

The Prophet of Islam:
Muhammad and Environmental Activism

Ozgur Koca
Ph.D. student, Claremont Graduate University

Abstract: This article examines a relatively unknown aspect of Muhammad: his interaction with the biophysical environment. The prophetic tradition (*hadith*), as it is narrated by the most authoritative sources, shows that the Prophet of Islam aimed to instill a deep sense of environmental consciousness in the minds and hearts of his followers. Starting from examples provided by authoritative hadith collections, this article will first focus on how Muhammad interacted with the surrounding biophysical environment. Next, it will outline some general principles that help tie together seemingly disparate teachings of the Muhammad and contribute to the construction of an authentic Islamic environmental ethics.

Key Words: Muhammad, Islam, hadith, ethics, environment

Muhammad, like every other important controversial historical figure, is what we choose to remember of his legacy. Current studies on the Prophet of Islam “choose” to remember the highlights of his life, such as his wars, diplomacy, and statesmanship. In this literature the Prophet of Islam appears to be a political leader, a conflict resolver, and a military leader. No one can deny the importance of studying such aspects of his life, however, there seems to be several problems with this highlight-based approach. First, focusing too much on the highlights necessarily leads one to lose sight of the more specific details. This is especially true when one deals with the life of Muhammad, for his wars, military leadership, and political activism occupy only a small portion of his prophetic career. For example, his wars

take up only about three months of his twenty-three-year career. Thus a highlight-based approach leads to a highly distorted understanding of Muhammad, for it misses the totality of his life. Secondly, in the religious universe of Islam, what Muhammad did in the rest of his life is equally, if not more, important. Moreover, one cannot properly understand political and military aspects of the Prophet of Islam without taking the details of his life into consideration, for a part is properly understood with an eye on its relationship with the whole. And, on a practical note, this task of exploring the details of Muhammad's life is not a difficult task since his life is so well recorded.

With these caveats in mind, I will attempt to examine a relatively unknown aspect of Muhammad's life: his interaction with the biophysical environment. The prophetic tradition (*hadith*), as it is narrated by the most authoritative sources, shows that the Prophet of Islam aimed to instill a deep sense of environmental consciousness in the minds and hearts of his followers. With a close look at Muhammad's biography, we encounter an environmental activist. Utilizing examples provided by such authoritative *hadith* collections as *al-Bukhari*, *Muslim*, *at-Tirmidhi*, and *Ibn Majah*, I will first focus on how the Prophet of Islam interacted with the surrounding biophysical environment. Then I will attempt to outline some general principles that will help tie together seemingly disparate teachings and examples of the Prophet of Islam and contribute to the construction of an authentic Islamic environmental ethics.

Sustainable Consumption

Muhammad's refraining from overconsumption, luxury, and lavishness is a lesson on how to be in tune with the realities of the ecosystem. It is a well-known fact that over-consumption leads to inevitable and gradual degradation of natural resources. Although it is impossible not to consume, it is possible to consume sensitively with an eye on limited natural resources. Consider the following prophetic passage that appears to exhort Muslims to adapt a lifestyle of which sustainable consumption is part and parcel: "No human ever filled a vessel worse than the stomach. Sufficient for any son of Adam are some morsels to keep his back straight. But if it must be, then one third for his food, one third for his drink and one third for his breath."¹

The very lifestyle that Muhammad chose to live is an example of wise use of resources and minimization of waste. The following examples indicate the highly ascetic lifestyle Muhammad chose to conduct his life: 1) He lived in a small hut made of mud that did not have a proper door, roof, and bed.² 2) His dietary habits were strict and austere; he ate very little and fasted very often.³ In addition, Muhammad maintained these habits not only when he was a shepherd boy, but also when he was equal to the kings. Overall, he chose a sustainable lifestyle that harmonizes with the quranic injunction: "Eat and drink, but waste not by excess, for God loves not the wasters." (Qur'an 7:31)

Treatment of Animals

¹ Muhammed ibn Isa Al-Thirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, (Istanbul: Cagri, 1992), Zuhd, 47

² Suleyman ibn Ash'ath Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, (Istanbul:Cagri, 1992), Jihad , 2675

³ Muhammad Ibn İsmail Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, (Istanbul: Cagri, 1992), Sawm, 193

Muhammad exhorts Muslims to treat animals with compassion and not to abuse them. He proclaims that animal species are an *ummah*, a community with rights to exist alongside with man.⁴⁵ Placing animals in the category of community allows him to ground a meaningful articulation of the rights and treatment of animals. This is a truly noteworthy form of discourse in a society where mistreatment of animals was a norm. He forbade beating animals,⁶ branding them on the face,⁷ having animals fight each other for human entertainment,⁸ and overburdening domestic animals. He also did not tolerate recreational hunting, scaring animals, targeting animals for shooting, and so on.⁹ Overall, Muhammad felt that animals should be well treated, protected, and not abused or degraded.

