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Religion, Harmony and Sustainable Development

Panel
Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development

**THE MAKING AND MESSAGE OF ISLAMIC DECLARATION ON GLOBAL
CLIMATE CHANGE**

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1. Common Problems Facing Humanity

It seems that environmental problems is the root cause of world's greatest problems, climate change, deforestation, erosion, floods, drought, hunger, racism, migration international and domestic terror, human rights violations, human trafficking, economic inequality, and even nihilism.

When trying to understand the current conflicts in the Middle East and the respective domestic and international terror, we should also think the negative and devastating effects of climate change on the region on the one hand and the rush of powerful states to control the region for the enormous resources of fossil fuels on the other. As much as our dependency on these resources continue, it seems these conflicts will prevail, too. After the fall of Berlin Wall, symbol of cold war era, eco-philosopher Henryk Skolomowski warned the West with these remarkable words:

... the West has won the battle against communism. But winning this battle - is it a victory? Or perhaps a pyrrhic victory? Entranced and mesmerized by this battle, we have perhaps neglected to see that we have been losing another, a more important battle - *the battle to save the earth and to save the meaning of our lives.* (Skolomowski, 1991, italics mine)

Today, we understand and appreciate what Skolomowski's words really meant and how to fight to win "*the battle to save the earth and to save the meaning of our lives*" with a new spirit of optimism, understanding, and cooperation. As the problems we are dealing with are too complex, we need to respond them collectively as the spirit of this event indicates.

This paper will discuss the role of religions in general and Islam in particular for environmental awareness and sustainable development. Then, it will summarize the

process of how Islamic Declaration for Global Climate Change drafted and declared in August 2015; its major messages and how it received in the world.

2. The Assets of Religion for Environmental Change

Although, the enlightenment project had tried to undermine the role of religion in modern society, religion is still with us. The impact of religion on the natural and man-made landscape has been experienced and documented since the beginning of civilization. “Sacred spaces; sacred groves; sacred structures: temples; tombs; animal and plant domestication; food taboos and religious calendars are but a few examples of man's efforts in transforming elements of his immediate environment into religious symbols and representations” which can be observed in Ayasofya and Sultan Ahmet Mosques as well as 11.000 years old Gobekli Tepe in Şanlıurfa. Klaus Schmidt, a German archaeologist who has been working here more than a decade, is convinced it's the site of the world's oldest temple. (Cury, 2008)

Providing people with *a sense of meaning and purpose* is arguably one of the most powerful but least appreciated assets of religion. A sense of purpose can unify entire societies around national goals. Ritual communication has a special place in the movement to create sustainable societies because it has long had the effect of protecting the natural environment (Gardner, *Engaging Religions to Shape Worldviews*, 2010).

Beyond the capacity to provide meaning, religions carry moral capital in their ability to project *moral authority*. Last but not least, there is the potential impact of *the sheer number of religious adherents* in the world population. It seems that around the world “Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Confucians, Buddhists, and nine other religious groups, such as Judaism, Baha’i, the Jains, and Sikhs (including indigenous religionists) comprised about 85% of the world population”. (Gardner, *ibid*)

3. Religion, Environmental Protection and a Culture of Sustainability

Gardner, then, explains and exemplifies how "religious and spiritual traditions have great deal to offer in creating cultures of sustainability.

- **Educate about the environment** by including ecological instruction in religious education.

- **Educate about consumption.** In an increasingly “full world” in which human numbers and appetites press against natural limits, introducing an ethic of limited consumption is an urgent task for religions. Religions can make a difference here.
- **Educate about investments.** Many religious institutions avoid investments in weapons, cigarettes. Religions may also "steer funds toward sustainability initiatives, such as solar power and microfinance.
- **Express the sacredness of the natural world in liturgies and rituals.** The most important assets of a faith tradition are arguably the intangible ones. Rituals, customs, and liturgical expressions speak to the heart in a profound way that cognitive knowledge cannot.
- **Reclaim forgotten assets.** Religious traditions have a long list of little-emphasized economic teachings that could be helpful for building sustainable economies. These include prohibitions against the overuse of farmland and pursuit of wealth as an end in itself, advocacy of broad risk-sharing, critiques of consumption, and economies designed to serve the common good. (Gardner, *ibid*)

4. The Making and Message of Declaration

The role of religion in changing and forming peoples’ perception of universe and themselves can be seen in the Pre-Islamic Arabs’ perception of nature, which was regarded as lifeless, meaningless, and purposeless. As a result of this understanding, they had no moral responsibility toward this dead and cruel nature.

