



## Original Article

### Theocentrism is not Anthropocentric: An Enlightened Environmentalist Reading of the Holy Qur'an

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**Abstract:** Humans should come down from their destructive arrogance stool to take the best cognizance of the fact that nature is a sculptural work of God. Their failure to realise this fact has been responsible for their formulation of the secular environmental theories which include; anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism, and the hybrid eco-feminism. Romanced with these theories the Holy Scriptures are also implicated by reading them in the light of one of these theories and considered anthropocentric. As a matter of fact, the best of these secular theories should never be taken to be representing theocentric view of the environment.

**Keywords:** Theocentrism, Anthropocentrism, Zoocentrism, Biocentrism, Ecocentrism, Eco-Feminism, Environmentalism.

**Introduction:** It is beyond reasonable doubt that nature faces serious problems. While it would do well to remind ourselves that humans cannot be exclusively held accountable for all the environmental problems as some are naturally-occurred though, humans-caused environmental problems are quiet so significant<sup>1</sup>. As a response, environmental scientists and philosophers manifested some environmental theories to rescue the environment. These are anthropocentrism<sup>2</sup>, zoocentrism<sup>3</sup>, biocentrism<sup>4</sup>, ecocentrism<sup>5</sup>,

and the hybrid eco-feminism, which, accordingly, places the interest of humans, animals, entire biomes, holistic ecosystem, and female-tinted ecology at its centre. Though, the criticisms have been levied against all these theories individually or generically<sup>6</sup>. However, the theocentric point of view is related to human and non-human environment placing God at the centre as the creator of nature generally<sup>7</sup>. According to this view, the value of actions done to people or the environment is attributed to God<sup>8</sup>.



The account of creation as contained in Genesis has been read in such a way that it favors the anthropocentric human gaze toward nature<sup>9</sup>. These readings have now been so popularly held that they have almost been taken as God's charters as far as human relationship with nature is concerned<sup>10</sup>. For the destructive posture of anthropocentric environmentalism, many environmentally-minded theorists have now criticized scriptures too for being essentially anthropocentric<sup>11</sup>. It is sad enough that the theocentric views have also been seen by, perhaps, reading the scripture with the predilection of the secular theories resulting from an inference that the holy scriptures are anthropocentric. This allegation is contained by Lynn White, coming from a Christianity perspective, in 1967. Seyyed Hussein Nasr published a similar notion of attacking the Arabic world in 1966<sup>12</sup>. According to Olaniyan Adeola (2021), making sense from Sufism (A school of Islam) point of view, the environment is defined as everything that surrounds anything and flourishes for everything. It is rightly put thus: "The totality of everything, circumstances and conditions, biotic or abiotic, natural or artificial, material or spiritual, concrete or abstract and/or permanent or temporal, which affects, partners or influences, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously and/or positively or negatively the survival, wellbeing and flourishing of everything, that I call the environment of a given thing"<sup>13</sup>. This work is justified by Ibn Rusd (Averroes). He argued that faith and reason should not necessarily contradict each other and whenever there appears a contradiction, the scripture should be revisited and reread for alleviation of the contradiction<sup>14</sup>. He made

this inference from chapter 3 verse 7 of the Qur'an, as a matter-of-fact; Averroes theory foreruns a non-anthropocentric reading of the scripture.

In this paper, a theodicy effort shall be made to debunk the allegations of White and Seyyed Hussein Nasr. This work is not only taking a theodicy view but also attempting to show that an authentic environmental theory that best harmonises human with nature is theocentric. To achieve this, Islamic descriptive ethics shall be dichotomised from the prescriptive or normative ones with the Aid of Sharp Hermeneutics.

**Methodology:** This article was written from October 2021 to March 2022 in Nigeria, at the University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Department of Philosophy. In the course of writing this article, Islamic primary sources of Sharia; Quran, and Hadith were read in the light of environmental ethics. In addition, many other kinds of literature and comments by Islamic scholars, written both in English and Arabic, were consulted before arriving at conclusion. Google scholar, Webinar, and many other search engines were employed. Theocentrism, Islamic Environmental ethics, and anthropocentrism are possible keywords for searching the literature.

**Descriptive Islamic Environmental Ethics:** Many environmentally-minded theorists e.g. White and Nasr from the Christian and Islamic have criticised scriptures too for being essentially anthropocentric which attacks the existence and intelligibility of God and His divine status. However, Ibrahim Ozdemir remarked that; parroting the Christian

view, a piecemeal and oversimplified approach has been given to some verses of the Qur'an<sup>15</sup>. Some descriptive Qur'anic ethics has been discussed to debunk the misinterpreted notions under these subtopics.

