

Planning for a Sustainable Future from the Islamic Point of View

The Purpose of Creation

Before discussing Islamic Ethics with regard to Sustainability, one has to understand the Divine purpose of Creation and the Reality of Existence as a whole from the Islamic point of view.

Islam teaches that Man has been created by God for two purposes:

1. To serve and worship God by fulfilling all acts of worship prescribed by Him, and by keeping good relationship between human beings, even as God said in the Qur'an, *"I have not created the Jinn and men but to serve me."* (Qur'an 51: 56)
2. To be God's Vicegerent on earth, even as God said in the Qur'an, *"It is God who has created for you all that is on earth....And remember when your Lord said to the angels: 'Verily, I am going to place a viceroy (mankind) on earth.' They said: 'Will You place therein those who will make mischief therein and shed blood, -while we glorify You with praise and sanctify You?'"* God said: *'Verily, I know better what you do not know.'*" (Qur'an 2: 29-30) This last verse refers to the time when God announced to the angels that He was going to create the first man, Adam (peace be upon him).

To assume the above positions man has two basic needs, namely: Spiritual Need and Physical Need. As a servant of God man has spiritual need to fulfil, while as God's vicegerent he has physical need to meet for their survival. And to make his life well balanced, man has to fulfil both his spiritual and physical needs simultaneously. His spiritual need is fulfilled through belief or faith in God, and obedience and submission to Him, that is through religious obligations. While his physical need is met by making the best use of all resources which God created for him. In other words, God created mankind for Himself, but He created everything else for mankind. So He created men to populate the earth, cultivate the land, mine the minerals, conduct developments, and rule in this world, and to thank God for all His favours and bounties, because God did not create this universe in vain, but for a purpose, that is that men recognise that there is God, the Creator, whom they have to serve. God said in the Qur'an:

"Verily, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding. Those who (always) remember God standing, sitting and reclining, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): 'Our Lord! You have not created all this in vain (without a purpose), glory be to you, so save us from the torment of Hell-fire.'" (Qur'an 4: 190-191)

Why Different Nations and Tribes, Different Languages and Colours?

God said:

“O mankind! Verily We have created you out of a male and a female, and We have made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most conscious of Him. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” (Qur’an 49: 13)

“And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily in that are signs for men of sound knowledge.” (Qur’an 30: 22)

God’s Favours and Bounties

God said in the Qur’an:

“And among His signs is this, that He sends the winds as glad tidings, giving a taste of His mercy (i.e. rain) and that the ships may sail at His Command, and that you may seek of His bounty, in order that you may be thankful. God is He who sends winds, so they raise clouds, and spread them along the sky as He wills, and then break them into fragments, until you see rain drops come forth from their midst! Then when He made them fall on whom of His servants as He wills, lo! They rejoice.” (Qur’an 30: 46-47)

“See you not (O men) that God has subjected to your service whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and has completed and perfected His favours upon you, (both) without and within? Yet of men is he who disputes concerning God, without knowledge or guidance or a Scripture giving light.” (Qur’an 31: 20)

“Verily, We have honoured the children of Adam, and We have carried them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom We created with a marked preferment.” (Qur’an 17: 70)

God Forbids Extravagance and Squandering

God said in the Qur’an:

“Give your kinsman his due, and the needy, and the way-farer, and squander not (your wealth) in wantonness. Indeed, the squanderers are brothers of the devils, and the devil is ever an ingrate to his Lord.” (Qur’an 17: 26-27)

Cause of Damage and Corruption on Earth

God said:

“Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of (the deed) that the hands of men have earned. That (God)) may give them a taste of (the consequences of) some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back (from Evil).” (Qur’an 30:41)

“If the Truth had been in accord with their desires, truly the heavens and the earth, and all beings therein would have been in confusion and corruption! Nay, We have sent them their admonition, but they turn away from their admonition.” (Qur’an 23: 71)

“When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But God loves not mischief.” (Qur’an 2: 205)

“Do no mischief on the earth, after it hath been set in order, but call on Him with fear and longing (in your hearts): for the Mercy of Allah is (always) near to those who do good.” (Al-A’raf 7: 56)

"But seek, with the (wealth) which God has bestowed on you, the Home of the Hereafter, and forget not you portion in this World: but do you good, as God has been good to you, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for God loves not those who do mischief." (Qur’an 28: 77)

Today, all of us are baffled and perplexed by the question why human life has been bereft of peace and security. Why are we being visited perpetually by various kinds of troubles and hardships? Why has the scheme of our life gone away? We find people falling foul of one another, country struggling against country, men tearing one another to bits like wolves. Millions of men are being killed. Wounded, or uprooted by war, human habitations are being destroyed, and property and business worth millions of dollars are being ruined. The strong are crushing the weak, the rich are exploiting the poor; governments are tyrannical and the guardians of law have turned unjust. The rich man is intoxicated by his wealth; the man in authority is arrogant. There is no loyalty in friendship, and breach of trust is rampant. There is no moral rectitude. Man has lost his faith in man; godlessness prevails even under the cloak of religion. Humanity is divided into countless groups and camps, and each of these is trying to harm others by force or fraud or any other means at its disposal – in the firm belief as if this were righteous conducts.

