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## **Quranic Ecology<sup>1</sup>** **Key Ideas**

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### **Introduction**

The main aim of this article is to provide a discussion of fourteen ideas that may be considered as central to Quranic ecology. From the perspective of Islamic epistemology, these ideas being Quranic are viewed as of divine and thus of supra-rational origin. Many people, including Muslims, may not be aware that ecology is a popular theme in the Quran. One main reason for their unawareness is because the ecological ideas in question are usually not identified in exegeses of this sacred book as ecological. In order to be able to identify verses in the Quran that may be justifiably viewed as those dealing with ecological themes or issues, one needs to not only understand the meaning of ecology but also to be well-versed with Quranic exegesis. In this article I will be referring to the Quranic verses from which I have derived the fourteen key ecological ideas that are to be discussed in the following sections.

In my book on Islamic environmental wisdom pertaining to the Earth's planetary health<sup>2</sup> I discussed rather briefly several ecological doctrines contained in the Quran. In the first edition of the book, I discussed six of them, which I view as fundamental in its importance to Islamic ecology and environmentalism and at the same time to be epistemologically related. To recapitulate the discussion, here are the six ecological doctrines we have presented in the book: (1) the idea of the earth's destiny, including that of man, as being linked to the rest of the cosmos; this cosmic linkage is a manifestation of the metaphysical-theological principle of divine unity (*al-tawhid*), which is the most fundamental teaching of the religion of Islam; (2) the uniqueness of the earth as a life-supporting planet; (3) the harmonious relationship between biological organisms and their environments; (4) the idea of ecological balance and equilibrium; (5) the idea of a divine economy prevailing in the natural order that abhors the intrusion of waste; and finally (6) the ecological function of man in relation to his role as God's vicegerent on earth (*khalifat 'Llah fi 'l-ard*).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at online Islam-Buddhism Eco Dialogue (IBED) Conference on 15-16 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Osman Bakar, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2007); 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2022. The new edition contains an additional chapter.

In its second edition, I added another major ecological doctrine of Islam. This is the idea of the planet Earth as man's only home, which is temporary in nature, since it will cease to exist at some point in time as maintained in Islamic eschatology.<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of the Earth's planetary care as a major ecological function of man when viewed as God's vicegerent on earth (*khalifat'Llah fi'l-ard*) is mentioned in both editions, but it was discussed at greater length in chapter three of the new edition. Moreover, the idea of man's ecological function on the planet Earth gains new emphasis and cosmic significance and even new urgency when discussed together with the idea of the Earth as man's temporary and only home. To hammer home these points, we identify and discuss several unique features of our planet that make it an ideal human home. Both from intra-planetary and inter-planetary ecological perspectives, the planet Earth is unique implying the perfect mercy and compassion, knowledge, and wisdom of its Maker. And to emphasise the cross-cultural significance of the planet Earth as humanity's common home which they together must take great care to protect and preserve we include a comparative discussion of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's and Pope Francis' treatments of the theme of planetary care that clearly show convergence in their understanding of the major challenges to the planetary ecological health. Both figures were profoundly inspired by their respective religions, namely Islam and Christianity.

The fourteen ideas presented in this chapter may be viewed as further clarifications or detailing of the major ecological doctrines just revisited. Since the term ecology has not been defined in the previous book, we will now explain its essential meaning, particularly as seen from Islam's *tawhidic* perspective. We see the word ecology as conveying the ideas of interrelatedness and interdependence between things that result in them in being in a state of balance and harmony. The whole reality encompassing the things in view and their total relationships is called their unity, which is epistemologically related to the Islamic idea of *tawhid*. At its most fundamental level, *tawhid* refers to the absolute unity of God. But this divine unity manifests itself in the cosmos in various forms and at various ontological levels, including in the world of nature. This cosmological wisdom may be understood as an integral part of divine pedagogy. God wants man to understand that the unity of the natural order is a clear proof of His Unity.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that ecology is an expression of unity, it is thus conceptually related to *tawhid*. The Quran's ecological ideas may then be understood as among the many ways in which divine unity is displayed in the world of nature. By internalising these ecological truths in their own being, the otherwise fragmented and multidimensional man becomes whole and a unity that reflects the divine unity itself. Although the idea of ecology may be broadened to include human or cultural and built ecology, our discussion in this chapter is limited to biophysical ecology.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea No 1**

The first key ecological idea in the Quran is contained in Chapter 2 titled "The Heifer" (*al-Baqarah*), verse 30 and verse 31. Verse 30 reads: And when your Lord said to the angels, "I am placing a vicegerent (*khalifah*) upon the earth," they said, "will you place therein one who

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<sup>3</sup> In Islam, eschatology defined as the science of the return of all things to the Creator is inextricably linked to the idea of the end of cosmic history of which the earth's future is a part.