The following are some examples of Muhammad's sayings (*hadith*) inculcating a deep sense of ethical responsibility towards animals:

"While a man was walking on a road, he became very thirsty. Then he came across a well, got down into it, drank and then came out. Meanwhile he saw a dog panting and licking mud because of excessive thirst. The man said to himself: 'This dog is suffering from the same state of thirst as I did.' So he went down the well (again) and filled his shoe and held it in his mouth and watered the dog. Allah thanked him for that deed and forgave him. The people asked, 'O Allah's Apostle! Is there a reward for us in serving the animals?' He said, 'There is a reward for serving any living being.'"¹⁰

⁴ Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Birr, 1489

⁵ "There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end." Qur'an 6:38

⁶ Al-Hajjac Muslim, *Sahih Muslim* (Istanbul: Cagri, 1992), Book 21, 2595

⁷ Ibid, 2117

⁸ Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Book 10, 2556

⁹ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Book 21, 2595

¹⁰ Al-Bukhari *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 73, 8

“Allah the Merciful mercy the merciful. Be merciful to those on the earth so that those in the heavens mercy you.”¹¹

“Allah will ask those who kill a sparrow unfairly on the Day of Judgment.”¹²

"A lady was punished because of a cat which she had imprisoned till it died. She entered the fire because of it, for she neither gave it food nor water as she had imprisoned it, nor set it free to eat from the vermin of the earth."¹³

Forestation, Natural Parks, Trees

On migrating to Medina, Muhammad launched a campaign for planting trees and date groves in and around Medina.¹⁴ This might be one of the earliest tree planting campaigns in history. He was also very sensitive about preserving already existing forests and green spaces. He proclaimed such green zones as conservation areas, where every sort of living creature has the right to exist. Hunting, cutting down trees, and harming the biophysical environment was strictly forbidden in these “natural parks;” these zones were called *himas*, or sanctuaries.¹⁵ For example, a strip of land approximately twelve miles wide around Medina was proclaimed as a *hima*. We also know that there are several other *himas* around Medina and Mecca. The following are a couple of sayings from Muhammad that are closely related to our topic:

“Whoever plants trees, God will give him reward to the extent of their fruit.”¹⁶

¹¹ Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, Birr, 16

¹² Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Sayd, 57

¹³ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 56, 689

¹⁴ Ibrahim Ozdemir, “An Islamic Approach to the Environment,” Accessed 5-5-2012, www.ecologyandislam.wordpress.com/2010/01/03/an-islamic-approach-to-the-environment-ibrahim-ozdemir-ph-d/

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, (Istanbul: Cagri, 1992), 415

“Whoever reclaims and cultivates dry, barren land will be rewarded by God for the act. So long as men and animals benefit from it He will record it for him as almsgiving.”¹⁷

“If a Muslim plants a tree or grow grains and a bird, a person or an animal eats from it will be counted as a charity for him.”¹⁸

“If any of you have a date sapling on the doomsday he should plant it - if possible.”¹⁹

“Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded.”²⁰

Conservation of Water

It is a well-known fact that water scarcity, pollution, and waste are some of the greatest problems the world faces today. Muhammad was a great proponent of cultivation and sustainable use of water; he had a deep concern for water waste and pollution.

“Do not waste water even if you are using it from a running river!”²¹

“Whoever increases (the use of water) he does injustice and wrong.”²²

According to some reports He used to take shower using one sa’ (a little more than one galloon) of water.²³ Inspired by this example, Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazali

¹⁷ Muhammad al-Munawi, *Fayd al-Qadir Sharh al-Jami al-Saghir*, (Beirut: Dar al-Marifah, 1995), 39

¹⁸ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, al khars wal muzara, 12

¹⁹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Edebu'l-mufred, #27

²⁰ Ahmad b.Hanbal, *Musnad*, V. 374

²¹ Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Jihad, 21

²² Ibid., Wudu, #48

²³ Mustafa Abu-Sway, “Towards an Islamic Jurisprudence of Environment,” Accessed 5-5-2012, <http://ecologyandislam.wordpress.com/2010/01/03/towards-an-islamic-jurisprudence-of-the-environment/>

attempted to calculate the maximum amount of water that one should use for purification and bathing to minimize the wasting of water.²⁴

Some General Principles

Now I turn to briefly outline three general principles that will tie together or be extracted from the abovementioned sayings and practices of Muhammad and the quranic injunctions.