The Qur’an from the very beginning tried to change and replace the pagan Arabs’ perception of nature with a new and vivid understanding. Nature has been regarded as “the prime miracle of God, cited untiringly in the Qur’an, due to its well-knit structure and regularity.” (Rahman, 1980, 68) 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. Now, we can talk on how we prepared *the Islamic Declaration of Global Climate Change* on the spirit of the Qur’an values.

As you know, Pope Francis declared an encyclical on integral ecology earlier this summer, 2015). It has been welcomed not only by Catholics but many concerned people around the world. The Pope boldly reminded that it is time “for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life” before it is too late. (Pope, 2015, §207)

Pope’s encyclical and its worldwide positive reception on one hand, and the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris on the other, encourages us as

Muslim environmentalists, from different continents, countries, and backgrounds, to draft “the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change” in early June, 2015. The drafting committee was as follows:

- Azizan Baharuddin- Professor, University of Malaya, Malaysia.
- Fazlun Khalid, FOUNDER, IFEES, UK
- Ibrahim Ozdemir- Professor, the Founding Rector, Gazikent University, Turkey.
- Othman Llewellyn- Environmental Planner, Saudi Arabia.
- Abdelmajid Tribak- Professor and Head, Division of Environmental Programmes, ISESCO, Morocco.
- Fachruddin Mangunjaya- Vice Chairman, Centre for Islamic Studies, Universitas Nasional, Indonesia

Then, the initial draft has been circulated widely for consultation to all major Muslim scholars and environmentalist for review and comments. Professor Syed Hossain Nasr, for example, made invaluable comments but most importantly very encouraging words for taking such a humble but very important initiative.

We decided to hold a symposium on the subject in Istanbul and invite experts and members of NGOs to debate and discuss the declaration the one hand and to seek a broad unity and ownership from the Islamic community around the Declaration on the other. Moreover, the senior international development policy makers, leaders of faith groups, academics, and other experts were attended the symposium. Thus, symposium also provided opportunities to connect with leaders from other faiths as well as secular organizations, and promoted inter-faith and cross-movement cooperation around aligned and joint messages. We hope that it may highlight the future role and contribution of Muslims to the climate movement and present ample communications opportunities.

More importantly, as Muslim scholars, we want further exemplify the trend of faith-based climate activism ahead of the U.N. climate change summit. In this spirit, we called on 1.6 billion Muslims to engage on the issue of climate change and take bold actions to stem its worst impacts. The declaration states that there is deep irony that humanity's "*unwise and short-sighted use of these resources is now resulting in the destruction of the very conditions that have made our life on earth possible.*" We asked ourselves that if we do not change our short-sighted perception and attitude towards the

planet, “*what will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy? How will we face our Lord and Creator?*”

In the preamble we tried to summarize the fundamentals of Islamic world view with these words:

"God – Whom we know as Allah – has created the universe in all its diversity, richness and vitality: the stars, the sun and moon, the earth and all its communities of living beings. All these reflect and manifest the boundless glory and mercy of their Creator. All created beings by nature serve and glorify their Maker, all bow to their Lord's will. We human beings are created to serve the Lord of all beings, to work the greatest good we can for all the species, individuals, and generations of God's creatures".

Then, we summarized the climate change as described and detailed by scientists and how "human activity is putting a strain on the natural functions of the earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."

