Islamic Environmental Ethics

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1.0 Introduction

In recent years critical and interdisciplinary research has significantly challenged the predominantly technical and a-political view of business and accounting. This has led to growing consensus that the most valuable insights are gained from studying practices in the organisational and broader social settings in which they operate, i.e. their cultural context. The environmental challenges facing businesses today, however, respect neither political nor religious boundaries. As such, the development of a 'Universal' environmental ethic (see Nasr, 1992; Callicott, 2001) must be correspondingly multicultural. It is because environmental problems cross cultural boundaries that coordination and coherence is needed among global sustainability agendas and initiatives. A prerequisite to coordination is understanding and appreciation of 'the Other' (see Said,1997; Kamla et al, 2006) potentially leading to a better understanding between Islam and the West and helping avert the threatened 'clash of civilisations' (Williams and Zinkin, 2010; Dsouli et al, 2012). This paper aims to contribute in that vein.

When applied to the natural environment, a lack of awareness and understanding of *Shari'ah* prescriptions, is not limited to the West. Empirical studies of Muslim majority countries (e.g. Rice 1999, 2006; Nasr, 2003; Hamed, 2005) find low levels of environmental awareness in general and even lower levels of the use of the environmental ethics of the *Shari'ah* in environmental movements, despite evidence of an important association between tradition or religiosity and pro-environmental behaviour in both the private and public spheres (Rice, 2006). For the Islamic world as a whole, however, a lack of confidence in governments to provide solutions to environmental issues is noted as they are seen more part of the problem than the solution (Hamed, 2005; Rice, 2006). Many of these same governments have faced varying degrees of civil unrest since the dawn of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Revolutionary calls for bread, freedom, social justice and the search for solutions beyond government further motivate this piece.

On the 20th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit, we aim finally to make a critical contribution to widening debates on the social and environmental role of organisations; in particular Islamic Financial Institutions (IFIs) who claim Shari'ah compliance as the base of their legitimacy.

Drawing throughout from key Islamic texts and relevant prior literature, the structure of the paper is to elaborate and discuss key principles of relevance and delineate an Islamic environmental ethic there from. Exploring implications for the operations of self professed Islamic institutions, we conclude with recommendations for further conceptual and empirical investigations into the green credentials of Islamic organisations.

2.1 The Origins of Islamic Ethics and Guiding Principles

The *Shari'ah*, wherein Islamic ethics are embedded, has four sources: ***a)*** the Qur'an, which expresses the work and will of Allah; ***b)*** the *Sunnah*, the body of customs and practices based on the words (*hadiths*) and deeds of Muhammad (pbuh) and elaborated on by scholars; ***c)*** Islamic law, which draws on the first two sources and is solidified by consensus of the jurists; and ***d)*** an individual's own conscience when the path has not been clarified by the first three sources (Lubis, 2000). Additionally, interpretive jurisprudence (*ijtihad*) and deduction by analogy (*qiyas*) are mechanisms argued to offer necessary flexibility to address the changing needs of dynamic societies.

In a seminal investigation of the principles underpinning Islamic social and economic life, Naqvi (1981) identifies four elements considered by many scholars to be key aspects of the Islamic approach in matters of human life and interaction (e.g. Al-Qaradawi, 1985, 2000; Beekun, 1997; Rizk, 2006; Kamla *et al*, 2006; Rizk, 2008a; Williams and Zinkin, 2010). The four principles of *Tawheed* (unity), responsibility, equilibrium and free will are discussed below.

Tawheed-Unity

Most discussions of the phlosophical pllars of Islamc Shari'ah begin with the principle of Tawheed. Unity is understood to have two interrelated meanings in Islam. First and foremost, the oneness of Allah: the universe is a connected whole, with Allah standing as a unifying principle outside of creation. Implicit herein is the equality 'of all of creation in the worship of their Creator and the respectful recognition of the interdependency and interconnectedness between all (Lubis, 2000). An individual finds his or her place in the whole through an acceptance of the Qur'anic prescriptions that reference and govern social behaviour and interaction.

