FACTORs CONTENDING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA: AN ISLAMIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Environmental sustainability is one of the major challenges facing most countries today. Hence, it is crucial to examine various approaches militating against environmental concerns. In Nigeria, attempts have been made to improve people’s knowledge and awareness of environmental issues, but the Federal Government has achieved little success with their awareness programmes. This paper argues that although government effort in educating the masses is a welcome development, it is not sufficient in changing the attitude of people to their environment. This paper presents a transformative Islamic approach in educating the masses. Although Nigeria is largely seen as politically secular this does not rule out the fact that a substantial number of the citizens are of Islamic following. This paper therefore shall discuss the Islamic understanding of environmental sustainability as exposed in the Qur’an and Hadith. It will also examine Islamic concept such as Ihsan (excellence and beauty), Mizan/tawāzun (balance), Khalifah (vicegerent) and Amanah (trust), tawassut (moderation) as a formidable strategy of engaging the Muslim masses through recognizable expressions of the Islamic values for environmental sustainability.

Field of Research: Spirituality, Environmental sustainability, Amānah (trust), Iḥsan (good), Khalifah (vicegerency), Mizan (Balance).

1. Introduction

Many works have been written about Islam and the environment, but one of the works that is considered a ground breaking research on faith and nature was written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. For it did not only open the eyes of Muslims but also followers of other religions. Nasr in his book Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man gave an historical account of environmental crisis as well as its intellectual and historical causes, the metaphysical principles of nature and their application to contemporary world. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing Islamic response to the environmental issues with particular reference to Nigeria. It examines the relationship between Islam and the environment. It also examines an Islamic response to environmental crisis. It proposes a possible practical solution from the religio-spiritual perspective.

Man it can be said is spiritual connected to his environment. This is why sometimes we feel in our environment something much greater than the ecological or physical process. A sensation beyond our physical senses which reveals to us our interconnectedness and interdependence within the environment we live. In our contemporary world, it is quite shocking that the idea of spirituality in the workings of the environment is often downplayed. According to Adebayo (2013), spirituality is that which “affect the mind and spirit, and reflect in the actions and deeds of those who profess the religion”. The spirit can be described as a supernatural force or being. The root of the word is found in ancient Greek “spirare” meaning “to breathe”. It is also quite interesting that the word spirare could be linked to respire, inspire, perspire, expire, aspire and conspire. This shows the importance of breathe or air to humans. Man can live without water for days and longer without food but without air he can only last for a moment. (Fortin, 2009)
A good perception of our environment is the way to understanding world events and the laws that rule man's existence. Man is expected to be active and creative and learn in ways natural to him in order to grasp the understanding of the natural phenomenon around him. One of the best examples from the Qur’an regarding sustainability is the story of Prophet Yusuf. His interpretation of a dream of seven fat cows devouring seven lean cows and seven green ears of corn, and seven withered ones can be found Suratul Yusuf 12 verse 43. The result of the king following his advice as regards the dream led to sustainable food and economic development in the city. This is just an example to show the essence of what the religion of Islam enjoins which is that until the misuse of resources are controlled; no meaning sustainable development can be attained. Therefore Islam encourages sustainability and consideration of the future generation.

2. Environmental Challenges in Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the countries expected to be worst affected by environmental changes (Boko, M. et al., 2007). Nigeria faces potentially serious risks both on the south coast and in the north of the country. To understand the deep impact these changes would have on Nigeria, a short explanation of Nigeria’s climatic condition is important. When considering Nigeria by climatic region, three regions emerge: the far south, the far north, and the rest of the country. The far south is defined by its tropical rainforest climate, where annual rainfall is 2,300 to 3,200mm a year. The far north (i.e. Sahel region) is defined by its almost desert-like climate, where rain is less than 800 mm per year. The rest of the country, everything in between the far south and the far north, is savannah, and rainfall is between 800 mm and 2,300 mm per year (DFID, 2009).

Odjugo (2010) reveals how air temperature varies over the years in Nigeria within the 105 years (1901-2005). He noted that temperatures increased by 1.2°C in the coastal cities of the Niger Delta and 2°C in the northern extreme of Nigeria. He also mentions that a mean air temperature increase of 1.7°C was observed in Nigeria for the past 105 years. He observed that the lowest mean annual temperature was recorded on the Mambilla Plateau, followed by Obudu hills and the Jos Plateau as against the initial claims that Jos Plateau experiences the lowest temperature in Nigeria. He concludes that the current available evidences shows that Nigeria, like most parts of the world, is experiencing the basic features of climate change (Odjugo, 2010).

