

ISLAM AND SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS: HOW RELIGION WORKS IN REGARD TO EARTH THEOLOGY

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Religion not only dictates the relationship between humans and their God, but it provides solutions to human problems. This is related to a thesis stating that theological practice must be practiced or proven in real life. In terms of concept, theology is universal and total, involving all aspects of life. The idea of repentance is correlated to the practical action of the idea towards fellow humans and their surrounding nature. Therefore, religious theology should cover more than faith in God, but also a realistic role in the social dimension and a form of wisdom related to the surrounding environment. This can be understood as “earth theology”. Monotheistic religions have been criticised for their tendency to be less friendly to nature. One interpretation of religion that sees humans more superior to nature is the basic issue of current ecological problems. It should not come as a surprise when the result of such interpretation is the ethics of exploitation and not protection. Furthermore, this essay will inspect the real role of religions in facing socio-ecological problems caused by misguided theological practices. Regardless, religious perspective of a society affects the attitudes and behaviours towards nature and environment.

Keywords: earth theology, ethics of protection, monotheistic religions, ecological crisis, socio-ecological problems

INTRODUCTION

A long and tiresome theological discussion about who holds authority over nature might have been started with a debate on the relationships between God, humans and nature. These relationships are commonly known as the metaphysic trilogy. They are often discussed only within metaphysical discourse, so they are not seen to have any relevance with more practical issues.

In response to this situation, some contemporary Muslim scholars recently proposed an idea to replace metaphysical and abstract theological discourse with more concrete issues. The basic idea in theology or traditional creed interpretation had been ways to defend God. In recent decades, this idea is often rejected. A new idea emerged that theology must be built on the spirit to defend humans. This kind of idea is more relevant to be developed further because for most Muslims, theology is still considered a ritual that is related only to the spiritual relationship with God.

Previously, increasingly critical ecological problems were directed to the misinterpretation of human relationship with nature that is mentioned in the holy scripture. It is explained there that humans are the caliph or rulers of Earth. However, many people interpreted caliph as someone who holds authority over the entire planet. This attitude has led to over exploitation that has eventually caused natural destruction¹.

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Misguided interpretation of our human role according to the Holy Scripture has caused an understanding that religion placed nature and the environment on a lower level than humans, which means that both can be exploited in whatever ways desired by the people.

In this context, it is interesting to see what Hassan Hanafi refers to as the theology of caring for the Earth. According to Hanafi², Earth is a creation of God that must be managed properly by humans, and that no humans are entitled to claim ownership of anything on and in it.

The question now is how does Islam answer this situation? In Islam, whose views are represented—one of them—by Sufism, nature and the environment are living things, capable of creation and giving love to their God. Sufism tradition explained that nature was created by God with the force of love. Therefore, his love transmitted into every part of nature, even its particles³.

Religious scholars have rarely discussed the relevance of theology to current ecological crises happening all over the world. Nevertheless theology should help religious communities to implement theological elements in every aspect of life, including ecological aspects.

METHOD

For Muslims, the Qur'an is not only a holy book (scripture) but also provides instructions that guide their attitudes and actions. Within this framework, experts in the Holy Book interpreted and analysed the book, including issues related to environmental crises. This study sees how the analysis and interpretation from these experts explain the Islamic view of current environmental crises. This study also analyses recorded discussions of Muslim scholars regarding Islamic points of view of current environmental crises, and compares this with the ideas of some non-Muslim scholars.

In Islam, the religious monotheistic consciousness is the source of the scientific spirit in all areas of knowledge. Therefore, Islamic intellectual tradition does not accept the idea that natural science is science or more scientific than other sciences. Similarly, the notion of objectivity, essential in scientific activities, can not be separated from religious and spiritual awareness.