Despite consensus of Islamic scholars on the centrality of the Tawheed principle, little has been written on the epistemological methodology of Tawheed and its

application to modern organisations. One notable exception is the growing literature on the corporate governance of IFIs (e.g. Chopra, 1992; Choudry and Hoque, 2004).

Balance-Equilibrium

Stemming from the concept of *Tawheed*, equilibrium is first noted as balance in nature, with all God's creations understood to be in balance, having been created in a measured way : *'Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measure' (Quran 54: 49).* The equilibrium principle is further understood to be all encompassing. Social existence requires the maintenance of a balance between many, often conflicting needs and desires, e.g. those of the individual and those of the community; balance between religious knowledge and engagement in practical worldly affairs; balanced patterns of consumption, etc. The equilibrium should 'not be transgressed at any level, whether at that of the harmony of nature or in the spheres of human justice, morality or commerce . . . the principle of balance, measure and moderation is all-pervasive . . .' (Hobson, 1998, p. 41 as cited in Lubis, 2000). The property of equilibrium therefore is more than a characteristic of nature; it is a dynamic characteristic that each Muslim must strive for in his/her life. In an organisational setting, it would manifest in decisions regarding balance of stakeholder interests (Beekun and Badawi, 2005), economic pursuits and social goals, etc.

Trust and Responsibility

Responsibility stems from a recognition that accompanies self-consciousness. Humans are responsible, as *khalifah*, (expanded on in the proceeding section) for the care of the Earth as vicegerents of God. This entails a broader understanding of the concepts of human trust and responsibility, inseparably linked in Islam. Personal responsibility is seen to be realized in the function of intellect or *aql* (reasoning). In all circumstances, the onus is on Muslims to act in accordance with their understanding (*itjihad*):

Truth is to be found in growing into an understanding of the teachings and practice of Islam, and the power of al Aql (the intellect) via the application of reason is the path prescribed for that growth. The rational, knowing part of the soul links man to Allah; the truth of this link is what forms the being of humans (Naqvi, 1981).

Free Will

The Islamic understanding of free will concerns the power to act. Such a conception of free will is conditioned by recognition that each person has a limit, so a person's power to act is limited by that person's capacity. The personal limitations of each human being are that person's manifest destiny. The individual human task is to seek to achieve this upper limit. The doctrine of human responsibility is formulated in terms of power, not of freedom; it is *capability* to do, not *freedom* to choose; it is of capacity to do what is required, not the freedom to decide for oneself what is desirable or right, as that is already known in the Qur'an and in conventional understandings of *Shar'i*ah law. Individual responsibility is determined according to how far one can move along a predestined path.

These guiding principles, argued to be the core of the Islamic model, have numerous implications for corporate behaviour. The proceeding discussions apply and expand on the principles with reference to key Islamic sources and relevant prior literature.

2.2 Guardianship of the Planet

In the Qur'an, Islam's primary authority in all matters of individual and communal life, as well as theology and worship, and in the teachings and example of the Muhammad, preserved in a literary form known as *hadith*, there is much with which to construct an authentic Islamic environmental ethic. The Qur'an tells of an offer of global trusteeship that was presented by God to the Heavens, the Earth, and the Mountains (Quran 33:72), who refused to shoulder the responsibility out of fear. Humankind seized the opportunity and bore the "*amana*" (trust), but were "unjust and very ignorant" but were guided by God through mercy in bearing the responsibility of the *amana.* The Qur'an, however, is clear that Allah is the ultimate holder of dominion over creation (e.g., 2:107, 5:120), and that all things return to Him (24:42) and are thus accountable each in their own ways.