Farmers in Nigeria are also increasingly aware of environmental changes within their communities. Water for domestic use is mainly from traditional wells and boreholes. Agro-forestry is not common, though women depend heavily on firewood for domestic cooking. Issues faced by farmers include poor soil fertility, soil erosion, deforestation, loss of grazing land and desertification. According to farmers from Gude community in Kano State, the quantity of rainfall has drastically reduced. Previously they experienced heavy rainfall and erosion which affected their crops. They have also suffered from the impact of low rainfall and drought to the extent that they had to replant crops three times before the rain became regular. Among other things that also affected the community are the pests and fungal diseases. All these show the extent of changes being experienced in the community. (Farm Radio International, p.2)

According to a woman farmer from Unguwar Dogo community in Kaduna State, “Now that productivity is going down, we are also faced with inadequate fertilizer and irregular rainfall. To crown it all, we see fewer professionals who are willing to share information on this issue” (Farm Radio International, p.2).

According to Nigeria’s First National Communication under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Ministry of Environment Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2003), 15% of the country’s population is affected in one way or the other by sea level rise and climatic variation. The Ministry of Environment’s 2003 report also states that this is set to rise to between 50% and
60% with further anticipated environmental changes, and that between 25%-40% of the national capital stock could be adversely affected (DFID, 2009).

In 1987, due to the dumping of toxic material in a village in the South-South region of Nigeria, the Federal Government decided to promulgate Decree 42 of 1988 regarding harmful waste. This later culminated in the establishment of FEPA (Federal Environmental Protection Agency). As of present this agency does not exist anymore, the duties expected of this agency have been merged with the Federal Ministry of Environment in 1999. In 2007, another agency that deals with effective implementation of environmental laws, standards and regulations was established with the name National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA). (NESREA, 2013).

3. Islamic Views on Environment

3.1 Nature

Islam encourages the contemplation on the wonders of the natural World. It is expected that a thorough meditation on nature will lead to an intimate connection between Man, Nature and God. In Islam, the contemplation on nature is seen as a way to assist people in transcending the material world, and grow closer to their Creator (Armstrong, 2001, p. 96).

The Qur’an calls nature ayat meaning sign. It is used to refer to both nature, and also to verses in the Qur’an itself (Hussain, 2007, p. 9). According to Nasr (1998, p. 119), Islam views nature as having sacred qualities, and that Muslim sages saw upon the face of every creature letters and words from the pages of the cosmic Qur’an. (Nasr, 1998, p.120) He believes that the early Muslims have great love for nature because they see Allah as al-Muhit (the All-encompassing) and so maintain awareness of the sacredness of nature through permeation of God presence in nature (Nasr, 1998, p. 121). There are numerous instances in which the Qur’an refers to nature and contemplation on nature as containing signs are as follows:

Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth - (Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise. (Qur’an 2:164)

Verily! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding. Those who remember Allah standing, sitting and lying down on their sides, and think deeply about the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying :) “Our Lord! You have not created this without purpose, glory is to you! Give us salvation from the torment of the Fire. (Qur’an 3: 190-191)

Another important point that Nasr put forth is that benefit that can be derived from nature is not just to feed and shelter our physical bodies, but also to nurture our souls. In other words, nature serves the spiritual needs of the masses. The implication of this spiritual dimension associated with the natural world is that when it is fully realized it would lead to a particular attitude, behaviour and reverence towards it. And because nature is serving this purpose, it can be said to be serving the deeper need of the people.
Another interesting angle on the issue of natural world from Islāmic perspective can be seen in views of Qur’anic commentators that each species and each generation of God’s creatures is a world unto itself, and that as a product of a divine and special creation, each life-form warrants special respect (Hussain, 2007, p.10). To support this argument is the Qur’anic ayat ...There is not a thing but celebrates His praise, but you understand not how they declare His glory. (Qur’an 17:44)

The above point further brings to mind the beautiful story of the sixteenth century Turkish Sufi, Sunbul Efendi, who asked his disciples to bring flowers to the school. While many of them returned with fine flowers, one of them, Merkez Efendi, gave the master only a little withered flower. Merkez Efendi told his master 'all the others were engaged in the praise of God and I did not want to disturb them; this one, however, had just finished its dhikr, and so I brought it'(Schimmel, 1994).