1. An Account of the Creation: For the creation of nature and humans, there are five different chapters of the Qur'an that say what is undeniably similar to Bible only with an exclusion of hierarchical account. With importations and impositions of some meanings, perhaps from Bible, the Qur'an is alleged of being anthropocentric; the notion that is not, implicitly or explicitly, stated in the Qur'an. Quran says God created everything on earth for human beings and humans are his vicegerent (Caliphs) on earth to look after the world and given them knowledge of everything He created.

*“It is He who created for you all of that which is on the earth. Then He established Himself on the heaven, [His being above all creation], and made them seven heavens, and He is Knowing of all things. And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.” They said, “Will you place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?” Allah said, “Indeed, I know that which you do not know.” And He taught Adam the names—all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, “Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful.” They said, “Exalted are You; we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, it is You who is the Knowing, the Wise.” He said, “O*

*Adam, inform them of their names.” And when he had informed them of their names, He said, “Did I not tell you I know the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and earth? And I know what you reveal and what you have concealed.” And [mention], when We said to the angels, “Prostrate before Adam”; so they prostrated, except for Satan. He refused and was arrogant and became of the disbelievers. And We said, “O Adam, dwell, you and your companion, in Paradise and eat therefrom in [ease and] abundance from whatever you wish. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers”<sup>16</sup>.*

Reading further from another chapter will show a beyond notion that man was rather placed on earth as God's vicegerent base on trust as portrayed in following verse of Quran.

*“And it is He who has made you successors upon earth and has raised some of you above others in degrees [of rank] ‘that He may try you’ through what He has given you. Indeed your Lord is swift in penalty; but indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful”<sup>17</sup>.*

Blending the earlier verses *make upon the earth a successive authority* with the latter *that He may try you* in the light of a sharp hermeneutic will expose the real intention of God. By the light of God's knowledge, which will not only make them to realise themselves and the status conferred on them but also what they are in relation to other creatures and the sanctions that await them afterward, God's requirements from humans are exposed better. Moreover, the fact that another verse follows the earlier stated verses buttresses this conclusion that humans are expected to be guided from

their ‘default’ behaviour to a ‘designed’ manner as contained in the Scripture.

*“We said, ‘Go down from it, all of you. And when guidance comes to you from Me, whoever follows My guidance – there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve’<sup>18</sup>.*

In addition, the celebrated stewardship status would turn to be a pitiable condition when it becomes realised that the stewardship is nothing but a trial. Hence, it becomes questionable that; is something held on trial is a benefit that should be celebrated or a burden that should be mourned or pitied, especially if one is a reasonable person? This point is established more when the notion of trust (*amana*) is introduced in another chapter of the Qur’an. Allah offers *amana* to the heavens, to the earth, to the mountains—to the rest of creation—but they all refused; only a human being took the risk of accepting it.

*“Verily, We did offer the amana (trust) to the heavens and the earth and the mountains; but they refused to bear it Yet man took it - for, verily, he has always been prone to tyranny and foolishness”<sup>19</sup>.*

Mohd Yaseen Gada considers that to the concept of *Califa*, a related term is *amana* or trust<sup>20</sup>. This makes us question humankind’s acceptance of the load that was rejected by every other creation? Alas! The question is answered at the enclosure of that very verse that; *“because humans are always prone to tyranny and foolishness”<sup>19</sup>*. Following from this verse, can you imagine that humankind who brags as Mr. Smart is portrayed as the most foolish of all God’s creations!

Be that as it may, this discussion is not exhaustive until Prophet Muhammad’s view is interrogated. According to a

narration; *“the world is sweet and green and verily Allah has installed you as a Caliph in it in order to see how you act”<sup>21</sup>*. In another Hadith, he says: *“each of you is a shepherd and will be answerable for those under his care”<sup>22</sup>*. Compounding these narrations is the fact that the term *Calipha* appears in seven different places of the Qur’an such that some are in singular and the others are in plural form. This is, perhaps, a demonstration that it refers to both a personal and global effort in keeping the balance of the earth. Human beings, viewing themselves from Hegelian rationalistic eyeglass, profess themselves as the authoritarian dominion, who have no external check to exhibit all they wish except what, implicitly or explicitly, immediately or in the future, has negative consequences on them. It is this anthropocentric gaze that turns to arrest humans today in form of environmental problems of all kinds.

