

## ON THE PREREQUISITES OF ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses various difficulties arising out of the concept of environmental ethics from an Islamic theological perspective. The author begins by describing growing Muslim awareness of environmental issues. Since the issue of manufactured climate change could not be raised in traditional Islam, the need arises to work out an environmental ethics based on the Qur'an. Subsequently, the Qur'anic concepts of stewardship (*hilāfa*) and entrusted property (*amāna*) become the foci of the article. The author highlights the need to develop a consistent view of Islamic ethics within the rise of Islamic theology in the European context, a view that is consistent with pre-modern Islamic scientific traditions and that deals with the contemporary understanding of ethics.

Keywords: Environment, ethics, Islam, stewardship, resources, Qur'an

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, issues of environmental and climate protection have increasingly become the subject of public debate. Among other things, there is a growing awareness of manufactured climate change, which is also expressed in demands for political change. In this context, Muslim voices can also be heard considering environmental protection issues from a religious perspective. Reflection on nature and on the concept of creation based on Islamic reference texts and on the normatively correct way of dealing with nature is likewise an important task for Islamic theology. But how can an "Islamic environmental ethics" be conceived against this background (A. Dziri)? In what follows, I present a reflection on the preconditions and difficulties of the conception of such a field of ethical issues from an Islamic-theological perspective. First, however, a brief classification of the growing Muslim environmental awareness of the last decades will be made. Subsequently, I will present arguments for the sake of illustration.

The Islamic environmental movement has its roots in the global preoccupation with environmental problems and threats to human livelihood in the 1960s. Among the first Muslim thinkers to address these challenges were Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Fazlun Khalid, each of whom formulated a critique of human exploitation of nature in different ways (Vgl. Zbidi). While the focus was originally primarily theoretical

and ethical, subsequently Muslims began to combine theological and ethical approaches to the environment with activism. This movement has come to be known as eco-Islam. While a number of the arguments and approaches are related to the Qur'an or are based on Islamic law, the movement as a whole can be described - according to Monika Zbidi - as a "synergy of the Western-influenced environmental movement with Islamic values" (Vgl. Zbidi).

This insight is important. The starting point for the Islamic environmental movement is the horizon of the present and debates are anchored in society as a whole and are conducted trans-nationally. Hence, these issues are also discussed by non-Muslims. From an Islamic theological perspective, this means that while religious sources frequently address the approach to nature and thus provide a basis for ethical arguments about the environment, at the same time contemporary questions such as the one about manufactured climate change could neither occur in pre-modern Islamic theological atmosphere. In this sense, there are starting points and normative texts within the Islamic tradition that can be referred to in environmental ethics issues but there is no ready-to-use "Islamic environmental ethics" that can be easily implemented. Hence, the need for fresh interpretations so that Qur'anic terms and concepts of Islamic law can be related to contemporary problems.

Attempts to update the Islamic tradition with regard to environmental issues have been made by Muslim scholars and intellectuals for the last 60 years. Overall, it can be noted that scholars often refer to a limited number of concepts and terms as anchor points for ethical reflection. I will now discuss two concepts that play an important role in environmental ethical debates –namely stewardship (*ḥilāfa*) and entrusted property (*amāna*). These two concepts are particularly useful as illustrations of the issues that need to be addressed in order to understand environmental ethical issues from an Islamic theological perspective.

#### THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN STEWARDSHIP (*HILAFĀ*)

The first example that can be mentioned is the concept of man as steward (*ḥalīfa*) on earth, which goes back to the Qur'an and is also frequently mentioned in the literature as one of the principles advocated by the Islamic environmental movement (C. I. Dziri). Referring to the creation of the first human being, the Qur'an says: And when your Lord said to the angels, 'I will appoint a governor (*ḥalīfa*) on the earth.' Then they said, 'Will you appoint on it someone who will do mischief on it and shed blood, while we praise you and sanctify you?' He said, 'I know what you do not know.'

