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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN THE HOLY QURAN

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Abstract. The Holy Quran, the sacred Muslim religious book, is also a sum of principles and teachings covering all aspects of human life – religious concepts, ethical and spiritual conduct precepts, and rules and regulations on various aspects of everyday life. Moreover, it comprises numerous rules on nature and environmental protection. About 750 verses (of 6236) refer to various aspects of nature, and to the relationship between man and nature. The aim of this paper is to analyse some of the many ecological verses, i.e. the ones that educate people in the spirit of nature conservation, sustainability and responsibility towards its preservation for future generations. The research question leading to the originality of this study was whether the Quranic verses comprise environmental teachings that address the various aspects of nature, the environment, and the interactions between humans and environmental components. The article highlights the eco-educational dimension of the Holy Quran by means of a qualitative investigation. It addresses the ecological considerations on the rational use of natural resources, ethical interactions between man and nature, and the rights of plants, animals and of the physical elements of the environment. For this study, we have used the Romanian translation of the Holy Quran, the third edition, translated by the Islamic and Cultural League of Romania (2004) and published by the Islam Publishing House, as well as the online translation of the Quran.

The Holy Quran shows that nature is a whole, a complete and complex system, in which the components support and protect each other. If one component is affected, the order and functioning of the entire system, i.e. nature, are disturbed. In this respect, the Holy Quran has been promoting a holistic approach to the environment approximately 1300 years before the introduction of the academic concept of holism. The teachings of the Holy Quran support moderation of the human behavior in order to avoid excesses. This moderation can be described through three principles found throughout its pages: the principles of unity, balance and responsibility.

The environmental teachings are obvious in the verses of the Holy Quran. In order to ensure a healthy environment, these teachings must be respected and put into practice on every level. As a

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conclusion, we can say that the Prophet Mohammed could be considered a pioneer of environmentalism, preservation, sustainable development and resource management.

Keywords: The Holy Quran, environmental education, teachings, environmental protection

1. Background

The sacred religious book of all Muslims, the Holy Quran, which contains 114 chapters (surah) and 6236 verses (ayah), is more than just a religious text, and represents a sum of principles and teachings that cover all aspects of life and human activity. The Holy Quran contains religious concepts, ethical and spiritual conduct precepts, as well as rules and regulations for various aspects of everyday life. The Islamic way is to live a peaceful and harmonious life, individually, socially and ecologically.

For many centuries mankind has been unable to study certain information found in the Quran, as the scientific means available did not allow it. It was only in the twentieth century that people understood that many of the verses in the Quran were describing natural phenomena. Even today, without using advanced research, scientists have a hard time comprehending the information available in the Quran. In order to understand some of the verses in the Quran, a scientist must possess an encyclopedic knowledge encompassing many scientific disciplines. However, we have to keep in mind that this holy book remains first and foremost a religious book and we should not expect any actual scientific purpose or result from it.

One can identify in the Holy Quran numerous rules intended to protect nature and the environment. Approximately 750 verses of the Holy Quran refer to various aspects of nature, the relationship between man and nature, vegetal and animal organisms and their environment. In this holy book, there are recommendations on reflecting over nature, on studying the links between organisms and their environment, on using our reason constructively in order to maintain the balance and proportions of nature.

The environment is not our property and the human beings have a duty to take care of it and preserve it for all future generations (Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011). The responsibility of man is not confined to one single generation, with everything having to be passed on in good condition from one generation to another. This sustainable approach has been supported in the Holy Quran, in the 22nd verse of the 2nd Surah, approximately 1300 years before the best known and cited definition of sustainable development, presented in the *Brundtland report* (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987): "Sustainable development is aimed at the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to address theirs".

2. Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role of the Holy Quran in environmental education, briefly noting and analyzing some of the many verses on ecology and selecting the ones which educate people on the importance of the environment and of taking responsibility to preserve it for future generations, which is the meaning of sustainability. The research question leading to the originality of this study was whether the Quranic verses comprise environmental teachings that address the various aspects of nature, the environment, and the interactions between humans and environmental components. The article stresses the eco-educational dimension of the Holy Quran by investigating the qualitative content of its verses.

3. Methods

The present study is a qualitative and descriptive-analytic investigation of the Holy Quran. It addresses the ecological considerations on the rational use of natural resources, ethical interactions between man and nature, as well as the rights of plants, animals and all other non-living elements of the environment. Moreover, the study analyses (what we referred to as) “the green verses”, in order to highlight the ecological significance of the Holy Quran, in today’s environmentally-troubling context. The Holy Quran transcends space, time and events, proving through every verse its quality as an all-around guidance pillar, including many valuable pieces of advice for nature lovers and environment defenders.

