



[The Prophet's \(sal\) Philosophy as an Environmentalist](#)

Allah Swt reveals in the Holy Qur'an many, many references to the environment, the principles of the environment, and the creation of them. He says:

And to Allah belongs what is in the heavens and what is in the earth, and it is Allah who encompasses all things.

In Surah al-Anbiyā, He says:

Do not those who cover up the truth see that the heavens and the earth were one piece, and We parted them and We made every living thing out of water? Will they not then believe? And We have placed mountains on the earth standing firm lest it shake with them, and We have made valleys as roads so that they may find their way. And We have made the heavens a canopy while secured, yet they turn away from the signs. And it is He Who has created the night and the day, and the sun and the moon, each swimming in its orbit. We have not given any human being eternal life. If you die, will they live forever?

And then again,

Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of the people, but most of the people do not know it.

We had a nice meeting this morning on the gardens. I thought I would like to create a talk today on the environment, trying to get ourselves oriented and re-oriented, excuse the pun, back to our roots. Leaf me alone... I hope it will be fruitful, and get to the stem issue of what is happening. The Prophet Mohammed (sal) said,

There is none amongst the believers who plants a tree or sows a seed, and then a bird or a person or an animal eats thereof, but is regarded as having given a charitable gift for which there is great recompense.

It is a wonderful thing to put up in the garden. The idea of the Prophet (sal) as a pioneer of environmentalism will initially strike many as strange. Indeed, the term “environment” and related ideas like ecology and environmental awareness, sustainability, or modern conventions are terms that were created in the face of growing concerns over the environment in the contemporary state of the natural world around us. When we read closely that *hadith*, we understand the body of the work that recounts significant events in the Prophet’s (sal) life.

It reveals he was a staunch advocate of environmental protection. One could say he was a pioneer in the domain of conservation, of sustainable development, of resource management, and one who constantly sought to maintain a very harmonious balance between human life and nature. From all accounts of his life and works, we can see that the Prophet (sal) had a deep respect for the fauna and flora as well as a very deep, personal, visceral connection to earth, air, water, and fire (*khak, bād, mā, and nār*). He was a strong advocate of sustainability, the use of cultivation of land, and proper distribution and use of water, proper treatment of animals and plants and birds, and the equal rights of users of them. In this context, the modernity of the Prophet’s (sal) point of view on the environment, and the concepts he introduced to his Sahaba and the *taba’ain*, and on and on to all of us in

some way at some point is very important, because certain passages of the *hadith* could easily be mistaken for discussions about contemporary environmental issues.

There were three basic principles you can extrapolate. The first of his environmental philosophy is that his environmental principles are holistic. As we sat in our meeting this morning, I tried to encourage a holistic view of what we are doing here (as we discussed with our intern and beginning this intern's project), and what it means for her, and what it means for us as a community. It is an opportunity for all of us to interface with her, with the gardens, and with our own knowledge and expertise, and our memories as well as our present state, and the sustainability of the garden, which Mustafa and Sahar and all of you have sustained all these years. There is always room for change, and new knowledge, and for understanding how to best share what we have and what we believe.

The Prophet's (sal) environmental philosophy, being holistic, assumed a fundamental link and an interdependency between all nature and all natural components and elements. He bases his teachings on the premise that if a human being abuses or exhausts one element, the natural world (as it is) will suffer direct consequences from it. We know this is true as you go down or up the food chain to ourselves. If we abuse ourselves, we get ill. The belief is nowhere stated in one simple phrase; it is underlying. That's why I quoted what I quoted. I could have quoted a lot of things from the Qur'an. There are over 954 references to the environment in the Qur'an, from one text I read many years ago. I just chose three that are principles, and began with the beginning.

The belief is formulated not in one phrase, but rather, as the basic principles that form the foundation of all of the actions of the Prophet Mohammed (sal) and his words, and his philosophy, and his life example that were defined in him and by him

and as him, as a human being. The three most important principles of the Prophet's (sal) philosophy on the environment are based on the Qur'anic teachings and the concepts of *tawhid*, on *khalifat*/ stewardship, and on *amanat*/ the trust – these three things. All things are connected in Allah—“Concentration of the mind upon the infinite.” *Khalifat*, stewardship. If I am the *khalifa* of my Shaykh Hazrat Azad Rasool, I am the steward of his teachings. And you are all *khalifas* of Allah in terms of the *amanat*, the trust that our souls accepted. *Tawhid*, the oneness of Allah Swt is of course the cornerstone of Islam.

