adoption of the specific culture that is inseparably connected with them.

The recipes prescribed in western societies with the purpose of solving the environmental crisis and protecting nature are not going to be curative for the people in the Third World who have entirely different cultures. On the other hand there are very helpful and rescuing levers in the cultures of the Third World that should be considered and used, if serious damages and losses are to be avoided.

Let us not look at others, but start with ourselves. The beloved and proud Iranian people live in a culture that basically consists of three principles: an Iranian, an Islamic, and a Shiite one.

Historic documents show that pre-Islamic Iranians, on the grounds of the religious teachings of Zoroaster, looked at nature and especially at the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air as well as the plants, as holy elements. They not only held polluting them to be a sin, but moreover saw it as their religious duty to keep them clean and pure. So they perceived nature and its elements as material and worldly phenomena as much as they saw a spiritual and heavenly aspect in them.⁴

Iranians can proudly point at a personality like Cyrus, who in our view can best be identified with the "double horned man" mentioned in the holy Koran, and who was one of the founders of humanitarian laws, of respect for humane principles, and protection of natural resources in times of war and armed conflicts. The rulers of Assyria before him, on the contrary, were proud of destroying their natural environment. In the inscription of Ashurbanipal, drawn up after the conquest of Elam, we read: "I burnt down the earth of the city of Madaktur, and within one year and one day I swept away its entire land. I deprived this country of the passage of cattle and sheep as well as of the melodies of music." But in Cyrus' declaration after the conquest of Babylon we read:

"When I calmly entered Babylon, the people received me with joy and pleasure...My countless troops moved along Babylon without any hindrance...I did not allow anyone to frighten Sumer and Akkad ... I considered the needs of Babylon and all of its temples and tried to restore them...I abolished the repulsive yoke (i. e. slavery) of the Babylonian

⁴ Naghizadeh, M, Water and Architecture and Iranian culture, Internationale Congress on Man and Water, July 4 – 6, 2002.

people. I restored their damaged houses. I ended their misfortune...I gathered all their inhabitants and returned their houses to them..."⁵

During the Islamic period, the Iranian culture that was already a rich one as far as the relationship between man and nature and the way of benefiting from nature was concerned, was enriched all the more through the influence of the Islamic worldviews. In the eyes of the Iranian Moslem the world of being became one single huge sign of the supreme Lord and of divinity. The Islamic Sharia emphasized such principles as abstaining from dissipation, being moderate, holding the balance, being contented, using natural resources in a reasonable and humane way, respecting the rights of animals, plants and even of inanimate bodies, and finally rejecting all sorts of corrupt hegemony over nature. By implementing the teachings of the honorable Shiite leaders, i. e. the People of the House of the Prophet, and by holding up their sayings, advice and even their practical way of life, the Iranians raised this culture to the peaks of dignity and virtue. There is a sentence of the first Shiite Imam that says: "Fear God when dealing with his servants and his land, since you are responsible, even for the earth and the animals."⁶

This sentence admonishes Muslims to protect the natural resources and not to use them wantonly even in times of armed conflict. It puts the protection of nature on the same level as the protection of human life.

The recommendations of Imam Ali are based on the teachings of the Koran. The holy Koran allows the use of weapons and engaging in armed conflicts only for the purpose of self-defense and the protection of the founders of the religion, and even this much is allowed only to extinguish the fire the enemy has kindled, whereas going beyond this limit is seen as a transgression and as illegitimate: "....." (Surah al-Bagara,

⁵Seyyed Mustafa Mohaghegh-Damand, International Humane Rights: the Islamic Way, Center for the publication of Islamic sciences, Tehran, 2004.

⁶ Nahjulbalaghah, Sermon 166.

190). According to this verse, any attack at persons other than the fighters is forbidden.

The Islamic orders on environmental protection and on saving natural resources from damages during armed conflicts are part of the humane laws of Islam.

On the issue of chopping trees in the theatre of war there is an ayah in the Koran, which however is sometimes misinterpreted (surah al-Hashr, ayah 5). It says:

"Whatever trees you chopped and whatever you left behind, it all was the will of God."