Affirming that "Allah is the Lord and Sustainer (Rabb) of all beings", "is the One Creator" and "encompasses all of His creation"; we noted that each thing is created bi 'l-haqq, in truth and for right". Therefore, we affirm that

- God created the Earth in perfect equilibrium (mīzān);
- By His immense mercy we have been given fertile land, fresh air, clean water and all the good things on Earth that makes our lives here viable and delightful;
- The Earth functions in natural seasonal rhythms and cycles: a climate in which living beings – including humans – thrive;
- The present climate change catastrophe is a result of the human disruption of this balance –
- We recognize the corruption (*fasād*) that humans have caused on the Earth due to our relentless pursuit of economic growth and consumption.

We recognize the corruption (*fasād*) that humans have caused on the Earth due to our relentless pursuit of economic growth and consumption. Its consequences have been –

- Global climate change, which is our present concern, in addition to:
- Contamination and befoulment of the atmosphere, land, inland water systems, and seas;
- Soil erosion, deforestation and desertification;
- Damage to human health, including a host of modern-day diseases.

Once more we appreciate deep meaning and implications of the Qur'anic teaching:

"Corruption has appeared on land and sea Because of what people's own hands have wrought,
So that they may taste something of what they have done; So that hopefully they will turn back". Qur'an 30: 41

We recognize that we are but a miniscule part of the divine order, yet within that order, we are exceptionally powerful beings, and have the responsibility to establish good and avert evil in every way we can. We also recognize that –

- We are but one of the multitude of living beings with whom we share the Earth;
- We have no right to oppress the rest of creation or cause it harm;
- Intelligence and conscience behoove us, as our faith commands, to treat all things with care and awe (taqwa) of their Creator, compassion (rahmah) and utmost good (ihsan).

We recognize that **we are accountable for all our actions:**

"Then he who has done an atom's weight of good, shall see it; and he who has done an atom's weight of evil, shall see it". Qur'an 99:6-8.

In view of these considerations **we affirm that our responsibility as Muslims** is to act according to the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who –

- Declared and protected the rights of all living beings, outlawed the custom of burying infant girls alive, prohibited killing living beings for sport, guided his companions to conserve water even in washing for prayer, forbade the felling of trees in the desert, ordered a man who had taken some nestlings from their nest to return them to their mother, and when he came upon a man who had lit a fire on an anthill, commanded, "Put it out, put it out!";
- Established inviolable zones (harams) around Makkah and Al-Madinah, within which native plants may not be felled or cut and wild animals may not be hunted or disturbed;
- Established protected areas (himas) for the conservation and sustainable use of rangelands, plant cover and wildlife.
- Lived a frugal life, free of excess, waste, and ostentation;
- Renewed and recycled his meagre possessions by repairing or giving them away;
- Ate simple, healthy food, which only occasionally included meat;
- Took delight in the created world; and
- Was, in the words of the Qur'an, "a mercy to all beings."

We call upon the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) to the Kyoto Protocol taking place in Paris this December, 2015 to bring their discussions to an equitable and binding conclusion, bearing in mind –

- The scientific consensus on climate change, which is to stabilize greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate systems;
- The need to set clear targets and monitoring systems;
- The dire consequences to planet earth if we do not do so;
- The enormous responsibility the COP shoulders on behalf of the rest of humanity, including leading the rest of us to a new way of relating to God's Earth.

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We particularly call on the well-off nations and oil-producing states to –

- Lead the way in phasing out their greenhouse gas emissions as early as possible and no later than the middle of the century;
- Provide generous financial and technical support to the less well-off to achieve a phase-out of greenhouse gases as early as possible;
- Recognize the moral obligation to reduce consumption so that the poor may benefit from what is left of the earth's non-renewable resources;
- Stay within the '2 degree' limit, or, preferably, within the '1.5 degree' limit, bearing in mind that two-thirds of the earth's proven fossil fuel reserves remain in the ground;
- Re-focus their concerns from unethical profit from the environment, to that of preserving it and elevating the condition of the world's poor.
- Invest in the creation of a green economy.