In Islamic thought, it is believed that Adam, the progenitor of the human race and Islamic prophet-was appointed *khalifa* or guardian of the planet Earth. By extension, every man and woman inherits the power and responsibility in relation to the planet and all its life forms. *"We have honoured the children of Adam and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and preferred them greatly over many of those we created"* (17:70). A *khalifa* is one who inherits a position or trust, holding it responsibly and in harmony with its bestower. He does not violate the trust. The verbal root of *khalifa* is *khalaf*, which means, "He came after, followed, succeeded". Ironically, it can also mean 'be at variance with, offend against, violate or break a rule, command or promise' as depicted in the following Quranic verse:

> *And lo! Your Sustainer said to the angels: Behold, I am about to establish upon earth a khalifa. They said: Will you place on it such as will spread corruption and shed blood whereas it is we who extol your limitless glory, and praise you, and hallow thy name? Allah answered: Verily, I know that which you do not know* (2:30).

Of the nine times the word *khalifa* and its plural are found in the Qur'an; seven times it is used in conjunction with the prefixed *fi'-al-ard-* or "on earth" . In each case, it refers to a person, people, or humanity in general, to whom God has entrusted part of His power on earth. The term has been variously translated into English as a successor, deputy, viceroy, and trustee or steward (Lubis, 2000, Kamla et al, 2006). In light of this, it is unsurprising that in Islamic thought, humanity is not thought of as a mere friend of the earth but rather, its guardian (Al-Qaradawi, 2000). Although we are equal partners with everything else in the natural world, we have added responsibilities. In this context, a concept unique to man is *amana* or trust. Allah offers *amana* to the heavens, to the earth, to the mountains - to the rest of creation - who all refused; only mankind was foolish enough to accept it.

> *"Verily, We did offer the amana to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; but they refused to bear it, yet man took it - for, verily, he has always*

been prone to tyranny and foolishness" (33:72).

A trust entails one who entrusts and a trustee. Allah offered the trust to man, the trustee who accepted the responsibility. Man accepted the *amana* by choice and relative free will - and gained thereby the capacity to live for good or evil. As *khalifa* on earth, man must fulfil that trust placed on him by God, by acting justly in accordance with God's laws, or be false to that trust and perpetuate tyranny and injustice against God's earth and His creation.

> *"For He it is who has made you khalifa on earth, and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed on you. And thereupon We made you Their khalifa on earth, so that We might behold how you act* (6:165).

This is confirmed by part of a hadith, in which Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: *The world is sweet and green, and verily Allah has installed you as khalifa on it in order to see how you act*. The privilege of humankind's stewardship of the earth comes with a profound responsibility for the protection and care of other living species, considered by the Qur'an to be "peoples or communities" (*ummas*; 6:38). The Prophet is reported to have said: *All creatures are God's dependents and the most beloved to God, among them, is he who does good to God's dependents.*

Islamic community principles and broader notion of accountability are therefore suggestive of a system of informing and disclosing to the *Umma* that is explicitly orientated to the public interest (*Istislah*), here seen integral to the safeguard and cultivation of the environment. This has inevitably, and often in vane, lead researchers to expect high levels of pro-environmental behaviour and disclosure on the part of self professed Islamic institutions (e.g. Haniffa, 2001;.Maali et al, 2005; Haniffa and Hudaib, 2007). These principles also have wider governance implications due to the overlap with notions of stewardship.

2.3 The Environmental Crisis in the Qur'an

The Qur'an paints a picture of a *khalifa* who is a trustee on earth responsible and accountable for his conduct towards his fellow humans, creatures, and the Earth itself.

Created to serve and worship God, by acting in harmony with God's laws, thereby fulfilling His trust and gaining His pleasure. Abusing God-given power and or violating the laws or trust bring only destruction and severe loss in the afterlife.

The consequence of violating the trust is attested to in the Qur'an through the frequent recounting of the histories of the people of 'Ad and Thamud. Both were powerful tribes in their respective times and lands: 'Ad was *"endowed abundantly with power*" and Thamud were "*settled firmly on earth*" - who having arrogantly abused the power given to them by Allah were destroyed by an environmental catastrophe. Strong parallels between these stories and the contemporary organisation – so firmly settled on Earth and truly endowed with devastating power– can be drawn; with particular reference perhaps to financial institutions during the most recent global financial crisis.