This verse in particular, and the concept of man as steward in general, has been important in research done since the 1960s. In the philosophical work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the idea of man as representing God has been understood as the "protector of the natural order (Cf. Nasr) Nasr began his work on religion and nature by reflecting on Qur'an 2:30, which speaks of Adam as a steward. He identified human forgetfulness of human stewardship as the central cause of environmental degradation<sup>2</sup>. The close connection of stewardship with man's task on earth led him to conclude as follows: "To destroy the natural environment is therefore to fail in one's humanity (Man and Nature, p. 10). Fazlun Khalid also regarded human stewardship as a "responsibility principle" and counted it among four environmental principles through which the Qur'an expresses its ecological message (Cf. Khalid).

The reference to stewardship also remains central in current writings of eco-Islam. The Green Iftar Guide, for example, a practical guide to the Ramadan plastic fast, which the Nour Energy Association has been calling for since 2017, refers to this concept (E.V.). The stewardship of man (*ḥilāfa*) is mentioned here as the first "ecological principle" as follows: "If man is allowed to make use of nature on the one hand, he is responsible for a balanced and sustainable use of it on the other"<sup>3</sup> This is understood in terms of conservation of natural resources. Man's stewardship thus amounts to a balance between the use of resources on the one hand and a sustainable use of them on the other. The connection with responsibility is also seen by Odeh al-Jayyousi, who recognizes in the concept of stewardship a summary of all human rights and responsibilities towards the environment<sup>4</sup>. For him, too, stewardship is one of the three central principles that would underlie the Islamic worldview and that would have to be observed with regard to the environment<sup>5</sup>.

The prominence of the term and the repeatedly emphasized relevance of stewardship as an environmental principle underscores its importance for contemporary environmental ethical approach of eco-Islam. Hence, the various interpretations share two important premises. First, without exception, they assume that what is meant by the term *ḥalīfa* in the Qur'an is the fact that humans have been appointed as God's stewards. The concept of stewardship has the double characteristic of

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<sup>2</sup> The present forgetfulness of who we really are [...] is at the heart of our greedy aggression against nature", ID: Religion & the Order of Nature, New York et. al. 1996, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> The other two principles mentioned there are responsibility (*amāna*), which is discussed in direct connection with governorship, and balance (*mīzān*).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. AL-JAYYOUSI, Odeh Rashed: Islam and sustainable development. New worldviews, Farnham et. al. 2012, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> The other two are the principle of unity (*tawḥīd*) and justice (*'adāla*), cf. ibid., pp. 76-81.

dependence on God and dominion over the world. Second, in view of the current ecological challenges, stewardship on earth implies the special responsibility of man for God-given nature, that is, the role of special protector (Dziri).

From the perspective of contemporary Islamic theology, which is equally interested in a responsible approach to normative reference texts as well as in their translation and updating for our contemporary context, however, critical questions must be raised on both the above points. With regard to the question as to whose steward [*ḥalīfa*] the newly created human being is actually supposed to be, classical exegesis provides a whole range of different interpretations (M. Sievers). If one understands the term *ḥalīfa* in the sense of "successor," then the verse can refer to creatures already created, namely, the angels or the jinn<sup>6</sup>. Other interpretations consider other contexts in which the word *ḥalīfa* is found in the Qur'an. Insofar as the word often refers to the so-called "punitive legends," in which the destruction of earlier peoples is reported as retribution for their sins, it is perhaps more appropriate to think of the word 'steward' as meaning successive generations of people<sup>7</sup>. The classical approach is also adopted by modern interpretation, which understands the word 'steward' as a reference to earlier human species such as *Homo Erectus* discovered by archaeological excavation<sup>8</sup>. Finally, the word *ḥalīfa* understood as referring to a 'steward' of God who rules in his place on earth is also found in the classical approach to Qur'an interpretation (Cf. (At-Ṭabari: tafsīr, Vol. 1, p. 268).