In relating the above point to environmental education, we would discover that the effect of killing a creation of God is not just physical but also spiritual. If action on environment can be supported by people in religious community, it will go a long way to curb the effect of environmental changes we are currently experiencing.

3.2 Balance

In the Qur’an, the Arabic word used to translate balance is Mizan. It occurs in several places in the Qur’an For example, the sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; And the herbs and the trees both (alike) bow in adoration. And the firmament has He raised high, and He has set up the Balance (of Justice); in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. (Qur’an 55:5-9)

Another verse that captures the idea of balance in the Qur’an is: Verily, all things have We created in proportion and measure. (Qur’an 54:49). The word balance in the Qur’an has been interpreted to be pertinent to a wide range of contexts. However the basic notion is the same, which is that everything has been created with due concern to each and every other detail of creation, and thus as Armstrong (2001, p.96) writes, “with all things in their correct relationship to one another.”

According to Hussain (2007, p.12), “the underlying concept captured by the words balance and proportion, as in translations of the Qur’an, can provide an ethical dimension for Muslims on climate change. It is, after all, the concentration or proportion of greenhouse gases, which can be measured in parts, relative to a quantitative value of the earth’s atmosphere, that is increasing, and for which an increasing number of scientists and scientific bodies regard human behaviour to be an important factor. The consequences of this change in proportion, has profound implications for the entire planet. Hence, within the discussion on environment, from an Islāmic perspective the responsibility can be viewed to clearly rest on our collective shoulders and within the natural world. The concept that underpins the current process taking place, is balance and proportion.

3.3 Disasters

From the Qur’an we get the impression that Islām does not support the idea that disasters occur naturally. The Qur’anic verse that supports this point is: “Corruption has flourished on land and sea as a result of people’s actions and He will make them taste the consequences of some of their own actions so that they may turn back.” (Qur’an 30:41).

The word translated as corruption in the above verse, is fasad in Arabic. The word if considered in its general sense can also include disasters. If the current environmental crisis is regarded as evil, we can also say that it is as a result of some evil actions as well. Although research has shown that those who are most likely to be affected by environmental crisis are not necessarily the major contributors to the change. There is another reference in the Qur’an that alludes to collective punishment “And
beware of that temptation to evil which does not befall only those among you who are bent on denying the truth, to the exclusion of others; and know that God is severe in retribution.” (Qur’an 8:25).

Even though disaster is evil, it can still be seen as an opportunity. In Islam disasters are sometimes seen as an opportunity to reflect on whether one has disobeyed Allah’s laws. It can also be seen as a punishment or a test and an opportunity to ponder on how to put things right, to feel sorrow and ask for forgiveness and reform, or to consider how best to pass the test. It is these opportunities that are to be pursued, hence providing a purpose in the face of tragedy. According to Hussain (2007, p.19), “If God is viewed in this way, then the need for a precise logical explanation for disasters diminishes, and it becomes more in alignment with the nature of the faith to reflecting on the symbols and signs that are experienced through the senses, that give a window of insight into the mind of God, whilst presenting an opportunity for an individual to spiritually evolve into a more God-conscious person.”

4. An Islamic Based Solution

From the points discussed above, we would notice there are interesting concepts in Islām that can help the Federal government of Nigeria in educating the populace about the environment. The government can better address the problem by not only focusing on adaptation, finance and technology but also addressing the attitude of masses to their environment. This paper is proposing that Islāmic concept such as ḥasan (good or excellence), khalīfah (vicegerent), amānah (trust) and unity of creation (tawhid) could be included in the message of the government to the people. These concepts will be examined in relation to environmental education.

4.1 Tawhid

The concept of tawhid is a fundamental belief in Islām. It is to believe in one God. It is can also be seen as a symbolic representation of the unity of creation (Hussain, 2007). In Islām all creation is from one source and that is God. The idea of unity of creation is captured in both the first pillar of Islām, which comprises a statement representing a belief i.e La ilaha illa lahu (there is no god worthy of worship except Allah). By reflecting on nature, one can understand the unity in creation. This is because the way to God-consciousness is by living one’s life in a state of increasing awareness of this unity. This will also make one understand better ones position in the wider creation. The concept of Tawhid is the foundation of holistic approach in Islam as it confirms the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Iḥsan

Iḥsan can be translated as good or excellence. It is a complete and permanent submission of the heart and the mind to God’s Will. Majeed (2003, p.468) describes ḥasan as meaning beauty and virtue. It can also be seen as related to the inner beauty or the beauty of the soul. Ḥasan in Islām is understood to transform every human activity into an art and every art into the remembrance of God (Majeed, 2003, p.468).