<sup>4</sup> Please refer to the Quranic verse, chapter 21, verse 22. "If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allah, there would have been confusion in both! But glory to Allah, the Lord of the Throne: [High is He] above what they attribute to Him!"

will make corruption therein, and shed blood, while we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy [Name]? He said, “I know what you do not know.” In verse 31 God says: And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: “Tell me the names of these if you are right.”

Arguing on the basis of the divinely revealed data contained in the above two verses, and with the help of other verses in the Quran, we may provide the following brief commentary. From the perspective of our present discussion, the key idea in these verses is the appointment of man as God’s vicegerent on earth. This appointment by no less an authority than God Himself confers uniqueness and unmatched significance to both man and the planet Earth. Man is unique, since he is constituted of both earthly and heavenly elements. He possesses both animal and angelic qualities. The angels pointed out man’s animal qualities when reacting to God’s intention to place the first man Adam as His representative on the planet Earth. The animal qualities were of the destructive type, since the angels referred to man’s capacity for corruption and mischief (*fasad*) and his capability to shed blood. God, on the other hand, refers to man’s angelic or divine-like qualities when He told the angels that He had taught Adam “the names of all things.” God made it very clear that the angels only know a small part of the knowledge taught to Adam, which the latter acknowledged. It is man’s capacity for knowledge possession that elevates him to a lofty cosmic position higher than that of the angels. Indeed, on this account, man is not only the best earthly creature, but also the best of all creatures in the cosmos.

As a planet, the Earth is unique, since it is life-supporting thereby implying that it is alive. The planet hosts numerous living organisms – plants, animals, and humans. Its precise position in the solar system and its several unique physical properties all favour it with the capacity to host and sustain life as beautifully explained by science. But modern science does not know the full secrets of the meaning of the Earth as a life-supporting planet. All things considered about the Earth we may rightly argue that the planet has been specially created for the human species. In other words, the earth exists for the sake of man. Employing the classical theory of causality popular among Muslim philosophers to explain why things exist, we may advance the final cause or teleological argument that the earth exists to serve as an ideal planetary home for man where he can discharge his role, responsibility, and duty as God’s representative (*khalifah*). Integral to man’s vicegerency or *khilafah* function, which is becoming more important than ever given the meteoric rise of corruption and other wrongdoings on earth, is man’s ecological role. The fundamental condition of vicegerency, particularly of human ecological role, is knowledge. For this reason, God taught Adam the names of all things. This means that human beings by virtue of being endowed with the Adamic nature will have the capability and capacity to acquire the kind of knowledge that would enable them to play their ecological role. This necessary knowledge refers to man’s knowledge of himself and of the cosmos, and thus of God.

The first Quranic Ecological Idea in our list thus emphasises man’s ecological function within the context of his divinely appointed role as *khalifah*, which is essentially to take care of, administer, govern, and manage the planet Earth on behalf of God. It is also

important to emphasise that man's ecological function is a knowledge-based agenda as is generally true of all Islam's civilisational activities.

## **Quranic Ideological Idea Number 2**

In chapter 33 (The Confederates), Verse 72, the Quran asserts the following: "We did indeed offer the trust (*amanah*) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof; but man undertook it – he was indeed unjust and foolish." We have selected this verse as our Quranic Ideological Idea Number 2, because conceptually and epistemologically speaking, it is very closely related to the previous verse. The core idea in this verse is trust (*al-amanah*) whereas in the previous verse it is vicegerency (*khilafah*). Both verses, in fact, seek to emphasise the idea of man as a bearer of divine trust. But whereas the idea of trust is explicitly stated in the present verse, it is only implied in the word vicegerent (*khalifah*) mentioned in the previous verse.