I will now discuss the assumption that the reference to *ḥalīfa* in the Qur'an indicates the protective role of man for the environment. If one reads Qur'an 2.30 as part of the narrative of Adam's creation, which is the context of the chronologically earlier Qur'anic parts of this narrative, then it seems that what is at stake here is rather a variant of the theodicy problem. The Meccan Surahs had repeatedly addressed the human propensity for evil, which needs further explanation in view of the fact that, in the Qur'an, God's creation and the work of human beings are both considered to

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. AṬ-ṬABARĪ, Abū Ğa'far Muḥammad ibn Ğarīr: tafsīr. ġāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-qur'ān, Ed. AL-ḤĀĠĠ, Hānī/AL-BĀRŪDĪ/ 'Imād Zakī/SA'ĪD, Ḥayrī, Cairo 2005, Vol. 1, p. 267 f.

<sup>7</sup> On the other contexts of *ḥalīfa* in the Qur'an, SIEVERS: Der Mensch als Statthalter auf Erden, p. 139 f.; likewise DZIRI: „Wir haben euch die Erde als Erbe überlassen“, p. 60 f. cf. AṬ-ṬABARĪ: Tafsīr, Vol. 1, p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation can be found for example in IBN RASSOUL, Abū-r-Riḍā' Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad: tafsīr al-qur'ān al-karīm. Erläuterung des Al-Qur'ān Al-Karīm in Deutscher Sprache, o.O. 2003, pp. 56–58.

be good<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the idea of man's stewardship in Qur'an 2.30 indicates that the 'mischief' and 'bloodshed' feared by the angels is an unavoidable concomitant of man's special task of stewardship. From today's perspective, environmental destruction can certainly be counted among such 'mischief'. However, to limit the reference to 'mischief' in this way would narrow the potential meaning of the Qur'an.

#### THE CONCEPT OF ENTRUSTED PROPERTY (AMANA)

Another example of a central concept that is often used as a starting point for environmental ethical arguments is the Qur'anic concept of *amāna*, found in Qur'an 33.72, which can generally be translated as "entrusted property"<sup>10</sup>. Eco-Islam literature often understands this concept as "trusteeship" and assumes that *amāna* refers to the earth, which "has been entrusted to man and [that] it must be cared for and protected accordingly"<sup>11</sup>. According to eco-Islam, human beings have a special responsibility for nature, which is the locus of their moral probation<sup>12</sup>, frequently, a direct reference to the above-discussed stewardship of man is also seen, which would subsequently be qualified by the concept of trusteeship. (S. P. Manzoor, AL-jayyousi, 1984) the task of the 'steward' would thus consist in the fulfillment of the *amāna*, by which is meant primarily the task of preserving the earth together with its resources. (Abdul Aziz et al., 2003) Manzoor summarizes this connection as follows: "The entire Islamic rationale for an ecological ethics rests firmly on the Qur'anic notions of *Khilāfa* (man's vicegerency) and *Amāna* (trusteeship)" (Manzoor, Environment and values, p. 157).

Qur'an 33.72 makes it clear that the context of the verse leaves some questions unanswered and thus opens a space for interpretation.

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<sup>9</sup> This is clearly evident, for example, early Meccan in Qur'an 70:19-21 and 90:4-11, and Middle Meccan in 36:77-78 and 20:115, SIEVERS, Mira: Schöpfung zwischen Koran und Kalām. Ansätze einer Koranischen Theologie, Berlin 2019, p. 71, 95, 106.

<sup>10</sup> The word is found in several places in the Qur'an, but with regard to questions of environmental ethics, however, Qur'an 33:72 is specifically referred to. Regarding the wide range of different translation possibilities and their relevance to the verse SIEVERS, Mira: Zum Begriff der *amāna* in Koran 33/32, in: BAŞOL, Ayşe (ed.): Untersuchungen zu Sure 33 al-Aḥzāb, Berlin 2019, pp. 29–58, pp.31–41.