Tawhid asserts that there is only one absolute Creator, and the human being is responsible to Him for all of his actions. That's why I quoted, **“To Allah belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, and Allah encompasses all things.”** The Prophet (sal) acknowledged that Allah's knowledge and power covers everything. Therefore, any abuse of His Creation, or any of His creations in the small c, whether a living being or natural resource, is a grave sin. The Prophet (sal) considered all of Allah's creations to be equal before Allah. Oil is not less equal than water, and water less equal than a bird, and a bird less equal than a human. He believed the animals, even though they have a hierarchy in their own world, had equality in the land and the forests.

The forests have rights, which is a matter of discussion we have been having here on choices about how we are dealing with that. I had a very interesting discussion with the elder young members of the community the other night, and they will write a letter to the community, *inshā'a-Llāh*, on their thoughts about it. It's very important that everyone have a voice. We all had the opportunity to speak, but we all have other voices to hear. The land has rights, the forests have rights, the water has rights – and we have to recognize their rights, and their power. Think about the

power of the water over the land. Think about the power of the air over the water. Think about the power of the earth to hold the trees.

The concept then of *khalifat* comes in, and the *amanat*. They come from the principle of *tawhid*. The Qur'an explains that human beings hold a very privileged position among Allah's creations on the earth. The human is chosen as the *khalifat* or vice-regent, and carries the responsibility of caring for Allah's earthly creations. Each individual is given a task, but also a privilege in the form of this trust/*amanat*. It's a privilege, not a right. It carries with it the responsibility for caring for Allah's earthly creations, all of them. Each individual is given this task and privilege, but the Qur'an repeatedly warns believers against arrogance, that we are no better than any other creation than Allah.

No creature is there on earth, nor a bird flying with its wings, but they are nations like you – nations like you – Surely the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of man, but most people know not.

The Prophet (sal) believed that the universe and all of its creations – the animals, plants, water, land – were not created for mankind, but human beings were allowed to use the resources and never own them fully. While Islam allows land ownership, it has limitations on it. An owner can only own land if he uses it, in Islam. Once he ceases to use it, he has to part with his possession. In fact, that concept, fortunately or unfortunately, exists in common law. One of the things I studied in law school, in real property, was adverse possession. In fact, it may be an issue here on our own land. If you openly and hostilely occupy land that is being unused, and a person doesn't assert the right to it, you own the land after, in Virginia, 15 years. The words 'open' and 'hostile' are legal terms. It means you can't pretend or hide; you must do

something to show you are using that land. This goes all the way back; do you see how far back it goes?

The Prophet (sal) recognized a human being's responsibility to Allah, but always maintained humility. Thus he said, ***"When doomsday comes, and someone has a palm shoot in his hand, he should plant it."*** When the Yawmi Qiyama comes, if you are caught with a plant in your hand, you should plant it. It suggests that, even when all hope is lost for mankind, one should sustain nature's growth. He believed that nature remains good in itself, even if man does not benefit from it. Similarly, the Prophet (sal) incited believers to share the earth's resources. He said, ***"Muslims share alike in three things. Water, herbage (vegetation), and fire."*** He considered it a sin to withhold water from the thirsty. He said, ***"No one can refuse surplus water without sinning against Allah and against man."*** This is a big issue in politics today in the Middle East, in Turkey and Syria, for example. In this *hadith*, he says ***"water, herbage, and fire."*** He did not say, "animals." It's very interesting that he did not: the Prophet as a vegan!

The Prophet's (sal) attitude toward the sustainable use of land, the conservation of water, and treatment of animals also can be seen in the attitude of humility of his environmental philosophy. ***"The earth has been created for me as a mosque, and as a means of purification."*** This is Sahih Hadith, Bukhari. With these words, the Prophet (sal) emphasized the sacred nature of the earth or soil, not only as a pure entity, but also as a purifying agent, as a *masjid*, and as a means of purification. Because the reverence for the soil is demonstrated [by the instruction that] if you don't have water to make *wudu*—he didn't say use air; he didn't say use a leaf—he said, use the soil, *tayammum*.