ISLAM AND PERENNIAL VISION

What is the Islamic view of nature and the environment? In *Islamic Art and Spirituality*⁴, Nasr says that the Islamic view on nature and the environment is like other things which are based on the Qur'an that sees the environment as inseparable from humans. Islam sees nature and humans as equals⁵. The only thing stands higher than either is the one who exceeds and owns everything in the sky and on earth. Therefore, the balance of the environment is the preservation of human life. The thesis is simple: there is no human that does not need the natural environment,

which means it is the task of humans to preserve and care for the environment to maintain a balanced and harmonious ecology.

It seems that this ecological issue is a basic issue that requires more than economic, political and technological perspectives to solve. The problem lies in the ways to build a new thinking platform that is capable of giving paradigmatic explanation on a harmonious and sustainable position and relationship between humans and nature, and how to gain a perennial teaching from religious sources.

In relation to that, it is necessary to explain that every religion has its own perennial vision related to the perseverance of the cosmic matter⁶. Islam, a religion with a universal mission, has a quality of blessing for the entire universe⁷ and it has a systematic and comprehensive view of the relationship between God, humans and nature. The major themes of the Qur'an include these relationships and their dialectics⁸.

In a paradigmatic view, the relationship between God, humans and nature lies in the Islamic doctrine on God's Oneness. This doctrine, as explained by Al-Faruqi⁹, becomes a world view that explains reality holistically. In Oneness¹⁰ there are three main principles of reality. First, the duality. According to this principle, reality comprises of two things: the creator and his creations. In this case, the creations are subject to their creator.

Second, the idealization. Based on this principle, the creator and his creations possess an idealization relationship that enables humans to understand God, not in the material understanding of God, but through his creations, which contain axiomatic conditions in the form of nature's law.

Third, theology. Human understanding in idealization relationships is not positivistic or materialistic. The latter is clearly against the principles of God that sees reality as teleological—having a purpose.

Based on the perspective of God's Oneness, it is clear how humans should place themselves in their environment and how it must be treated by them. Humans should not take away natural resources as the capitalistic Westerners do, but also preserve harmony and balance. Cosmological balance can be maintained when humans can be fair and reliable. Fairness implies balance (weighing). A more operational definition of fairness reflects the cosmological balance that is preserved when humans explore and exploit natural resources. In short, exploration and exploitation must be undertaken simultaneously with conservation efforts to maintain the natural balance.

ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Empirically there is an ecological crisis in the Islamic world. The first question to be answered is: What causes the Islamic world to experience an ecological crisis like in the West? Zaim Saidi¹¹ in his article said that the crisis was caused by human absolutism, which could be traced back to 17th Century Western humanism

and rationalism. People with such views controlled nature and destroyed the forests, for they saw themselves as absolute.

This view was a typical example of Western rationalism and humanism. It was Rene Descartes who founded the base of philosophy, which basically supported the Aristotelian logic. The Cartesian paradigm was based on *cogito ergo sum* dictum.

The view caused two basic things. First, the *cogito* element was very important and received an important place. Second, *ego* became very dominant. Every thinking process in a person's mind was not to prove the other being, but mainly to prove the existence of ego.

Therefore, thinking was always related to the needs of one's ego and other needs determined by the ego. Since he put such an emphasis on ego, modern philosophers accused Descartes of creating egology, which is a philosophy that is based on ego and ends on ego.

If Aristotelian and Descartes' logical perspective is related to ecological issues, then nature would have to be predicted and conquered, because nature's position was *res extensa* for *res cogitans*, the thinking humans.

This dictum was accused of directing Western civilization to no longer question 'why' but only think 'how' by Ahmad Syafi'i Ma'arif¹². For example, how the nuclear bomb was created and never asked why it was created.

Since the dictum was brought up by Descartes, Ma'arif said—quoting Roger Geraudy¹³—that the West was no longer interested in contemplating reasons or the 'why' question. The effect was tremendous: science and technology developed rapidly. Nature was explored (read: exploited) massively funded by billions of dollar. Ma'arif grieved what he said a tragedy of a how civilisation went without asking 'why'.