<sup>11</sup> NOURENERGY: Green Iftar Guide, p. 5. Cf. ZBIDI: Islamische Normenlehre zum Umweltschutz, p. 324; VOLM: Der Mensch als Statthalter auf Erden, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. SAID, Abdul Aziz/FUNK, Nathan C.: Peace in Islam: An Ecology of the Spirit, in: FOLTZ, Richard C./ DENNY, Frederick M./BAHARUDDIN, Azizan (ed.): Islam and Ecology. A Bestowed Trust, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2003, pp. 155–183, here p. 162.

We offered the entrusted property (*amāna*) to the heavens, the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, they feared it. But man carried it - he is certainly very unjust and very ignorant. (Qur'an 33.72)

We could inquire as to the meaning of the "entrusted good " that only man was willing to carry. This issue has preoccupied pre-modern Muslim exegesis and led them to provide various interpretations. However, the dominant view in classical exegesis, for example, in Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), is that *amāna* refers to "the obedience and duties" of human beings to God<sup>13</sup>. According to Tabarī, this interpretation is connected with the reward or punishment that will be given to man in the hereafter, depending on his actions (Vgl. At-Ṭabari: tafsīr, Vol. 22, p. 58). This also explains why the heavens, the earth and the mountains were afraid of not fulfilling the *amāna* and, therefore, refused to accept it. Later scholars, such as Zamaḥṣarī (d. 538/1144) and Rāzī (d. 606/1210), understood *amāna* in a similar sense but described it with the aid of the legal-theological term of "juristic responsibility" (*taklīf*)<sup>14</sup>. This interpretation also has broader implications regarding human free will and divine predestination.

As with the concept of human stewardship, it can be seen that the meaning of *amāna* represents a limitation with respect to the Islamic theological tradition. On the one hand, there is a clear commitment to a single meaning (as opposed to several possible interpretations, as indicated, for example, by Ṭabarī). On the other hand, the interpretation that understands *amāna* as entrusting the goods of the earth and its resources to human beings is an interpretation that is not anchored in the classical tradition. At the same time, the far-reaching theological considerations of this concept are less important than the concrete instructions for action.

In summary, recourse to Qur'anic terms such as *ḥalīfa* or *amāna* to justify environmental ethical principles seems problematic. First, the question arises as to whether this is not an interest-driven interpretation of the Qur'an that attempts to find instructions about the proper treatment of the environment in the text of the Qur'an (*eisegesis*). In this case, the independent theological-ethical emphases of the Qur'an would be obscured rather than appreciated. To what extent this interest-driven interpretation is connected with the Muslim environmental consciousness evident in transnational movements would have to be clarified. This would involve a re-

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<sup>13</sup> AṬ-ṬABARĪ: tafsīr, Vl. 22, p. 58; cf. SIEVERS: Zum Begriff der amāna, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. AZ-ZAMAḤṢARĪ, Ġarallāh: tafsīr al-kaššāf 'an ḥaqā'iq at-tanzīl, ed. ŠĪḤĀ, Ḥalīl Ma'mūn, Beirut 2009, p. 866; AR-RĀZĪ, Faḥr ad-dīn: tafsīr, Beirut 1981, Vol. 25, p. 235 f. For this interpretation see also: SIEVERS: Zum Begriff der amāna, pp. 48–50

reading of Islamic sources (Zbidi). Secondly, from an Islamic theological perspective, these interpretations are neither sufficiently supported by the classical tradition nor are they based on a methodologically sound contextualized reading of the Qur'an. An approach to the Qur'an that does not sufficiently take account of chronology or of the micro- and macro-contexts does not meet the minimum requirements of a responsible approach to the tradition of Islam. Thirdly, Qur'an passages that have ethical concerns raise the question of the status of ethics within Islamic theology.

