

How Can Islam Help Us Tackle Climate Change?

Written by Arwa Aburawa

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ARWA ABURAWA, AUG 24 2012

With the latest scientific findings predicting even more drastic changes to the earth's climate[1] and the complete failure of the UN climate summits to agree a fair and decent deal on cutting the world's emissions,[2] it is clear that we are running out of time to tackle climate change.[3] Rather than a steady increase in attention and action, it seems the world's government are slowly going quiet on climate change, distracted by more pressing concerns such as unemployment and the economic recession.[4] The most recent UN COP17 conference in 2011 at Durban, South Africa, failed to put climate change back on the world agenda and big players such as the US and China don't appear to be taking their responsibilities seriously.[5]

One topic that has been given a recent boost by this desperate state of affairs is geo-engineering which is defined as 'the deliberate manipulation of the planetary environment to counteract anthropogenic climate change'.[6] Indeed, a field experiment which consists of spraying sun-reflecting chemical particles from a balloon into the atmosphere over Fort Sumner in New Mexico to artificially cool the planet has just been given the all clear.[7]

However, embracing geo-engineering as 'Plan B' is not only dangerous as the outcomes of planetary-scale experiments are highly uncertain; it is undemocratic, irresponsible and ignores the fact that we have a perfectly good 'Plan A' – to cut our emissions. We just need better ways of convincing people to do that. One area that is commonly overlooked when exploring ways to encourage greater climate awareness and action is faith and religion. Islam, in particular, which is perceived as the faith of oil-rich sheikhs is sidelined with sparse academic research highlighting the insights Islam has to offer an environmentally vulnerable planet.

The primary source of all Islamic thought and practice, the Holy Qur'an, is full of exhalation of nature, its beauty and the need to protect it. Nature is portrayed as God's glory, a gift of sustenance and humanity is divinely ordained responsibilities to care for the natural world and keep the harmony and balance placed within it.[8] In the Qur'an there are "ample instructions as well as warnings to the faithful not to abuse their power in dealing with the environment. Distortion of the natural order and ill-treatment of God's creatures, whatever they are, are considered as sins that lead to punishment." [9] Wastefulness is discouraged and excessive consumption or greed is actively prohibited. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) warned his followers to not waste precious resources such as water and encouraged them to protect land and improve its fertility.

With this in mind, it is not hard to make the link between Islamic ethics and the need to curb our excessive use of non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels which are poisoning the air and land.

As such, Islam has "the capability of helping to solve one of the greatest problems of our time, namely that of 'the environment'. Islam need not be a hindrance, but could be a great help, in educating the faithful about good environmental conduct." [10] Cairo, the Islamic capital with one thousand minarets, is one of the most polluted cities in the world and Bangladesh and the Maldives – which are both Muslim nations – will be the worst affected countries when climate change hits due to flooding and droughts.[11] Indeed, environmental problems plague many Muslims countries whether it be deforestation in Indonesia, desertification and over-development in the Middle East or drought in North Africa. These nations and many others have everything to gain by tackling climate change and environmental pollution by embracing the green ethics of Islam.

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The Muslim faith commands influence (to varying degrees) of 18% of the world's population and covers a very large area where some of the greatest environmental problems exist.[12] As such, highlighting the green tenants of the Islamic faith is hugely beneficial to tackling climate change and may become increasingly useful with the predicted doubling of the Muslim population by 2030 to 26.4%. [13] If Muslims across the world garner greater awareness of their Islamic duties to the environment, it is also perceivable that they would be able to pressure their governments into making the right 'green' decisions when it comes to water, food, recycling and energy use. It would also mean that rich Gulf Muslim nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain wouldn't be as obstructive at important climate summits if their populations could rally for the environment based on Islamic tenants.[14]

As well as opening up opportunities for Muslims and Muslim nations to deal with climate change, Islamic research into the area is also producing more spiritual conclusions. This includes the belief that the current environmental crisis is an outward reflection of an inward and spiritual crisis of modern day humanity. As Murad (2011) notes: "The solution to the environmental crisis does not lie in the use of environmental engineering alone. Even if humanity successfully reduced its carbon footprint through various kinds of eco-friendly technology, such a crisis shall continue until the environment is given back its sacredness in the eyes of the abuser. Such a feat is only possible through humanity's making peace with its surroundings, inner peace and most importantly God." [15]

Murad explains that due to the divorce of science from faith, the natural environment lost its sacredness. It lost its symbolic significance as a sign of God and creation and simply became regarded as physical properties available for exploitation and consumption. "The practical significance of this is that a tree today can be used for the production of paper, pancake syrup, and other consumer goods, but it is generally no longer a studied entity of harmonious purity—let alone an instrument of enlightenment and transcendence." [16] Modern science failed to provide nature with anything other than physical features and properties and so devoid of any sacredness, they were open to mass exploitation and mistreatment.

Muslims and Muslim nations need to reclaim the sacredness of nature and use it to build links to the wider environmental movement whilst also taking their Islamic duties to the environment more seriously. What is more, given the theological correspondences to Western religions and its esoteric similarities to Eastern religions, Islam should be making the most of its "capacity to provide a universal basis that can benefit other religions in their own approaches to the environmental crisis." [17] Rather than lagging behind in awareness and action around climate change, Islamic nations should be leading the way. Not only would this help protect their vulnerable nations from their worst impacts of climate change, it would also help them fulfil their Islamic duties as stewards of nature.

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