For this study, we have used the Romanian translation of the Holy Quran, the third edition, translated by the Islamic and Cultural League of Romania (2004) and published by the Islam Publishing House, as well as the online translation of the Quran. In all references to the Quran in this paper, the first number refers to the surah (chapter) and the second to the ayah (verse) – e.g. 2:22.

4. Results and Discussions

The teachings of the Holy Quran support moderation of the human behaviour in order to avoid excesses. This moderation can be described by using three principles found throughout its pages: the principles of unity, balance and responsibility.

4.1 The Principle of Unity

The Holy Quran shows that nature is a whole, a complete and complex system the components of which support and protect each other. If one of the components is affected, it disturbs the order and normal function of the entire system of nature (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012). In this respect, the Holy Quran has encouraged a holistic approach of the environment (55:7-8) approximately 1300 years before the emergence of the academic concept of holism that has been defined by Smuts (1926).

All nature is one. Its elements interrelate and form a whole. Mankind has been given all the resources it needed to live (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Sharif, 1961; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Miller, 1992). It must use them sagely and has no right to abuse them (20:53-54) (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012). The 164th verse of the 2nd Surah and the 10th verse of the 55th Surah synthesize the same principle. People must manage wisely all of nature’s gifts and at the same time get to know nature, its elements, its processes and their roles, in order to better understand and respect it (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Miller, 1992).

4.2 The Principle of Balance

The universe exists in perfect balance and proportion, both qualitatively and quantitatively (29:44; 54:49; 55:7) (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004) and man is obliged to respect the environment (40:57). All the components of the universe have a well-established role. As part of the environment, man has his role as well – as its wise user and protector – and the non-compliance with this role leads to imbalance (Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Akhtar, 1996).

The environment in which we live is a chain of links that influence each other in such a way that any imbalance felt by one of them will bring a negative influence on all others. This perspective has recently been proven by environmental sciences [the concept of ecological balance is relatively new, introduced in the late 20th century, by United Nations (1997)], but was pointed out by many verses of the Holy Quran (15:19; 25:2; 54:49) (Akhtar, 1996).

The billions of galaxies in the universe, the billions of creatures on Earth, everything that has ever been created, from the smallest particle of the atom and up to the biggest of galaxies, they are all part of a perfectly-created system where all the elements find themselves interdependent, influencing each other in a positive or negative way. Each being has its predestined function, which must remain undamaged and respected (2:60; 7:85; 21:16; 55:7-8) (Seda, 2002; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Osman, 2012; Mohammadi, Najjarzadegan, & Masoumbeigi, 2013).

4.3 The Principle of Responsibility

According to Islam, man is not the master of nature and world. Man is responsible for his behaviour (33:72) (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004) and he is the gardener of the Earth (2:30) (Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012). Man must be aware of his responsibility on this Earth, as he is only a temporary administrator – a beneficiary and NOT an owner (28:77) (Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012).

The Quran encourages the protection of all the natural elements of the environment (Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012) and specifies that people are not superior to any other species (6:38). The Holy Quran mentions that there is a close relationship between the behaviour of people and the state of the environment (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011). A righteous and moral behaviour will lead to positive results (7:96; 11:52).

The Quran sends out a clear message to take good care of the environment and protect it, as humankind is not its owner! Moreover, the Quran prohibits cruelty to animals and birds. It is man's responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of all creation. In other words, the attitude of Islam towards the environment and natural resources is a constructive one, based on protection and development, rejecting all abuse and destruction (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012). These issues are highlighted in the 11th Surah, verse 61, which refers to maintaining and restoring the lands through agriculture, cultivation and construction. Therefore, the right to use natural resources implies humankind's commitment to preserve them in a sustainable manner which will ensure that the next generations will also enjoy their benefits, appreciate their beauty and use them to build their homes – all of which will have to be done in a moderate and considerate way (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Kamaruzaman & Siti Akmar, 2011; Mohammadi, Najjarzadegan, & Masoumbeigi, 2013). Environmental protection and the conservation of nature represent the philosophy of the Islamic environmentalism (Aminzadeh, 2013; Bateni, 2013; Bazzi, 2013; Karizi, 2013; Mozafari, 2013; Arbabi & Noormohamadi, 2014; Mohammadi, Najjarzadegan, & Masoumbeigi, 2013). As the administrator of nature, man has the duty to take care of environmental sustainability and to oppose waste (6:141; 7:31). Over the following two sections, we will present the teachings on the various environmental elements enclosed in some of the many eco-verses.