The Islamic Principles of Ethics

As a matter of fact, and so far as the Qur’an is concerned, it deals with ethics or matters and relations which are considered to be the subject and the object of ethics, in rather more general terms such as righteousness (Qur’an 2: 177, 189), good conduct (Qur’an 49: 13 quoted above) and doing good and avoiding abomination (Qur’an 54: 31,32). This is in addition to the verses quoted earlier. The Qur’anic passages which render a more detailed account of moral precepts or matters representing the subject of ethics, appear to be in particular Q. 17: 23,40; 23: 2,9; 25: 64,75; 31: 12, 19; and 49: 1-15. As

far as ethics is concerned it is the HADITH (the collection of words and reports on actions of the Prophet Muhammad or his tradition) which recognises these by the word “AKHLAQ” which denotes moral and social virtues or disposition, and represents the substance of ethics either as the sincere exertion in goodness or the aspect of faith as it appears in the virtues of love, benevolence and modesty.

Planning a more sustainable future always involves people or human beings who are part of the nature and associated with it, and their attitude towards natural resources plays very important role in Sustainability Strategy. It is not easy to make everybody more considerate in this regard, because as human beings people have desires and dreams which lead them to greed for more and more. And this greed makes them oblivious of public interest or the interests of their fellow men and less responsible and considerate in their action.

Therefore, unless men have some sort of faith in a Supernatural Power, or Religious Belief, or strict adherence to certain moral values, there is no way that one can check them or prevent them from misusing and abusing the natural resources by way of causing damage to the environment. From the Islamic point of view, only the strong belief in God and obedience to Him can prevent men from mischief and corruption, because only God-consciousness can stop people from evil. That is why in Islam, the nobility or honourability of a person is not judged by his or her social status, race or descent, but rather by his or her righteousness and God-consciousness. So if a person strongly believes that God will reward him or her for doing good and will punish him or her for committing crimes in life after death which is eternal, and he or she is conscious of that, then there is no need for anybody to tell him or her what to do and what not to do. Hence the need for the Divine (Sacred) Law, which in Islam is called “*Ash-Shari’ah*”

Why did the Revelation of the Shari’ah take place?

Why are those faculties of observation and reasoning which suffice for man’s discovery of the scientific laws, inadequate for the discovery of the ethical and social law? The answer is quite simple. It is obvious that there is an essential difference between the two categories. The former is, so far as they concern man, ground for study only from the point of view of his physical being. They are therefore of a purely objective order. The latter are related to the human beings as a moral, conscious and social structure. Therefore they are of a sentimental, psychological order; that is to say, they are prominently subjective and afford no ground for positive regulation. Man does possess the mental independence and impartiality necessary for deducing just conclusions from facts and phenomena which are produced mechanically outside his will and on which his peculiarities have no hold. He can deduce from them rules and laws corresponding to the truth. But no sooner is it a question of studying the existence of man as a moral and social being, that is, as a factor thinking and acting of his own account, of formulating the laws governing his conduct, then observation and reasoning, however disciplined their use is, become uncertain and generally defective guides because they

are always marred the infirmities of one who employs them. The natural incapacity of man to discover the truth in this domain is manifested in a striking manner by the ignorance of the moral and social laws which correspond to natural principles in which the peoples of the West, though ultra-civilised, are still plunged and by the sufferings which are the result of this ignorance at a time when their work has procured to them so high a degree of knowledge of the other natural laws. It is thus a fact that man never would have known the moral and social laws on which human happiness depends, if the Prophet had not revealed them.

Conclusion

In addition to the concepts of sustainability proposed in the “Consultation Paper for the State Sustainability Strategy for Western Australia”, the moral and ethical issues should be given serious attention. This is so because mankind has been created by God for a set purpose, and this earth and all its resources have been created for men to use, not to abuse or misuse. The fact that men are suffering today, is because they have adopted a way of life at variance with truth and reality; he will find no peace until they bring their life into harmony with truth and reality. This is how men can work together towards a Sustained World in which they live, by conducting sustainable development.

**“The best of people is the one who is
most beneficial to other people.”**

(The Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him)

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