Concerning the word trust, Yusuf Ali explains it as follows: "The trust is something given to a person, over which he has a power of disposition: he is expected to use it as directed or expected, but he has the power to use it otherwise. There is no trust if the trustee has no power, and the trust implies that the giver of the trust believes and expects that the trustee would use it according to the wish of the creator of the trust, and not otherwise."<sup>5</sup> In the case under the present discussion, as made clear in the verse, the giver of the trust is God the Creator of the Universe as well as of man. The recipient of the trust is the human species or the collective man alone, since the heavens and the earth and the mountains, which were created and offered the trust earlier than man, refused to accept it. A trust means an undertaking of responsibility and thus having the freedom and capacity to exercise a choice of good or evil. The creatures mentioned, implying the whole of the macrocosm, refused to accept the offer out of fear that they would not be able to be faithful to the trust. In Yusuf Ali's words, "they preferred to submit their will entirely to Allah's Will, which is All-Wise and Perfect, and which would give them far more happiness than a faculty of choice, with their imperfect knowledge."<sup>6</sup> In other words, they preferred to be true Muslims even if they are to exist without freewill. But man undertook the trust only to end up in proving that he was both unjust and foolish and ignorant (*zaluman jahulan*) in accepting it.

In the Islamic perspective both injustice and foolishness and ignorance refer to the human states of deprivation of real knowledge. It is thus deprivation of knowledge that makes man unworthy of undertaking the trust to manage and take good care of the planet Earth. The message from the Quranic Ecological Idea Number 2 is loud and clear. If man does not really know himself and about the world of nature surrounding him and thus not knowing God, then he does not deserve to be the trustee and the guardian of the planet Earth and the protector of its ecological health.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2005), 899, note 3777.

<sup>6</sup> 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, 899, note 3778.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 3**

In Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verse 36, the Quran says: We said: “Get you down, all you people, with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your sustainable dwelling-place and your means of livelihood – for a time.” This verse is viewed as conveying an ideological idea, since it speaks of the planet Earth as a sustainable dwelling-place for the human species. Although the Earth is only a temporary home for mankind, it is created secure and comfortable for their habitation. Moreover, its resources and facilities are more than sufficient for human needs if only there is no waste in their consumption.

This verse is of special significance for our present discussion, and for the Islam-Buddhism Eco Dialogue we had earlier organised, since it addresses in principle the issue of planetary sustainability though not in details. We are referring to the Quranic word *mustaqarr* in the verse, which is rendered into English as “sustainable dwelling-place.” There is the Arabic word *istimrar* used in the contemporary discourse to mean sustainability, but this word does not occur in the Quran. We prefer the word *mustaqarr*, first because it occurs in the Quran and, from the Islamic perspective, was thus purposely chosen by God to describe the condition of the earth as the most appropriate dwelling-place for human beings to last until the end of the world. And second because the word conveys the idea of a holistic sustainability conditioning the earth, embracing the notions of stability, security and comfort, growth, sufficiency for the lasting needs of humans and other living organisms, and the capacity to restore its lost balance due to human interventions. The idea of permanence, continuity, and continued existence conveyed by the word *istimrar* is, however, not absent from the Quranic understanding of *mustaqarr* as implied in the verse.

There are spiritual agencies governing the earth’s sustainability, but the ultimate source of it is God, one of whose Names and Qualities is the Provider and the Sustainer (*al-Razzaq*). Still, human destructive actions can adversely affect the earth’s sustainability. Human beings are thus reminded of their ecological role in order to help God’s Nature protect their planetary home. The third Quranic Ecological Idea describes in clearer terms the condition of the planet Earth where man is to undertake the trust of vicegerency and guardianship of ecological health.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 4**

In Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verse 38, the Quran says: We said: “Get you down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes guidance to you from Me, whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.” This verse is about the divine message of assurance to Adam and his descendants that in exercising their role as vicegerents of God on earth and in undertaking their ecological function as guardians of the planet they will be receiving divine guidance from time to time as determined by God. If they obediently follow this guidance that is meant for their respective times they will have nothing to fear and nothing to worry about. In other words, they will attain happiness through sincere obedience to the divinely revealed guidance. At the same time, the ecological health of Nature will also be assured.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 5**

In Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verse 22, the Quran says: “[Your Lord] who has made the earth your couch, and the heavens your canopy; and sent down rains from the heavens; and brought forth therewith fruits for your sustenance; then do not set up rivals unto God when you know [the truth].” This verse provides detailing of the Earth as man’s ideal planetary home for which man should be deeply thankful to God who created it.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 6**

In Chapter 67 (The Dominion), Verses 3-4, the Quran says: “He who created the seven heavens one above another, no want of proportion will you see in the creation of the Most Gracious. So, turn your vision again: do you see any flaw? Again, turn your vision a second time: Your vision will come back to you dull and discomfited, in a state worn out.” These verses seek to impress upon man the flawless design of divine creation. They serve as an extremely important cosmological background for our appreciation of the planet Earth as man’s ideal planetary home.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 7**

In Chapter 50 (Qaf), Verses 7-11, the Quran says: “And the earth – We have spread it out, and set thereon mountains standing firm, and produced therein every kind of beautiful growth [in pairs] – to be observed and commemorated by every devotee turning [to God]. And We send down from the sky rain charged with blessing, and We produced therewith gardens and grain for harvests; and tall [and stately] palm-trees, with shoots of fruit-stalks, piled one over another – as sustenance for [God’s] servants – and We give life therewith to land that is dead: thus, will be the Resurrection.” These verses remind man that apart from the ecological significance of these diverse natural phenomena and the Earth’s biodiversity they should pay heed to the spiritual messages implicit in them.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 8**

In Chapter 13 (The Thunder), Verses 3-4, the Quran says: “And He is who spread out the earth, and set thereon mountains standing firm and [flowing] rivers: and fruit of every kind He made in pairs, two and two. He draws the night as a veil over the day. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who reflect (*yatafakkurun*). And in the earth are tracts [diverse though] neighbouring, and gardens of vines and fields sown with corn, and palm trees – growing out of single roots or otherwise: watered with the same water, yet some of them We make more excellent than others to eat. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who understand (*ya’qilun*).” These verses describe the Earth in normal times before its beauty and health were uglily spoilt by modern man’s activities of overdevelopment. The verses remind man not to forget the spiritual messages of Nature that are directly addressed to him.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 9**

In Chapter 23 (The Believers), Verse 18, the Quran says: “And We send down water from the sky according to [due] measure, and We lodge it in the ground; and We certainly are able to drain it off [with ease].” This verse clearly conveys a very important message about the Earth’s planetary ecological health. It pertains to the sustainability of water supply, which is now under threat. It refers to the phenomena of natural water cycle, abundant supply of water

to the planetary home, and retention in ground storage. All these issues are of great interest to scientists. But a global water crisis for the present humanity is possible, since various signs of it are now visible in such phenomena as global warming and climate change as a result of man's destructive environmental activities of overdevelopment.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 10**

In Chapter 6, verse 38, the Quran says: "There is not an animal [that lives] on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but [forms part of] communities like you. Nothing have We omitted from the Book, and they [all] shall be gathered to their Lord in the end." This verse is about the harmonious relationship between organisms and their environments. It is very pertinent to issues of biodiversity, inter-species harmony, biophysical ecology, and indeed to integral ecology as a whole. Particularly, it is of immense importance to the ecological relationship between the human and other living species found on earth.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 11**

In Chapter 6 (The Cattle), Verse 141, the Quran says: "It is He who produced gardens, with trellises and without, and dates, and tilth with produce of all kinds, and olives and pomegranates, similar and yet different; Eat of their fruit in their season, but render the dues that are proper on the day that the harvest is gathered. *But waste not by excess (tasrif): for God does not love the wasters.*" [italics mine]. This verse is about biodiversity, which is of great importance to the Earth's ecological health. It is thus of great importance to the Earth's planetary sustainability. But the verse seeks to remind man of a lingering threat to the Earth's ecological health. This threat is man's indulgence in waste. The Quran reminds man that God did not create Nature in waste. For sure there is no waste in divine economy, and He wants human economy to be modelled on it. He produces food in abundance for which mankind should be thankful. But mankind instead is prone to commit waste through excessive consumption. The Quran is emphatic in describing committing waste as a negation of thankfulness to God. Indeed, it denounces wasting of God's sustenance as a satanic act! The main message from the 11<sup>th</sup> Quranic ecological idea is this: in response to natural abundance of food man should avoid waste and observe the *wasatiyyah* spirit or the golden mean that is universally acknowledged in various religious and spiritual traditions.