We call on the people of all nations and their leaders to –

- Aim to phase out greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible in order to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere;
- Commit themselves to 100 % renewable energy and/or a zero emissions strategy as early as possible, to mitigate the environmental impact of their activities;
- Invest in decentralized renewable energy, which is the best way to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development;
- Realize that to chase after unlimited economic growth in a planet that is finite and already overloaded is not viable. Growth must be pursued wisely and in moderation; placing a priority on increasing the resilience of all, and especially the most vulnerable, to the climate change impacts already underway and expected to continue for many years to come.
- Set in motion a fresh model of wellbeing, based on an alternative to the current financial model which depletes resources, degrades the environment, and deepens inequality.
- Prioritise adaptation efforts with appropriate support to the vulnerable countries with the least capacity to adapt. And to vulnerable groups, including indigenous peoples, women and children.

We call upon corporations, finance, and the business sector to –

Shoulder the consequences of their profit-making activities, and take a visibly more active role in reducing their carbon footprint and other forms of impact upon the natural environment;

- In order to mitigate the environmental impact of their activities, commit themselves to 100 % renewable energy and/or a zero emissions strategy as early as possible and shift investments into renewable energy;
- Change from the current business model which is based on an unsustainable escalating economy, and to adopt a circular economy that is wholly sustainable;
- Pay more heed to social and ecological responsibilities, particularly to the extent that they extract and utilize scarce resources;
- Assist in the divestment from the fossil fuel driven economy and the scaling up of renewable energy and other ecological alternatives.

In the spirit of the Qur'an "So compete with each other in doing good deeds" (Qur'an 5: 48) we call on all groups to join us in collaboration, co-operation, and friendly competition in this endeavor.

Finally, we call on all Muslims wherever they may be –

- Heads of state
- Political leaders
- Business community
- UNFCCC delegates
- Religious leaders and scholars
- Mosque congregations
- Islamic endowments (awqaf)
- Educators and educational institutions
- Community leaders
- Civil society activists
- Non-governmental organisations
- Communications and media

To always bear in mind the words of our Prophet (PBUH) "The world is sweet and verdant, and verily Allah has made you stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves" and be humble and take full responsibility for a sustainable future.

5. Reactions

The positive reactions and well-reception of declaration was surprising and overwhelming for us. Major newspapers, magazines, social media and leading environmentalists expressed their appreciation of and support for declaration. Bill McKibben, a leading environmentalist and activists argues that although "by itself this declaration will not lead to much as Islam, for better and for worse, lacks a central governing body; there is no pope"; "what they signal is an ongoing shift in the zeitgeist, to the point where most thinking people in our civilization realize that we have to take dramatic, even "radical," action to blunt an emerging crisis. This is new". (McKibben, 2015)

Another interesting comment was from Emma Foehringer Merchant of the New Republic. She notice that although "the Muslim legacy of environmentalism has long been overshadowed by Christian-focused environmental stewardship, the declaration could potentially have a larger reach than its Catholic counterpart". He points to an April Pew study, which indicates that "Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world, with around 1.6 billion followers and on the other hand by 2050, there will be as many Muslims as there are Christians of all denominations".

To conclude, the Qur'an presents the universe as created by God with a particular order, balance, measure, beauty, and aesthetic structure. Therefore, there are certain aims in the creation of all living beings.

- The purpose of the universe's creation is not solely anthropocentric; before everything, the universe is a missive, a book, showing its Maker. It therefore has a dimension, which transcends human.
- There are certain aims in the creation of all living beings; human's prime obligation is to understand these, and act in conformity with them.
- Since there are no wastefulness and prodigality in the universe, human should not be wasteful in his life.
- The models of unlimited growth and unlimited consumption are opposed to the spirit of the Qur'an. The ecological balances and systems that the Creator has placed in the universe must be respected and protected.
- Human will be called to account in the hereafter for what he has done in this world. Included in this will be his treatment of the beings in the universe, animate and inanimate.

As Syed Hossain Nasr noted “*the main value of the declaration will be to remind Muslims that nature is not just a machine; it has a spiritual meaning*”. Muslims, therefore, have the responsibility of developing an environmental ethics which motivates and leads them toward a more meaningful and responsible attitude towards planet earth and sustainable development.

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