1. Sacralization of Nature

The Qur'an and the teachings and example of the Prophet of Islam establish the nature of beings as manifestations of a higher reality, the Absolute, God.²⁵ Thus, the world is sacralized and relationships between beings are enriched by the presence of God, the sustainer of relationships (*Qayyum*). Attaching beings to God and to each other in such a sacred ontological framework leads to one of the basic tenets of many religious worldviews: Things are more than they appear. Apart from their place in the cosmic order, beings also signify something greater than themselves.²⁶ Therefore, beings as comprehensive mirrors of the divine manifestation are valued through their relationships with the divine as well as with

²⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya*, vol.1, p. 139, cited in Mustafa Abu-Sway, "Towards an Islamic Jurisprudence of Environment."

²⁵ "To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is God's countenance. For God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing." Qur'an 2:115.

²⁶ "Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the 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 subjugated between the sky and earth — [here] indeed are signs for a people who thinks." Qur'an 2:164.

other beings. Both physical and spiritual significance of beings are celebrated.²⁷ This view provides grounding for a highly sophisticated environmental ethics.²⁸

2. Relationality-cum-Responsibility

This describes, then, a profoundly relational worldview in that everything is connected to each other, not only horizontally through material interactions, but also vertically through a higher principle. We are as responsible ethical agents, placed within the larger context of being of which we are only a part, and in which we have a certain set of relationships with everything else in the world. By relationality, I mean perceiving the world as an organic whole where everything is receptive to the acts of everything else in both a physical and metaphysical plane. By responsibility, I mean asserting humanity's unique position as a responsible being for the rest of creation. Relationality attaches individuals to the whole and leads to "consciousness of totality"; responsibility points to the significance of human acts and leads to "consciousness of individuality." This is, then, a harmonious oscillation between totality and individuality. In this framework, humanity is a conscious, responsible, and relational species. Things are no longer independent, self-enclosed, or substantial entities, but rather profoundly interdependent and receptive phenomena.²⁹

²⁷ All that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth glorifieth Allah. Qur'an 59:1.

²⁸ "Among Lote-trees without thorns/ Among Talh trees with flowers piled one above another/ In shade long-extended/ By water flowing constantly/ And fruit in abundance/ Whose season is not limited, nor [supply] forbidden." Qur'an 56: 28-33.

²⁹ "For that We pour forth water in abundance/ And We split the earth in fragments/ And produce therein corn/ And grapes and nutritious plants/ And olives and dates/ And enclosed gardens, dense with lofty trees/ And fruits and fodder/ For use and convenience to you and to your cattle." Qur'an 80:25-32.

3. Centralization-cum-Decentralization of Humanity

In the eyes of the Qur'an, humans are unique. We are vicegerents (*khalifa*) of God on earth; the world has been given to us as trust (*amanah*) to preserve, to protect, and to develop. Man is centralized as a relational and responsible being as it is already implied. But this does not lead to anthropocentrism, because the Qur'an appears to envisage a God-centric universe where the ultimate aim of creation is not man. There seems to be a greater purpose for creation in that God manifests itself to be known by itself and by other conscious beings. Here, humanity's unique position is asserted in a way that can escape the pitfalls of anthropocentrism. Humanity is at the center of creation because it has an unparalleled capacity to respond to God, to know God, to love God, to serve God, and to be the most comprehensive mirror of the "names" of God (*insan kamil*). But this capacity is not given to humanity to create hierarchies or to exploit creation. Thus, man is centralized as a responsible and relational being; but man is also decentralized because he/she is not the ultimate purpose of the creation.

Bibliography

The Holy Qur'an, trans. Yusuf Ali. Maryland. Amana: 1983.

Al-Munawi, Muhammad *Fayd al-Qadir Sharh al-Jami al-Saghir*. Beirut: Dar al-Marifah, 1995.

Al-Thirmidhi, Muhammad b. Isâ. *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Ibn Majah, Ebû Abdillah Muhammad b. Yezid. *Sunan Ibn Majah*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Abu Dawud, Süleyman b. el-Ash'ath, *Sunan Abu Dawud*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Al-Bukhari, Muhammed b. Ismail. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Muslim, Al Haccac, *Sahih Muslim*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Ibrahim Ozdemir, "An Islamic Approach to the Environment", last modified 2010/01/03,

www.ecologyandislam.wordpress.com//an-islamic-approach-to-the-environment-ibrahim-ozdemir-ph-d/

Ibn Hanbal, Ahmad. *Müsned*. Istanbul: Cagri, 1992.

Mustafa Abu-Sway, "Towards an Islamic jurisprudence of Environment", last modified

2010/01/03, <http://ecologyandislam.wordpress.com/towards-an-islamic-jurisprudence-of-the-environment/>

Al-Ghazali, Ebu Hamid. *Ihya'u Ulumd-din*. Beirut: Dar al-Khayr, 1993.