The ecological significance of this verse is discussed in my book *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth*.<sup>7</sup> The main message from this verse is this: the ecological health of the planet Earth is best guaranteed when man succeeds in uprooting the culture of waste and consumerism in society.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 12**

In Chapter 22 (The Pilgrimage), Verse 63, the Quran says: "Do you not see that God sends down rain from the sky, and forthwith the earth becomes clothed with green (*mukhdarratan*)? For God is He who understands the finest mysteries, and is well-acquainted [with them]." This is an especially beautiful verse on planetary ecology. It describes the earth as being clothed in a green garment. In short, the earth is a green planet. The green clothing is a symbol of Divine Mercy for the planet Earth, man's only home. In the verse 6:99 the Quran speaks of vegetal or plant diversity, which is the source of the earth's greenness. This vegetal

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<sup>7</sup> Osman Bakar, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth*, 35-36.

diversity is a symbol of the Earth's sustainability as a source of legitimate human needs. The idea of the Earth's sustainability thus appears again in our discussion of ecology but this time in another setting, namely the scriptural description of Earth as a green planet.

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 13**

In Chapter 2, Verse 11, the Quran says: "When it is said to them [the hypocrites]: "Do not make mischief on the earth," they say: "Why, we only want to be peacemakers!" Of a surety, they are the ones who make mischief, but do not realise it." This is among the earliest verses in the Quran that address the issue of hypocrisy among human beings, which is described as a spiritual disease of the heart (2:10). But hypocrisy is not just a disease and a problem of the individual human soul. It is also a social disease when it becomes a collective and organised trait to the point of assuming a societal or civilisational proportion. Quite clearly, in the passage comprising the verses 2:8-20, the Quran is addressing collective hypocrisy at the civilisation level such as found in modern and contemporary human civilisation. The hypocrites share a common mindset: they pretend to be peacemakers and true civilisation-builders, but in fact they are mischief-makers who cause havoc and destruction to both Nature and Society. Through the 13<sup>th</sup> Quranic ecological idea, we receive this powerful message: Hypocrisy disguised as civilisational development is Nature's greatest enemy!

### **Quranic Ecological Idea Number 14**

In Chapter 30 (The Romans), Verse 41, the Quran says: "Corruption has appeared on land and sea as an outcome of what the hands of men 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]." This 14<sup>th</sup> Quranic ecological idea is a befitting description of the modern environmental and ecological crisis. It is quite fitting to be an immediate follow-up to the 13<sup>th</sup> ecological idea, which pertains to civilisational hypocrisy, and to conclude our discussion. Hypocrisy on a civilisational scale has become the hands that wrought corruption on land and sea, which is clearly visible to everyone.

However, as we earlier asserted, Nature is not dead but alive. Its capacity for sustainability, which is a divine providence, for example its capacity to sustain life, means that it will respond back to the evil doings of man in ways that will cause pain, suffering, and difficulties, not only to those responsible for them but also to the "innocent bystanders." Nature is selective neither in its favours nor in its disfavours. It knows no colour. According to the universal spiritual law that is very much emphasised in Islam, there is no neutrality when it comes to man's crimes either against fellowmen or against Nature. We are called upon to be on the side of truth and justice, which is what defending Nature is all about. The verse tells us in no uncertain terms that when Nature fights back against human aggression against it, the bitter tasting of its consequences is purposive. It is one of God's infinite ways of mercy and compassion to bring man back to the right path and to restore his rightful relation with the natural environment.

### **Conclusion**

The above fourteen ecological ideas just discussed comprise only a small portion of the numerous Quranic verses dealing with the theme of ecology. This larger body of Quranic ecological ideas deserve a detailed study, but time and space do not permit such a study to be undertaken in this essay. But they suffice to demonstrate to those who are not familiar with



the teachings of Islam, particularly Quranic ecology, that this Muslim sacred book contains many references to ideas that are of great significance for the contemporary concern with the ecological health of our common planetary home.