It seems that he wasn't alone. Richard Tarnas¹⁴ also complained that there was damage caused around the world due to secular Western science. These consequences were not caused only by the applied science, but also basic science.¹⁵

Herman Soewardi said that the end result of secular Western science are 3Rs which are deprivation, insecurity, and destruction. Insecurity represents the people, deprivation is when developing countries are deprived by developed countries, and the destruction is about the overall natural destruction¹⁶.

Insecurity, as Eric Fromm said, is not an intrinsic character, but is a result of a view on Westerners' struggle. The basis of this characteristic is the freedom that becomes a reference for individuals and society, but it's intimidated. Psychologically, people need both freedom and submissiveness. This intimidated freedom has become unbearable for Westerners over time. They escaped their freedom in three ways: sadism, masochism and automation¹⁷. This insecurity then became normalcy for Westerners and is referred to as the pathology of normalcy.

Deprivation covered the exploitation of natural resources in developing countries by developed countries. There is an incredible gap where developed

countries use 80% of the world's natural resources, meanwhile 80% of developing countries' community use only 20% of the world's natural resources. According to Jujun Suriasumantri¹⁸, this was caused by a liberal capitalistic economy that applied a profit maximisation principle that was different from the principles applied by most developing countries' society, which sees needs as the inner driving force.¹⁹

Current damage in the world, according to environmentalists, were started during the first century (the birth of Jesus). These damages became bigger and stronger over time and now at the start of the new millennium, natural destruction is going on at an alarming rate, or as Tarnas said, it's increasingly worsening every day.

However, according to Mander and Goldsmith²⁰, globalisation drove natural destruction on a larger scale. Comparative advantage concept encouraged products to be sent from faraway places, which included food products, and this in return increased water, air and land pollution, and also the destruction of marine ecology by trawlers, the destruction of forest, as is occurring in Indonesia, and many others. In short, quoting Herman Soewardi, we can be worried about the coming of doomsday before the real one happens.

The next question that must be answered is: why do Islamic normative values seem to have no effect at all? In the same article, quoting Nasr's view, Zaim Saidi said that it happened not because Islamic wisdom had perished, but because the Islamic world was no longer completely Islamic²¹.

According to traditional Islamic view, human rights were never absolute by neglecting God's and other creature's rights²². Homo Islamicus lives life by remembering God. Meanwhile, what we hear now is either the fundamentalists or the modernists, two views that often are diametrically different but both have taken in modern science blindly.

This situation according to Nasr's view²³ happened as a result of the defeat of the Islamic world endured from the West, since Napoleon's era and then the end of the Ottoman and Persian Empires. The modernists were seen as guilty for sending intellectuals to the West, because of the Western knowledge and technology that they gained, while traditional Islamic views on nature and science were forgotten. On the contrary, the fundamentalists were accused of failing to control the implications of the West, by not using traditional Islamic philosophy on nature and the environment.

Other than these two reasons, there is a third and more practical reason, which is the economic and political factor in the Islamic world. These factors prevented them applying their traditional values in nature and the environment. In this context, the Islamic world was inferior by blindly accepting Western technology, and lost an opportunity to make their own innovations.

Tracing back, this situation started by colonialism that dominated the past Islamic world. It wasn't only about importing the economy, but also legal products,

ideas and more, which reduced religious values and replaced them with secular values.

However this sentiment was dismissed by Azyumardi Azra. According to Azra's view²⁴, environmental crisis in the Islamic world had happened long before Islamic society interacted with the West, mainly when Islamic society was no longer creative in intellectual processes. In other words, environmental crisis happened when Islamic society was in intransigence. Therefore, according to Azra, the West couldn't be blamed completely. Islam, normatively, supports the establishment of Islamic environmental ethics. However, this wasn't functional. And the cause of this, according to Azra, wasn't modernism coming from the West.