As a social creature, man has both ecological and biological needs for water, food, shelter, community and nature, similar to all other living creatures on earth. As such, needs to utilise the earth's resources to secure these basic needs. There are clearly potential conflicts of interest between spiritual and material needs, man and nature, man and man. In this regard, numerous references in the Quran remind humanity to the observe the balance:

> "*The All-Merciful has taught the Qur'an. He created man and He taught him the explanation. The sun and the moon to a reckoning, and the stars and trees bow themselves; and heaven - He raised it up and set the balance. Transgress not in the balance, and weigh with justice, and skimp not in the balance. And earth - He set it down for all beings, therein fruits and palm trees with sheaths, and grain in the blade, and fragrant herbs. Which of your Lord's bounties will you deny?"* (55:1-12).

It is a test of the *amana* that humankind passes on to future generations these resources. There is no Qur'anic sanction of the use by one group of people over another, so that no power may control the resources of the Earth for its own sole use. All peoples, as well as all other creatures on the planet, have an equal right to benefit from these resources. Similarly, all future generations have an equal right to God's bounty (Al-Qaradawi, 2000). The use of the earth's resources ought to be in accordance with our material and spiritual needs, the needs of all other creatures, now and in the future, so that we do not jeopardise the planet itself. These and other basic tenants of sustainable development can be found in the teachings of Islam.

"And you devour the inheritance (of others) with devouring greed" (89: 19). A crime not without its consequence.. Muhammad (pbuh) is reported to have said: *If any one deprives an heir of his inheritance, Allah will deprive him of his inheritance in Paradise on the Day of Resurrection.*

In contrast to basic human instincts, Islam also preaches moderation and preservation. On moderation in all things the Qur'an reads: *For, the true servants of the Most Gracious are they who ... whenever they spend are neither wasteful nor niggardly, but remember that there is always a just mean between these two extremes"* (25:63). *"And We have willed you to be a community of the middle path"* (2:143). *"*

In the sayings and practices of Muhammad (pbuh), Muslims find the embodiment of Qur'anic guidance. In another hadith, Muhammad (pbuh) urged the active pursuit of moderation: *Practice moderation, and if you can't practice it perfectly, then strive towards it as far as possible*. Thus, ideally, all actions should be guided with the spirit of moderation: from consumption and production, to the use of natural resources. For moderation is balance, and it's opposite disturbs this balance: *"And the sky has He raised high, and has devised (for all things) a balance, so that you (too, O men) might never transgress the balance: weigh, therefore, (your deeds) with equity, and do not upset the balance!* (55:7-9). These principles of moderation, balance and conservation are the core of sustainable development and provide a framework for discernment, without which there would arguably be no limits to waste, extravagance or greed both individual as well as corporate.

This raises serious questions regarding the compatibility of large scale construction projects, industry concentration of funding, risk management practices and other operations of IFIs with the true spirit of the Shari'ah and the principles of balance and moderation.

2.4 Islam and Nature

Throughout history, Muslim scholars developed legislation regarding animal rights, urban growth, bodies of water, forests, wildlife, land use, and other aspects of the management of Earth's finite natural resources (see Izzi Dein, 1990; Nasr, 1992; Lubis, 2000). At the height of Islamic civilisation, laws required the establishment of conservation areas within which development was strictly prohibited in order to safeguard natural resources. These areas often bordered wells, rivers and canals to protect water sources from pollution. Additionally, pastures, woodland, wildlife and forests could not be privately owned or monopolized as they were deemed public property to be managed by the state for the common good of all. There are numerous reported hadiths on reforestation and land reclamation, for example:

> *"If a Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and men and beasts and birds eat from it, all of it is charity on his part.'; Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until itmatures and bears fruit is rewarded. Whoever brings dead land to life, that is, cultivates wasteland, for him is a reward therein" ; "When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand he should plant it."* (see Muslim, 2000).