## THE QUESTION OF ISLAMIC ETHICS

Although "Islamic ethics" is on everyone's lips, it cannot be found as a clearly delineated discipline within the classical canon of Islamic sciences (*al-'ulūm al-islāmiyya*). As a result, the term ethics, common in Western scholarly traditions, has come to be applied in contemporary usage to different contexts, concepts, and textual genres. For example, Kevin Reinhart argues that the term "Islamic ethics" could most readily be applied to Islamic law and its legal theory (Cf. Reinhart). *Kalām* theology, on the other hand, is not sufficiently practical in orientation and the ethics of Islamic philosophy is not sufficiently religious. Other authors, such as Zahra Ayubi, take the opposite view. She suggests that "Islamic ethics" can be understood primarily in the sense of the *aḥlāq* tradition and thus can refer precisely to ethical thinking in Islamic philosophy (Vgl. Ayubi). These observations point to the diversity of ethical thought in the Islamic tradition. Starting from a general understanding of ethics as an indication of good and right action, corresponding discussions can indeed be located in quite different disciplines.

Thus, *Kalām* theology deals with the ultimate justification of norms and reflects on the concept of good and evil and their relationship to God, thereby raising the question of the access of reason to moral knowledge (A. Shihadeh). Islamic law, on the other hand, focuses on the derivation and the practical orientation of norms taken from religious texts and tries to classify actions systematically on the basis of the "five legal categories" (*al-aḥkām al-ḥamsa*), namely: obligatory, desirable, permitted, frowned upon, or forbidden (Cf. Carney). In this way, this Islamic law engages in both evaluation of human action and reflection on the methods taken to do so. Ethical thought developed quite differently in Islamic philosophy: Based on the translation movement that transferred most of the ancient scientific heritage from Greek into Arabic between the 8th and 10th centuries, the discussions regarding ethical thought follow the ideas of Aristotle and Galen (Cf. Adamson) and shape their own tradition of ethics in the Islamic context. Finally, mention should be made

of Islamic mysticism, which is concerned with the experience of God and, from an ethical point of view, is especially dedicated to the behavior of a person of good character beyond the boundaries of Islamic law. The latter is understood in terms of the minimum requirements of human behavior and concerned with the guarantee of well-being in the hereafter (Cf. Heck).

Keeping these distinctions and observations in mind, one could discuss the specific contribution of Islamic theology to the treatment of ethical problems related to the environment in particular or to ethical questions in general. To do so, one must examine the basis for a contemporary Islamic theological ethics and its relation with the classical Islamic tradition and, in particular, to clarify its relation to philosophical ethics: As an expression of scientific theology, Islamic ethics must not only be rationally acceptable but must also be capable of forming a relation with other theological and philosophical ethics. An example can be seen in the tendency within Islam to relativise the theological voluntarism of the classical Ash'arites in favor of a more significant role given to autonomous reason (C. Shihadeh). In any case, with regard to issues of environmental ethics, a consistent overall view of Islamic theological ethics would be a prerequisite (Dziri).

#### SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

The first point of criticism raised above - namely, the danger of an interest-driven interpretation of the Islamic texts - can also be understood from the perspective of scientific theology as a fundamental requirement for Islamic (environmental) ethics. Consequently, ethics should not serve solely to reinforce and confirm already existing moral convictions but should methodically distance itself from them. This is particularly fruitful when it proceeds in a problem-oriented manner (Cf. Alsoufi). Although the urgency of developing effective environmental ethics is obvious in view of the increasing environmental destruction and the experience of climate change, controversial questions need to be answered.

First, one could mention the frequently discussed question of whose interests make environmental protection an ethical necessity. The 1992 Rio Declaration of the United Nations formulated the following statement: "Human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature"<sup>15</sup>. Action for the conservation of nature and

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<sup>15</sup> Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_CONF.151\\_26\\_Vol.I\\_Declaration.pdf.](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf.), 1992



the protection of the environment are thereby justified in terms of human rights. One could ask how this is to be judged from an Islamic perspective. Would it be conceivable to see nature as a bearer of its own interests, as is currently expressed in various ways? (Kersten). A promising approach in this context from an Islamic theological perspective can be found in the work of Asmaa El Maaroufi, who recently presented a reflection on the sign character (*āyāt*) of nature. Based on an understanding of nature as cosmic revelation, the "intrinsic value of nature arises, which is due to it independently of the obvious human use (Cf. El Maaroufi).