Generally, we can say that Semitic religions, like Islam, have strong spiritual values in managing environmental issues. Meanwhile in reality, non-Semitic religions are actually friendlier towards the environment.²⁵

The modern view claims that humans are the centre (anthropocentrism), while it should have been nature. It seems that now there is a reversal from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Traditional beliefs are really strong in ecocentrism, apparently, in which humans and nature are not attached to a specific hierarchy.

Nasr's view on anthropocentrism is exaggerated. Secular people can also exhibit good behaviours towards the environment. In the West, there are ideas about nature, behaviours towards nature and the environment, although they don't have a specific metaphysical base. Therefore, when Nasr blamed science and modernisation, he was heavy handed to one side. He thought that what enlightenment, humanism and secularism wanted was not humans to be the centre of everything and could do what they pleased. Humanism has a good objectives, to encourage people to be more creative, and many more.

If accusing science and modernism as the culprits of natural destruction, then we need to make exceptions. More natural destruction has been caused in modern times. Seeing modernism as the cause of the destruction maybe hit some truth. However, if modernity and science are considered the cause of everything, this is not only unfair, but seems to accuse modernism of being projected to destroy the environment.

ISLAMIC PROSELYTIZATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

The most important pivot of the ecological issue is the position of humans and nature in Islamic view²⁶. This is understandable, since in essence, ecological crisis is a reflection of the disharmony and imbalance of human relationships with nature. The explanation above covers a philosophical-spiritual field. In that field, Islam has a strong legitimacy, if it is developed as a universal ecological ethic²⁷.

The opportunity to establish that does exist. An increasingly complicated ecological condition would evoke ecological awareness that would encourage people to find solutions that are not just based on rational deductions, but on a more basic thing, which goes back to the perennial messages implied in every universal religion²⁸.

Related to that, there are at least two proselytization programs offered. First, to formulate and explain traditional knowledge in contemporary languages as a part of the Islamic intellectual tradition. This is the task of preachers who work in the intellectual field, such as lecturers, professors and researchers.

Second, to increase awareness in *sharia* teachings in ethics and the practice of human relationships with their environment that are based on *sharia* principles, so they will have religious values. This becomes the main task of preachers, who have a direct interaction with a wider public.

Specifically for the second program, it seems that there is a complicated issue. *Sharia* seems to have been reduced to just jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The *muamalat* issues, such as natural preservation, tend to become marginal issues in *fiqh* discussions.

Related to that, there's an interesting case in which Nurcholish Madjid's wife was involved, as told by Madjid himself, during a time when his wife was guided by the Islam Jamaah group. After washing herself before prayer, she was heavily criticised because her washing procedure was deemed wrong, which meant that her prayer was invalid. Since it was invalid, it meant that she sinned and she would go to hell for her sins.

We can see that the washing procedure became a serious problem, that could determine whether someone would go to hell or not. This view is actually reflected in the Qur'an. And then the matter was exaggerated, so that it determined where someone would be sent in the afterlife. The question is: why are issues that are far more detrimental in determining the faith of humans in the future, such as the environment, not discussed in the same sentiment?

Meanwhile, on an *ad hoc* basis, environmental issues are discussed more in the Qur'an than washing before prayer, which is only mentioned in one verse of the book. Why should the contents of this one verse became such a big deal, while many other verses, related to the environment, cosmology and nature, do not? It seems that this is a problem in *fiqh*.

The impact of an invalid procedure in washing before prayer in real life does not exist. On the contrary, killing a bird would have a great effect in real life. So, if the issue is about the effects happening in this world, people's attitude towards birds should determine more whether they are going to hell or not compared to how they wash themselves before praying.

It seems that traditional Islamic views need to be reintroduced, as they possess wise teachings in preserving the harmony between humans and the environment.

It is also important to note that as the *caliph*, humans must actively protect the harmony with nature and spread grace as the consequence of being the centre of nature. However, as the servant of God, humans must abide by God and accept his grace. And just like God who breathes life to and cares for nature, humans must take care of their surroundings.