The world is undoubtedly more complex now than it was over fourteen hundred years ago when the industrial revolution had not yet taken place and the earth's resources not yet strained to current levels. Certain Islamic environmental laws formulated at the height of Muslim civilization may now appear inadequate and simplistic. The challenge for modern Islamic scholars will be to illuminate the ecological principles of the Qur'an as they apply to contemporary environmental issues (Izzi Dein, 1990; 2000; Lubis, 2000). "*Corruption has appeared on land and 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.* " states Qur'anic verse (30:41), implying destruction of the natural environment follows from immoral and unethical use of natural resources. Climate change has been argued in this light as the earth's attempt to regain balance following the human assault against it (Al-Qaradawi, 2000; Lubis, 2000).

Muslims envisage heaven as a beautiful garden, described in numerous verses in the Qur'an, where the saved will enjoy the company of generations of devoted servants who have been similarly rewarded with a blessed afterlife. If life on Earth were preparation for eternal life in heaven, then the care and protection of the natural environment would seem appropriate training for the afterlife. Whether one plants a tree or invests in an environmentally sound way of life for the sake of her/hisposterity, serving Allah through stewardship reflects His guidance, mercy and generosity described throughout the Qur'an.

> *"Do you not observe that God sends down rain from the sky, so that in the morning the earth becomes green?"* (22:63).

The colour green is regarded by numerous scholars (e.g. Al, Qaradawi, 2000; Kamla et al, 2006) as the most blessed for Muslims and, together with a profound sense of the value of nature, provides a charter for a green movement that could become the greatest force yet known in Islamic history, a "green *jihad"* appropriate for addressing the global environmental crisis (Afshari, 1994).

Beyond specific accounting applications noted in the growing literature on disclosure (e.g. Kamla et al, 2006, Arsalan, 2007; Haniffa and Hudaib, 2007; Dusuki, 2008) and governance (e.g. Cone, 2003; Lewis, 2005; Rizk 2008b; Safieddine, 2009), the centrality of the Shari'ah concern for the environment would lead us to expect the same of organisations claiming to be Shari'ah based or compliant. Rather than mere lip service to minimal environmental initiatives, as suggested by empirical evidence (e.g. Haniffa, 2001; Maali et al, 2005; Rizk, 2006; Haniffa and Hudaib, 2007) a more prominent role in core business operations is envisaged with environmental impact assessments featuring as key lending criteria. Economic activity is governed by the *halal* - *haram* code and is tempered or restricted in the wider interests of society. Incumbent on the Islamic organisation is a duty to not only protect the environment from harm through its own policies and processes, but an added obligation on IFIs as financiers of new projects. Implicit in the Islamic injunction to 'command right and forbid wrong' (see Cook, 2001) is a duty on IFIs to proactively seek out and encourage green projects, not merely abstain from funding environmentally detrimental ones. In other words, an *affirmative* corporate environmental agenda that moves from mitigating harm to reinforcing corporate strategy through environmental developments and social progress (Porter and Kramer, 2006). Given the geographical concentration of IFIs and their prominent stakeholders, funding for initiatives in renewable energy sources, for example, could contribute greatly to the economic sustainability of the Middle East in the post oil era; a key but as yet under addressed regional concern. In taking on functions traditionally the domain of governments, a more robust conception of the role of private enterprise is herein embraced.

3.0 Concluding Remarks

> *"God has created the world and the universe perfect in proportion, measure and balance as a life-supporting system.* (67:3,4). *All the elements in the universe are interdependent and connected, and have a value to each other, over and above their value to humans; for humans need the earth in order to exist, but the earth has no need for humans* (40:57). *Indeed the earth and what it contains is a means of subsistence for all creatures, not only for humans"* (15:19,20).