Dry *wudu* permits the use of dust for purification for prayer when water is not available. We say in English, “Oh, that’s dirty.” We have to think in a slightly different way about what’s dirty, and what’s pure dirt. The Prophet (sal) saw the earth as subservient to human beings, but he recognized that it shouldn’t be over-exploited or abused, and that it also had rights like the trees and wildlife living on it. To protect the land and the water and the wildlife, the Prophet (sal) created inviolable zones known as “*hima*” and “*haram*,” in which resources are to be left untouched. Both are still in use today. *Haram* areas are often drawn up around wells and water sources to protect the ground water table from over pumping, and *hima* applies particularly to wildlife and forestry. And it usually designates an area of land where grazing or woodcutting are restricted, or where certain animal species are protected.

The Prophet (sal) not only encouraged the sustainable use of fertile lands, he also told his followers of the benefits of making unused land productive: planting a tree, sowing a seed, irrigating dry land. They were all regarded as charitable deeds—*sadaqa*. He says, “**Whoever brings dead land to life, that is, cultivates wasteland, for him is a reward therein.**” Any person who irrigates a plot of dead land or desert land becomes its rightful owner. When you put tomatoes up the hill a few years ago, since that land was unproductive land, you got *thawab* from that. I got a little because I suggested that you use it. You got most of it because you did it.

Then conservation of water. Think about the harsh, desert environment where the Prophet (sal) lived. Water was synonymous of life itself. Water was a gift from Allah, the source of all life on earth. Allah says in Qur’an, “**We made from water every living thing.**” Qur’an constantly reminds believers that they are but the guardians of Allah’s creation on earth, and that they should never take this creation for granted. “**Consider the water which you drink. Was it you that brought it down**

from the rain cloud or We? If We had pleased, We could have made it bitter.”

Saving water and safeguarding its purity were two important issues for the Prophet (sal). We have seen that his concern for sustainable use of water led to these *haram* zones in the vicinity of water sources. Even when water was abundant, he advocated to be sparing in the use of it. He recommended that believers perform *wudu* no more than three times, even if they were near a flowing stream of water. Abu Hari added, *“The men of science disapprove of exaggeration and also of exceeding the number of ablutions of the Prophet.”* The Prophet (sal) also warned against water pollution by forbidding urination in stagnant water, or pouring anything that was *nargis* or dirty into the water.

And then animals. ***“If anyone wrongfully kills, even a sparrow, let alone anything greater, he will face Allah’s interrogation.”*** These words reflect a deep reverence and love and respect that the Prophet (sal) always showed toward animals. He believed that as part of Allah’s creation, animals should be treated with dignity. The Hadith contain a large collection of traditions, stories, warnings, and admonitions about his relationship to animals. It shows that he had a very special consideration for horses and camels. To him they were valiant companions, he said, during journey and back. He found a great deal of peace and solace and wisdom in their presence. He said, ***“In the forehead of horses are tied up welfare and bliss until the Day of Resurrection.”***

Even in the slaughter of animals, the Prophet (sal) was very gentle and sensitive. He did not practice vegetarianism, you know that. He wasn’t vegan. He wasn’t an ovo-lacto vegetarian. But the Hadith clearly show that he was extremely sensitive to the suffering of animals, almost as if he shared their pain. He recommends using sharp knives and a good method so that the animal can die quickly, and with as little pain as possible. He also warned against slaughtering an animal in the presence of other

animals, or letting the animal witness the sharpening of the blade even. To him, that was equal to slaughtering the animal twice. And emphatically he condemned such practices as abominable. Think about the world we live in today.

It's impossible to do justice to the subject of environment and conservation and the Prophet (sal), his philosophy. But his holistic point of view of nature, his understanding of our place in the natural order of things really showed him to be a pioneer in environmental thought and action. Unfortunately, the harmony that he advocated between the human beings and their environment we see today is lost, or mostly lost. We are facing the effects of pollution, and over-exploitation, and the desertification, and the excessive rains, or excessive drought in some parts of the world... floods, and violent storms, and tornados, and the early hurricanes.

It's perhaps a time for all of us as Muslims to inform the world community, through this, our World Community, which name I did not choose accidentally, of our actions and relationships with the world and with the land. Inform the Muslims, and Christians, and Jews, and Buddhists, and Hindus, and atheists, and agnostics to take a leaf out of the book of the Prophet Mohammed's (sal) life, and to address the current environmental crisis seriously and with wisdom. ***"He who is content with little, Allah will be satisfied with him for his minimum deeds."*** Asalaamu aleykum.