4.4 Water and Air

Water is the miraculous liquid that sustains life (21:30). Several verses in the Holy Quran (22:5) refer to the water cycle and its fundamental role in sustaining life on Earth (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Bucaille, 1995; Keshavarz, 2010). Aside from its role in supporting life, for Islam (as well as for all the other religions across the globe), water has a socio-religious function, purifying the body and clothes (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004). The Islamic culture forbids any sort of waste, including water (7:31) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004). The word water is found numerous times in the Holy Quran, which repeatedly praises its life-giving properties (22:63; 25:48; 50:9).

The water circuit is well known today. The verses of the Holy Quran related to the water circuit (39:21) express ideas which are utterly obvious in the present world, but we need to keep in mind the reality of the time when the revelation and writing of the Holy Quran occurred: a time when the only known practice was land irrigation (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Bucaille, 1995). Such ideas are common nowadays, but it was only in the XVIIth century that Bernard Palissy put together the first coherent description of the water circuit (Bucaille, 1995; Verry, 2003). If someone were to compare the notions of modern hydrology and the information available in the Quran on the matter, the consensus between them would be undeniable.

There are also certain verses with easily understandable ideas, which, at the same time, reveal amazing scientific facts. A good example is the 30th verse of the 21st Surah, which is a spectacular statement of the modern idea claiming that the origin of life is aquatic. Water is at the origin of all of the life forms on Earth (Bucaille, 1995; Keshavarz, 2010).

Air is just as important as water. Most of the living beings on Earth depend on the air they breathe to survive. Given all the functions fulfilled by the atmosphere, it is obvious that keeping it balanced, pure and unpolluted is essential for preserving life (7:57) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004).

A serious issue arising from air pollution is represented by acid rain, which kills lakes and rivers, destroys the soil and threatens human, plant and animal life. The main pollutants that contribute to acid rain are sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide. The verses 68-70 of the 56th Surah refer to this particular aspect of pollution – acid rain (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004).

4.5 Earth, Plants and Animals

Fertile ground is the foundation for crops, which represent a major food supply for man and other beings (16:11) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012). Reducing soil productivity, exposing it to erosion, as well as uncontrolled exploitation are all actions taken against the general natural balance and they are forbidden by Islam (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004). Not only does Prophet Muhammad encourage the sustainable use of fertile lands, but He also talks about the benefits of transforming unused lands into productive ones (25:49) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004).

Plants are sources of food, oxygen and soil-enrichment substances, they protect lands from soil erosion with their roots, they absorb and retain water, they represent an essential resource and a starting point for medicine, perfume, hygienic items, fuel, etc.

Plants are of different species, kinds and colours, distinguished by traits which had been mentioned more than 1000 years before the notion of “species” was first introduced in *Historia plantarum*, John Ray’s paper from 1686 (16:13; 80:27-32) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Bucaille, 1995; Ray, 1686). In the time of Prophet Muhammad, botany was not advanced enough for scientists to know that plants have both female and male reproductive

organs (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Bucaille, 1995), but the 53rd verse of the 20th surah and the 3rd verse of the 13th surah mention this knowledge.

Animals are not just a source of food and various goods. Due to their enhanced senses and their ability to develop social relations, animals have a special status in Islam. Muslims believe that animals deserve respect and people must also show compassion to them. A Muslim has to provide food or water for a thirsty or hungry animal. In the Holy Quran, animals are considered communities, similar to the ones formed by humans (6:38) (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004).

Muslims must show kindness to animals, even when they are about to sacrifice them. There are very strict Islamic rules for sacrificing an animal. A Muslim is not allowed to torment an animal by beating it, burdening it with more than it can carry, mutilating it, burning it, etc.

To live a life according to the Islamic principles means letting go of any extravagance and living harmoniously with everything that surrounds us, as well as showing compassion towards all other elements of nature (Aş-Şarif, 2011; Osman, 2012; Islam, 2004).

5. Conclusion

Everything on this planet was created wisely and with a purpose (54:49). The Holy Quran mentions that man must not change anything in this natural order (7:56). Still, all the damages brought upon the environment have been caused by man. The environmental and ecological disasters, as well as human interventions, have been vividly recounted in the Holy Quran (30:41). When the concept of environment is assessed in light of the Holy Quran, it becomes apparent that the Holy Book offers significant and permanent solutions for a wide range of environmental problems, i.e. it has put forth principles contributing to environmental education and protection.

The environmental teachings are obvious in the verses of the Holy Quran. In order to ensure a healthy environment, these teachings must be respected and put into practice on every level. As a conclusion, we can say that the Prophet Muhammad could be considered a pioneer of environmentalism, preservation, sustainable development and resource management.

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