These verses stress the fact that each single element in the environment plays an essential part in the sustenance, maintenance, and preservation of the whole. In other words, the function of all created things is to serve creation itself, i.e. all created things have an ecological function. A further function of creation is to service humans. *God has passed the whole of creation to humans by virtue of the trust placed on them* (45:13). In summary, all creation has a hierarchical function or value: An inherent value as things-in-themselves; an ecological value as integral parts of the whole; and a utilisation value to humans. The whole of creation - being the work of one Originator - works within a defined pattern. Another verse in the Qur'an refers to the heavens and the earth as *extensions* of God's throne, further reinforcing the idea that creation was designed to function as a whole. Each of its complementary parts, including humanity, plays its own self-preserving role, and in so doing supports the rest.

Qur'anic verses describing nature and natural phenomena outnumber verses dealing with commandments and sacraments. Of more than 6,000 verses, some 750, or one eighth of the Book, exhort believers to reflect on nature, to study the relationship between living organisms and their environment, to make the best use of reason and to maintain the balance and proportion God has built into His creation. The earth's resources land, water, air, minerals, forests are available for humanity’s use, but these gifts come from God with certain ethical restraints imposed on them. We may use them to meet our needs, but only in a way that does not upset ecological balance and that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The Islamic approach to the environment is holistic. Everything in creation is linked to everything else; whatever affects one thing ultimately affects everything. Man was created from the essence of nature and so is inextricably bound to it.

Because of its ability to think and and reason, humanity has been made trustee or steward of God on earth. Nature is created on the principle of balance, and as steward, it is humanity's responsibility to ensure that our actions do not disrupt this balance. Stewardship invests humans with a moral responsibility in safeguarding God's creation. Stewardship requires that humans learn to live in harmony with, rather than work against nature. Man can detect God's "signs" in all the natural phenomena that surround him and should, therefore, observe them better to understand "God's way," the Qur'anic term for "laws of nature". Thus *"in the change of the wind" , "in the succession of night and day*", *"in the mountains towering above the earth", "in the hives of the bees and the flight of the birds, " in the springs that gush forth from within the earth",* "*in the water that comes down from the sky, giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless," "in the wonder of the seed," "*, and numerous other Qur'anic verses, God reminds humanity that there are *"messages for those who reason and think "*.

Every created thing has inherent value, an ecological value, and a utilisation value for humankind both as spiritual sustenance and material resource. Humankind’s rights over nature are rights of sustainable use based on moderation, balance, and conservation; future generations have a similar and equal right. Nature’s rights over mankind include protection from exploitation, degradation and destruction. Greed, affluence, extravagance, and waste are considered tyranny against nature and a transgression of those rights (Lubis, 2000). The Qur'an teaches that human need cannot justify transgressing the equally legitimate needs of other species. "Mastery of nature", with its implied one-sided benefits for man, is a concept foreign to Islam. Inherent in Quranic teaching is the notion that ecology is farsighted economics; that in the deepest sense, ecology is religion (Denny *et al*., 1998b; Rizk (2008b).

With an estimated $700 billion in assets under management, and annual sector growth of 10-12%, in many ways IFIs have become 'too big to ignore' (Imam and Kangni, 2010). The global rise in Islamic capital markets necessitates a more critical understanding of the values underpinning the Islamic economic system. Developments in social and environmental responsibility have arguably only come from increased societal and stakeholder pressures (see Gray et al, 1996; Porter and Kramer, 2006; Rizk, 2006). Perhaps it is time to start asking some difficult questions of the environmental standards of organisations flying an Islamic flag. If there is to be a 'green jihad', then IFIs need to be on the front lines. As stakeholders in the global village, it is also incumbent on us all to file in behind them.

It is hoped that in the true spirit of Islam, this contribution encourages debate, reflection, understanding, *Ijtihad* and a greater sense of individual and collective responsibility for our planet.

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