2. The Instrumentalist Description of Nature: Reading the Qur’an in another oversimplified way may make one wrongly misquote it for claiming that everything was created to meet human ends. Such a reading can be hastily misconstrued from several verses of the Qur’an, which include these fourteen continuous of verses:

*And the grazing livestock He has created for you; in them is warmth and [numerous] benefits, and from them you eat. And for you in them is [the enjoyment of] beauty when you bring them in [for the evening] and when you send them out [to pasture]. And they carry your loads to a land you could not have reached except with difficulty to yourselves. Indeed, your Lord is Kind and Merciful. And He*

*created the horses, mules and donkeys for you to ride and [as] adornment. And He creates that which you do not know. And upon Allah is the direction of the [right] way, and among the various paths are those deviating. And if He willed, He could have guided you all. It is He who sends down rain from the sky, from it is drink and from it is foliage in which you pasture [animals]. He causes to grow for you thereby the crops, olives palm trees, grapevines, and from all the fruits. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who give thought. And He has subjected for you the night and day and the sun and the moon, and the stars are subjected by His command. Indeed in that are signs for who reason. And [He has subjected] whatever He multiplied for you on the earth of varying colours. Indeed in that is a sign for a people who remember. And it is He who subject the sea for you to eat from it ornaments which you wear. And you see the ships flowing through it, and [He subjected it] that you may seek His bounty; and perhaps you will be grateful. And He has caste into the earth firmly set mountains, lest it shift with you, and [made] rivers and roads, that you may be guided. And landmarks. And by the stars they are [also] guided. Then is He who creates like one who does not create? So will you not be reminded? And if you should count the favours of Allah, you could not enumerate them. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful<sup>23</sup>.*

From the above, a wrong conclusion may be made that God, purportedly, says that everything is created “exclusively” for man. A similar notion is expressed in some

other verses across different chapters of the Qur’an<sup>24,25,26</sup>. If this is accepted to be true, then, it provides a “tonic” to any anthropocentric project! This questions the integrity of God. However, an enlightened reading of these verses reveals that these verses only highlight the benefits the other components of nature have for humans while a further reading will bring to the limelight that these things are for humans in the same way humans are for them reciprocally. In another word, everything in nature is not “exclusively” but “inclusively” created for humans, such that they are reciprocally and equally dependent on one another, contrary to the superficial reading. Put in a concise but logical axiom; *everything is created for everything*. This point is proven in the Qur’an thus: “*And the earth has He spread out for all living beings, with fruit thereon, and palm trees with sheathed clusters [of dates], and grain growing tall on its stalks, and sweet-smelling plants*”<sup>27</sup>. Commenting in a parallel mind, Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said that God created these creatures not only for the benefits of man but for the reasons other than serving man”<sup>28</sup>. Said Nuri argues that, contrary to humanocentric view, there are several purposes for the creations. In his book *The Words*, he categorises them into three. Firstly, everything is created to proclaim the miraculous wonders by means of their life and existence, the miracles of power, and the traces of artistry of the Maker and display them to the gaze of the Glorious Monarch. Secondly, the human was created as a conscious being for truth-displaying offer to the gaze of the angels and jinn, men and animals, and the environment. The third one has to do with soul itself and consists of even minor consequences as the experience of pleasure

and joy, and living with some degree of permanence and comfort<sup>29</sup>.

**Islamic Prescriptive Environmental Ethics:** The Islamic prescriptive environmental ethics is embedded in the Islamic sources of Sharia; Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma and Qiyas. The justification for this is alluded to, in the Qur'an says "*Do they not ponder over the Qur'an in order to understand its deep meaning, or is it that their minds are locked up from within?*"<sup>30</sup>. Algazel remarked regarding this verse that the Qur'an is like an ocean. Like the pearls remain hidden at the bottom of the ocean, the same way, wonderful meanings have been hidden behind the Qur'anic verses so it is the duty of a Muslim to understand these meanings<sup>31</sup>. Buttressing this view, Parvez Manzoor asserted that environmental ethics is the core of the Qur'anic *weltanschauung* and man should infuse the natural world with transcendent (revealed) ethics according to the Qur'an<sup>32</sup>. With this understanding at the back of our mind, the Qur'an shall be interrogated with the aim to unearth Islamic prescriptive environmental ethics. This shall be discussed under the following heading:

**1. Islamic Environmental Ethical:** There are numerous verses, spreading across different chapters, checking human's nonchalant attitudes on earth. God checks neither to abuse nor to corrupt nature in the course of their usage of the land either for animal grazing, commerce, transportation, planting as well as mining expenditures. On the usage of land for transportation sake, God, purportedly, warns "*And do not walk upon the earth exultantly. Indeed, you will never tear the earth [apart] and you will never reach the mountain in height*"<sup>33</sup>. And also "*And do not walk through the*

*earth exultantly. Indeed, Allah does not like everyone self-deluded and boastful*"<sup>34</sup>. Interrogating this warning in the contemporary light, it can be inferred that using sport cars that has less burden to the land while driving would be encouraged rather than land-quaking jeeps. Traveling in a car, where possible, would be preferred to traveling in entourage for the boast of wealth, on and on like that.

In addition, in the course of water mining, God purportedly instructed to Moses as "*And [recall] when Moses prayed for water for his people, so We said, 'Strike with your staff the stone.' And their gushed forth from it twelve springs, and every people knew its watering place. 'Eat and drink from the provision of Allah, and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption*"<sup>35</sup>. In the contemporary light, this verse can also be read as issuing regularity on humans' digging of land, especially borehole water system that the action should be reviewed as the excesses could have devastating impact on earth, as recent geological researches show.

More so, on causing destruction on plants, it is prohibited in the Qur'an "*When he turns his back, His aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and progeny. But Allah does not love mischief-making*"<sup>36</sup>. In the contemporary light, this verse could be issuing warning on agrochemical farming. Yet, on the building, another verse warns "*And remember when He made you successors after the Aad and settled you in the land, [and] you take for yourselves palaces from its plains and carve from the mountains, homes. Then remember the favours of Allah and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption*"<sup>37</sup>. And

also If Allah could be worried hence issuing warning to the Aad despite the primitiveness of building technology of those days, how much more could be His worry given to the sophistication of technology of today's building and construction? This also includes quarrying and mining of precious stones for building strength and ornamental purposes. There are numerous other Qur'anic verses negating one humans' corrupt practice.

The Prophet of Islam's voices as far as humans' interrelationship with nature is equally of important. Reference shall be made to a story in a hadith "*God's Messenger appeared while Sa'ad was taking the ablutions. When he saw that Sa'ad was using a lot of water, he intervened saying: 'What is this? You are wasting water'. Sa'ad replied asking: 'Can there be wastefulness while taking the ablutions'? To which God's Messenger replied: 'Yes, even if you take them on the bank of a rushing river'*"<sup>38</sup>.

However, while reflecting on above hadith, Ozdemir noted that Prophet Muhammad, perhaps, is not referring to only minimisation of water but preaching austerity to Muslims in all ramifications. Actually taking the ablution is a mandatory condition for the prayers, but not wasting anything is the Islamic teaching. He comments further that if there is Prophet's proscriptions on the wastefulness and extravagance of things that neither cause deficiency nor pollution of nature, thus nor spoil the ecological balance, how much more his degree of prohibition could be on things whose wastefulness and extravagance; causes deficiency, pollution, spoil the ecological balance, violates the rights of forthcoming generations to live in

a healthy environment, is arbitrary and meaningless, and merely for enjoyment, that, is for the satisfaction of destructive side of man; [and] it is contrary to the basic aim?<sup>39</sup> With the mindfulness that natural resources are always limited and finite no matter the apparent abundance of its occurrence, Quran teaches the sustainability of these resources as it is found in different verses thus: "*eat and drink but not to waste as God do not love the wasters*"<sup>40</sup>.

Prophet Muhammad also reported "*If any Muslim plants a tree or sows a field and a human, bird, or animal eats from it, it shall be reckoned as charity from him*"<sup>41</sup>. And also "*If the day of resurrection comes upon anyone of you while he has a seedling in hand, let him plant it*"<sup>42</sup>. Reading this last hadith, one would realise that environmental ethics in the heart of prophet Muhammad is even beyond caring for the nature for oneself, for future generation. Again Prophet Mohammad prohibits not to urinating in stagnant water and defecating under a fruiting tree for hygienic reason<sup>43</sup>. There are several others which issue warning on maltreatment or abuse of animals on grazing, carrying overload<sup>44</sup>. Islamic environmental ethical prohibitions are so exhaustive that if strictly followed, there would exist a perpetual harmony between human and nature.