CONCLUSION

Religious teaching teaches only good things. The problem is, according to Azyumardi Azra, how to actualise it in everyday life. In reality, there are many cases of split personality or cognitive dissonance in life. There are people who pray diligently but do not care about other people when they're on the road. Disparity occurs not only in common people. Even people with high intellect can have some disparity, which means the same applies to preachers and religious leaders. Disparity can be caused by various things: economic, political, or social issues.

Humans can't claim anything in the world. Repentance in faith is related to practical actions towards the environment. Therefore, religious theology should not only cover faith in God, but also the real role in the social dimension and environmental wisdom. That's the earth theology that will direct humans towards ecological awareness.

Notes

1. Nasr SH. *Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, (Toronto: Unwin Paperback, 1990), p 5.
2. Hassan Hanafi's progressive ideas on earth friendly theology can be read further in *Islam Wahyu Sekuler: Gagasan Kritis Hassan Hanafi* (Jakarta: Ist@d, 2001).
3. Mulyadhi Kertanegara, *Mengislamkan Nalar: Sebuah Respons terhadap Modernitas* (Jakarta: Erlangga, 2007), 179
4. Nasr, SH. *Islamic Art and Spirituality: A Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
5. Haleem HA. *Islam and the Environment*, (London: Ta-Ha Publisher, 1998).
6. Even in Indonesian ancient beliefs, Kejawen, as explained by Franz Magnis Soeseno, talks about *mamayu hayuning buwono* which is an obligation to preserve nature. However, according to Soeseno, modernisation presents some difficulties in actualising the traditional belief. His comment on this matter can be further explored in *Islamika* journal (January-March 1994), p 26.
7. See Q.S. 21:107.
8. Rahman F. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
9. Ismail Razi Al-Faruq, *Tawhid: It's Implication for Thought and Life* (Pensylvania: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1971).
10. Murtadho Muthahhari, *Pandangan-Dunia Tauhid* (Bandung: Muthahhari, 1989), 19-21.

11. See Zaim Saidi, “*Islam Tradisional dan Krisis Lingkungan: Pandangan Seorang Aktivistis*”, in *Islamika* journal, nomor 3, (Januari-Maret, 2000), 19-22.
12. Ahmad Syafi’i Ma’arif, *Peta Bumi Intelektualisme Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Mizan, 1993), 19.
13. Ibid.
14. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of The Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Book).
15. Herman Soewardi, *Islamisasi Sains: Apa Signifikansinya? dalam Mimbar Studi*, Nomor 1 Tahun XXIII (September-Desember, 1999), 27.
16. Ibid, 29.
17. See, Eric Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (USA: Ballantine Books, 1941).
18. Jujun Suriasumantri, *Filsafat Ilmu: Sebuah Pengantar Populer* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1999).
19. According to Jujun Suriasumantri, the difference in principles caused the exploitation of natural resources in developing countries. The implication of this situation is that if developing countries want to maintain the intactness of their natural resources, they must act greedy just like the Westerners.
20. Soewardi, op.cit., 31.
21. Saidi Z. “Islam Tradisional dan Krisis Lingkungan: Pandangan Seorang Aktivistis”, *Journal Islamika*, Number 3, Januari-March. 2000.
22. Mortada H. *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment*, (New York: Routledge, 2013).
23. Sayyed Hosein Nasr, loc. Cit.
24. Azra A”*Homo Islamicus: Menuju Spiritualitas Lingkungan*”, *Journal Islamika*, January-March. 2000; 23-33.
25. Dien MI, and »Izz al-Dīn MY. *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam*,(Cambridge: The Lutherworth Press, 2000).
26. Machendrawaty N and Safei AA. *Pengembangan Masyarakat Islam* (Bandung: Rosdakarya, 2001).
27. Matin IA. *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet*, (California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).
28. Ziaulhaq. *Islamic Green Living*, (Bandung: Salamadani, 2011).

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