Some have thought that this ayah allows the chopping of trees in enemy territory. This interpretation is due to the fact that the term "lina" has been taken to mean "tree", whereas it apparently means the dates that hang down from these trees. Thus, this ayah allows the consumption of these dates by the soldiers, and it by no means allows cutting off the trees, which is seen in Islam as a case of "corruption on earth".⁷

This point of course is one of the teachings that Islam is proud of, because in comparison it says in the Mosaic law:

"Go now, fall upon the Amalekites, destroy them, and put their property under ban. Spare no one; put them all to death, men and women, children and babes in arms, herds and flocks, camels and donkeys." (1 Samuel 15,3)

In this second part, i. e. the discussion of practical methods and measures, two main themes are of utmost importance as the pillars of envisaged actions: one is the issue of instruction, the other is that of legislation. Adequate instructions are one of the columns of environmental protection. They lead society to get to know its natural environment, the reasons for its destruction, the necessity to protect it,

⁷ Viz. Tabatabai, op. cit., Commentary on the Surah al-Hashr.

and at the same time they encourage programs to further study and protect the environment. The main topics of instruction can be enumerated as follows: explaining the holiness of nature, making clear its role for the present and the future, endeavoring to correct the way society and the official instances in charge perceive of their natural environment so that they establish a proper relationship with it and use it adequately and, beyond this, will not hold a single group or organization responsible for the environment. The rich Islamic-Iranian culture should be esteemed as one of the main sources of instruction for handling nature. Of course, it has to be kept in mind that the necessary instructions for different groups must be adequately given according to differences in the participants' age, levels of education, ethnic affiliation, and vocation. The instruction program has to keep in mind the goals and the culture of society and must be composed of long-, medium-, and short-term programs, oriented at the main principles.

Besides instruction, another measure of high importance is legislation and practical law-enforcement. The rich Islamic judicial sources together with the holy Shiite institution of continuous "individual reasoning" (*igtihad*) as well as open-mindedness, resulting from a deep feeling of interpersonal acquaintance and responsibility for solving problems and mitigating the effects of misfortunate accidents can create a very bright perspective for our society.

The Protocol I Additional to the Geneva Convention of 1977 prohibits the use of methods and means of warfare which are or can be detrimental to the natural environment. But unfortunately, because of the lack of practical enforcement measures, as yet it had no deterring effect.

"Article 55: Protection of the Natural Environment

1. Care shall be taken in warfare to protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage.

This protection includes a prohibition of the use of methods or means of warfare which are intended or may be expected to cause such damage to the natural environment and thereby to prejudice the health or survival of the population.

2. Attacks against the natural environment by way of reprisals are prohibited."

This author in no way defends extremist action in the name of Islam or by so-called Muslims, be it in the past or in our days; and he also admits that in practice there has been many a trespassing. What this author is talking about is Islam, and it has to be noted that what is meant by Islam is not the Islamic world, but Islam as a religion which has a judicial structure and a worldview based on vital teachings. By the same token, Christianity, too, is different from the Christian world. The English language knows two expressions with different meanings: "Christianity" and "Christendom", the first one meaning the Christian religion and the second one the Christian world. Accordingly, it might be suggested that we for our part, when talking about the Islamic religion, use the term "Islamyyat" in Persian. To demonstrate the issue drastically, one can say that Hitler and the Nazis emerged from the Christian world but not from Christianity, which is a religion of friendship, and love. On the Islamic side one can point at criminals like Saddam Hussain who cannot be attributed to Islam as a religion, even though his crimes were unfortunately committed in the Islamic world.

This author holds that the main task of Islamic thinkers, by relying on the instructions of their religion whose practical enforcement is ensured by the faith of the believers, is to prevent actions that are unislamic and inhuman, such as the destruction of the environment and of

natural resources. This principle should be upheld also in case of armed conflicts involving Muslim believers.

This author thinks that in our legislation we for a long time will not need to go beyond the initial principles and reach out for principles such as "necessity" or "exigency", because Islamic laws are by themselves capable of satisfying the demands of consecutive generations as time and circumstances change. What is needed are thinkers who are aware of present-day judicial systems and who, within those traditional and specific frameworks, will thus certainly have a different interpretation of the Islamic judicial sources.

This view is confirmed by the gradual change and development of the great Islamic jurists' interpretation throughout many centuries of such axioms as *lazarar*, (*noharm*) *zimanate ghahreyyah* (automatic liabilities) *adl va ensaf* (justice and equity), Who can deny that the transformation in Shiite jurisprudence by Sheikh Tousi in the 5th century A. H. and by Allameh Helli in the 7th century a. H. was a result of these respected personalities' acquaintance with the judicial system of their time?

It should be added that environmental legislation cannot be limited to the national level but requires serious cooperation of all countries. The importance of this point lies in the fact that it is impossible to limit environmental destruction or protection to geographical boundaries. This is why international understanding and cooperation is utterly needed. A conspicuous demonstration of this point is the opposition of the United States to the Kyoto Treaty, which not only impeded its implementation, but also led to the fact that even a treaty on environmental protection between other countries did not render the expected results.

Obviously international legislation like national laws need some enforcement guarantee. As an example one can point at the indifference of industrialized countries to fulfill their obligations they had accepted at the Conference of Rio, in the Protocol of Montreal and the Stockholm Convention. The change of these countries' position and the lack of enforcement guarantees of international treaties can be seen in the failure of the Conference of Bali.