

A bestowed trust: The perception of nature and animals in Islam

I grew up in a small village as a child of a farmer. I enjoyed the beauty of the natural environment with all its richness in the 1960s. When I saw my first – but also, unfortunately, my last – wild wolf, I was about seven years old. Then, I could still drink the water of the creeks, as it was crystal-clear. Later, I learned that Rachel Carson was writing her seminal and groundbreaking book *Silent Spring* (1962) during those same years.

Now I have four children, two granddaughters and a grandson. I never thought that my descendants might not enjoy the same kind of life that I had in my childhood, but it seems that they live in a different world. They have hardly seen a wild animal in nature, only in documentaries and zoos. In my lifetime many species have disappeared forever from the face of the Earth because of our treatment of them. For a long time, we have ignored the impact of our lifestyle on the planet Earth and our fellow creatures. Therefore, like many concerned colleagues of different religions, faiths, cultures and races, I have deep concerns about my descendants' future and the world they are going to live in. Addressing environmental problems and climate change are thus a moral imperative for me.

It is needless to say that environmental threats affect everyone without discrimination – whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist. A key question is whether adherents of different religions can work together to respond effectively to these challenges to humanity, whilst still preserving their differences.

Whether explicitly or implicitly, every religion and philosophy proposes a worldview to its followers – a way of looking at the universe, nature and 'other'

human beings. In other words, religions and philosophies provide conceptual and practical maps to navigate in life.

When we look at the first chapters and verses of the Qur'an, which were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Meccan period in 7th century Arabia, we see that its main purpose was "to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and universe" (Iqbal, 1958). All these should be considered as components of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*. The Qur'an challenged the polytheism of the Pagan Arabs by conceptualizing nature as an assembly of orderly, meaningful and purposeful phenomena. Briefly, the Qur'an asserts that God created the universe and adorns the skies with the sun, the moon and the stars, and the face of the Earth with flowers, trees and the various animal species. God causes the rivers and streams to flow, upholds the skies, causes the rain to fall and places the boundary between night and day. That is, the universe, in all its richness and vitality, is the work and art of God.

In other words, nature – "having a firm and well-knit structure with no gaps, no ruptures, and no dislocations" – is regarded as "one of the grand handiworks of the Almighty" (Rahman, 1980). Like a mirror, nature reflects the power, beauty, wisdom and mercy of its Creator; it is a balanced, just, peaceful, unified pattern, created and sustained by God. Moreover, the Qur'an's insistence on the order, beauty and harmony of nature implies that there is no demarcation between what the Qur'an reveals and what nature manifests (Iqbal, 1958; Özdemir, 2003).

A number of chapters of the Qur'an have animal names: The Cow (chapter 2), The Cattle (chapter 6), The Bee (chapter 16), The

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“The implication is that all the natural phenomena around us are ‘full of meaning, high design, and the goodness of God to human beings’ (and therefore must be handled with care and responsibility.)”

Ant (chapter 28), The Spider (chapter 29) and The Elephant (chapter 105). Camels, cattle, horses, mules, donkeys, sheep, monkeys, dogs, pigs, snakes, worms, ants, bees, spiders, mosquitoes and flies are all mentioned by name. The Qur’an portrays animals as works of art displaying the Maker’s skill and perfection (16:66). It invites us to consider camels and how they are created; the sky and how it is raised high; the mountains and how they are fixed firm; the Earth and how it is spread out (88:17–20). The implication is that all the natural phenomena around us are “full of meaning, high design, and the goodness of God to human beings” (Özdemir, 2003) and therefore must be handled with care and responsibility.

The Qur’an emphasizes that the natural world has not been created solely for humanity’s use. Even if the human being is the vicegerent of God on Earth, this does not mean that the whole of nature and its resources are designed for human benefit alone (55:10–12). Rather, it is a bestowed trust for human beings. The Prophet Muhammad therefore insisted, for example, on the protection of animals and the kind treatment of them. His concern that they should be well treated, protected and not abused or degraded is truly noteworthy. Care for the environment and for all animals, and deep concern over climate change and its daunting consequences, are thus our moral responsibility as Muslims.

It seems to me that our responsibility to raise environmental awareness in Muslim societies has both theoretical and practical dimensions. On the theoretical level, we need to deal with the issues from the ontological, cosmological and epistemological perspective of the Qur’anic *Weltanschauung*. However, on the practical side, we also need to provide useable tools for interested groups, which will involve drawing from the best and most successful examples in the world.

We Muslims are faced with a choice between continuing to live amid environmental problems and handing over to the next generation a hellish place in which to live, or rolling up our sleeves and working together to redefine our relationship to the environment. As the whole of creation is a bestowed trust to us, to strive to make the world a better place to live for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren and all fellow creatures is a moral imperative. ■

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