This is where Islamic moral codes among Muslims become extended to the nature too where it is said thus: "*The believers are but brothers, so make settlement between your brothers. And fear Allah that you may receive mercy*"<sup>45</sup>". In this case, it becomes imperative for Muslims to make harmony with nature. Many great saints

have understood this interrelatedness and interconnectedness among humans and other components of nature. This is the reason why a number of them could leave the community of humans where both the believers and the hypocrites are diluted, to join the community of plants and animals in the jungle believing that there is a community of pure unadulterated believers. Many of such is found in the first systematised Sufi Order, Qadriyyah, founded by, and named after, Sheikh Abdu al-Qadri Jailany. This is the more reason why a number of them, having realise their brotherhood, and make harmony with nature and so working a number of miracles by suspending laws of nature becomes possible for them. A great Sufi and poet of thirteen Century, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi reflects this in one of his poems thus:

Since God hath made Man from dust, it behooves thee to recognize the real nature of every particle of the universe,

That while from this aspect they are dead, from that aspect they are living: silent here, but speaking Yonder.

The moon obeys the sign given by Muhammad; the fire (of Nimrod) becomes a garden of roses for Abraham.

Then thou wilt know that God is glorified by all inanimate things: the doubts raised by false interpreters will not beguile thee<sup>46</sup>.

**Conclusion:** Just like Western world' Eurocentric derogatory writings to justify their colonial projects which led them to paint Africans as irrational, barbaric, and many other horrible pictures as against Western world, which is the only rational, "measure of standard" and absolute spirit<sup>47,48</sup>. Western paradigms paint the

nature too as irrational, destitute and instrumental to humans who are at the positive sides of all this negative remarks. To exacerbate this, the existentialists go a step further in writing their "dubious" dictionary of existence which finally excludes everything other than man from being qualified to accord the full status of existence<sup>49</sup>. This is where colonialism is related with anthropocentrism. The consequence of this is the environmental impairment that, unavoidably, resulted from humans' instrumental approach to the nature. This error is made, perhaps, because it is the humans that do the painting. I imagine whether each and every other components of the nature are not also conceiving same, considering themselves as the best of which every other thing in the nature, including humans, other than the species that is doing the painting, is inferior to!

Contrary to this, Islamic environmental ethics considers nature, both the living flora and fauna as well as the non-living components, as coequals which is as sensitive as humans too. What is more, the Islamic nature pirates with many humans in many qualities which include the ability to communicate and form a social community. This point is partially illustrated in the verse of Qur'an "*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*"<sup>50</sup>. More so, the communication which humankind's venerate as exclusively their characteristic is also exhibited by Islamic "nature." The animals communicate among themselves. What is more, comprehension of their communication by



humans is possible. Prophet Solomon understood the language of bird, jinn, and ant, and can communicate with them<sup>51</sup>.

Nursi and Ozdemir consider nature as sign of God. God purportedly calls the attention of the believers and the unbelievers alike consistently throughout the Qur'an to look and ponder on the nature as His manifestation and signs through which His Greatness can be imagined. There are numerous verses on this. *"To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn there is the presence of God. For God is All-Pervading All-Knowing"*<sup>52</sup>. Explicating on the meaning of a sign in this context, Sachiko Murata, reports further that a sign is "any phenomenon that gives news of God. It may be a prophet, a prophetic message, a prophetic miracle, or simply the things of the natural world...In short everything in the universe is a sign of God"<sup>53</sup>. In the Qur'an, God is reported to have invited people to think about Him from the created things [nature] that surrounds him thus: *"Do they not look at the Camels how they are made? And at the Sky how it is raised high? And at the Mountains How they are fixed firm? And at the Earth how it is spread out?"*<sup>54</sup> Muhammad Iqbal points out that; the purpose of the gaze, as it is encouraged by the Scripture; "is to awaken in man the consciousness of that which nature is regarded a symbol," and then "to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and universe"<sup>55</sup>. What makes this observation different from the scientists' is that; while scientists observe to discover law of nature, the one that Qur'an calls for, as Iqbal notes, is aimed at discovering the Creator of the nature (God)<sup>56</sup>.

Thus, above description, best contained in the Holy Scriptures which is neither anthropocentric nor ecocentric but theocentric. Nature is not created for humans more than the way humans are created for the nature.

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