A second example consists in reversing the interest-driven approach: Do theological ideas exist that tend to favor human exploitation of nature exist in the Islamic tradition and how can they be understood and classified? This question relates to the criticism that has been heard since the 1960s against religions that have played a decisive role in the ecological crisis through their anthropocentric view of man (White). In the Islamic context, for example, one could mention the idea of making creation serviceable (*tashīr*) for human beings, an idea that can be found in the late Meccan Surahs of the Qur'an (C. Sievers). By critically examining such elements of the tradition, environmental ethics from an Islamic theological perspective could provide insights that throw light on the challenges of responding to nature as well as on the diversity of the meaning of the Islamic tradition itself.

In connection with this second example, the necessity for a contextual approach to the Qur'an, which takes into account the chronology of the Qur'an's formation, becomes apparent. Whereas verses on service and similar themes, which can be understood in terms of the superiority of human beings over other creatures, can be found from the Middle and Late Meccan periods onward, a different picture emerges in the Early Meccan Surahs, where the idea of an equal relationship of all creatures with the Creator seems to be fundamental. A theological classification based on this insight can lead to a relativization of anthropocentric verses and understand them in the sense of a call to take responsibility for creation (M. Sievers).

## CONCLUSION

Even if a critical examination of the two concepts of *ḥilāfa* and *amāna* presented in this paper could point out only some aspects that need to be considered when dealing with issues and concerns of environmental ethics from an Islamic theological perspective, a fundamental need has become clear. This refers to the necessity to develop a consistent view of Islamic ethics within the development of Islamic theology in the European context, a view that is consistent with pre-modern

Islamic scientific traditions and that deals with the contemporary understanding of ethics. Ethical issues related to the environment can make an important contribution to this process since they have received special attention from eco-Islam in recent decades. The continuing relevance of issues related to the environment as well as the current dynamism in Islamic theology lead us to expect that further approaches will soon emerge. ■

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Cf. Nasr, S. H. *Man and Nature. The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London et. al. 1990 (first published 1968), p. 96. The expression „protector of the natural order“ is located on p. 9 f.

Cf. Reinhart, K. *Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics*, in: *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (1983), S. 186–203, hier: S. 186f.

Dziri. The creation of mischief (fasād) mentioned in Qur'an 2:30 is often interpreted in the sense of environmental destruction, see Dziri: „Wir haben euch die Erde als Erbe überlassen“, p. 61

Dziri. For the concrete area of environmental ethics this need is also stated by Dziri: „Wir haben euch die Erde als Erbe überlassen“, p. 65 f.

Dziri, A. The conceptual problem is discussed in: Dziri, Amir: „Wir haben euch die Erde als Erbe überlassen“ – zwischen Verantwortung und Nutznieß. Der islamische Begriff des Kalif-Seins in umweltethischer Hinsicht, in: Binay, Sara/Khorchide, Mouhanad (eds.): *Islamische Umwelttheologie. Ethik, Norm und Praxis*, Freiburg et al. 2019, pp. 51-67, here p. 51 f.

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Vgl. Ayubi, Z. *Gendered Morality. Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, New York 2019, especially pp. 35–46. Ayubi even argues that the aḥlāq tradition would be more relevant to the religious ethics of individuals, cf. p 37 f.

Vgl. Zbidi, M. Islamische Normenlehre zum Umweltschutz, in: *Zeitschrift für Umweltrecht* 6 (2015), pp. 323-330, here p. 323 f.

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Zbidi. Islamische Normenlehre zum Umweltschutz, S. 323–326. This interest is also suggested by Fazlun Khalid: “A secular articulation of current concerns appears to be motivating Muslims to look for answers from within their own traditions“, Khalid: *Islam and the Environment*, p. 16.