Majeed further explains that in Islām the concept of beauty is intimate to God. He understood ḥasan as a feeling that can manifest through humans in the form of beautiful geometry, gardens, calligraphy. He explains that just as these are expressions of ḥasan, which reflects God-consciousness, the affect of witnessing these forms of expression can themselves affect the individual, leading to a greater appreciation of God.

Ḥasan can lead to the attitude of gentleness to the earth, to nature and to the natural environment. A person, who understands the concept of ḥasan will want to live in peace within his environment,
will respect not only living but non-living things on earth. Thus the qualities of gentleness to nature, peacefulness to people, moderation in spending and consumption and devotion to the Lord of all things will be integrated within someone who imbibes the attitude of *ihsan*.

**Amānah (Trust)**

This is a very significant teaching in Islām. Man is expected to see everything he owns (or think he owns) as a trust. The trust can be seen as a burden that Allah has placed on man. The Qur’ān says: We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it...(Qur’ān 33:72). According to Abdullah (1992, p.1268),

> The trust is something given to a person, over which he has a power of disposition; he is expected to use it as directed or expected, but he has the power to use it otherwise. There is no trust if the trustee has no power, and the trust implies that the giver of the trust believes and expects that the trustee would use it according to the wish of the creator of the trust, and not otherwise.

The verse showed that the heavens, the earth and the mountains understood the magnitude of the trust and so rejected the offer. Man was ignorant but also audacious enough to accept the offer the reward is that those who act well based on the trust will be rewarded and those among men who betrayed the trust will be punished.

If we treat the earth and the natural things we see around us as a trust, the society and our environment will be safe and healthy for us to live in. But by doing the opposite we create more problems for ourselves and the future generations yet unborn.

Another interesting point is that the word *amānah* is intricately connected with the notion of *aman* which means security. This security can be seen in the light of physical and spiritual dimensions. By betraying the responsibility of trusteeship, man not only endangers the security of those entrusted to his care, but he also losses the right to his own physical and spiritual security in this world and in the next.

**Khalīfah**

The Qur’ān informs us that when Allah wanted to create man, he told the angels “I will create a vicegerent on earth”. The word for vicegerent in Arabic is *khalīfah*. It can also be described as guardianship. Llewellyn (2003, p.190) is of the view that most of the discussions on this word among Muslim writers in the last few decades have over-emphasised the right associated with this role. Because most of them stress on the point that man is superior to other creations of God. However, Llewellyn believes *khalīfah* should not only be seen as a privilege position, but a trust, responsibility and trial. The position is not just to take, but to give. It is not just to receive, but to serve.

The current environmental crisis can also be seen from the fact that man has failed in his position as a *khalīfah* on earth. We believe the condition of our environment can be used to gauge how well man has fulfilled the enormous responsibility given to him by God. It is obvious to us that man is dreadfully close to shattering the trust that comes with the position he is occupying based on the impact of human activities on environment. This simply means a serious awakening is needed for those who believe in the position of *khalīfah* as described in this paper, if they want to succeed in their test of guardianship.
5. Conclusion and Future Recommendation

We suggest a systematically formulated message by the Federal government of Nigeria that will be drawn from the rich and still very much alive religio-spiritual conscience of the populace. It can be premised on concept such as *ihṣan, amānah*, and others listed above. In other words, the message of the government can be premised on beauty, excellence, and perfection of people’s actions both the inward and the outward.

Most times, governments forget to think seriously and deeply in terms of deconstructing, re-viewing, re-visioning the core attitude of people towards nature through the renewal of spiritual rather than physical resources.

Finally, unless we take into consideration the certainty of personal responsibility before a God of justice, who is also the Creator of man and his environment, it may be very difficult to change the attitude of people to their environment. This paper therefore should be seen as giving positive and practical ideas rooted in basic understanding of Islamic principles.

References


