15 Environmentalism and Sustainability as an Expression of Islamic Morality

Summary 15.1 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law. – 15.2 Environmental Corruption. – 15.3 Islamic Antecedence and the '*Muḥtasib*'. – 15.4 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example.

There is no need to repeat once again that when we cross from one language into another we never say quite the same thing, and so much is evident from the etymology of words. Let us consider, as a last example, 'environment', and its derivative 'environmentalism', and the Arabic equivalent *bīʾa* بِيئَة.[1] 'Environmentalism', in the ecological sense, derives from the French *environnement* which describes the action of surrounding something; and the etymology is similar in most European languages: for example, the Italian *ambiente*, from the Latin verb *ambīre* 'to encompass', or the German *Umwelt*, composed of *um* 'around' and *Welt* 'world'.

Diversely, the Arabic *bīʾa* signifies a place of residence, a home, wherever it is that we return to. The term *bīʾa* does not appear in the Qurʾān but the verbal root from which it derives does often occur, as when it is said, for example, that the Jews settled in a 'safe haven' according to God's will (Qurʾān X,93), or that the Prophet's Companions, having been persecuted by the Meccans, found a warm welcome in Medina, or in Abyssinia (XVI,41), or that the blessed abide in paradise among a thousand delights (XXIX,58); or again, that Abraham was given an abode in the precincts of the House of God, that is, in the Kaʿba (XXII,26). Furthermore, the early lexicographers tell us that *bīʾa* could also mean equal restitution or fair exchange, or even have to do with vendettas or blood money.[2]

In any case, 'environment' and *bīʾa* presuppose two different conceptions of being a person in the world. In one, he or she is at the centre as a sort of

1 Frequent in the constructions *difāʿ* or *munāṣarat* or *riʿāyat al-bīʾa*, all meaning 'defence or care of the environment'.

2 Lane 1968, root b-w-ʾ.

DOI 10.30687/978-88-6969-849-1/015

absolute, surrounded by everything else, which is nevertheless external to him; in the other, he is within a world, in which he has been put and which welcomes him in, and which is also of equal weight to him: they deserve each other, as it were.

More eloquent still is the comparison between *sustainability* and *istidāma* استدامة, the latter being the term most commonly used for the former in Arabic, both in the environmental and in other senses. Sustainability derives, ultimately, from the Latin verb *sustĭnēre*, whose prime meaning is 'to hold something or someone up, bearing the weight from underneath'. In the neo-Latin languages, and others, the derivatives of *sustĭnēre* insist on effort and difficulty, on holding out against adversity, or an enemy: what is being sustained is an unwelcome weight, an encumbrance, most often a material one. Sustainability is then the capability of bearing something, and has to do with weighty commitment and suffering.

Let us now look at *istidāma*. Again, the word does not appear in this form in the Qur'ān, but we do find there its root, indicating persistence and insistence (Qur'ān III,75), the enduring nature of a state of affairs (V,54), permanency (XI,107-8; XIII,35). Medieval Arabic dictionaries record the term *istidāma* as having the same connotations, and they gloss it with reference to the whole semantic range of duration: continue, exist or remain for a long time, incessantly, constantly, always, in perpetuity.[3] While in practice resulting in symmetrical procedures and comparable courses of action, sustainability and *istidāma* also testify to two different visions of man in today's world and the role he plays in it: whereas sustainability implies that we must take on the burden of our surrounding abused and worn-out environment, *istidāma* speaks of a possibly unchanging nature, which it is our duty to leave as we find it. And whereas sustainability starts now, and concerns future generations from here on, *istidāma*, characterised by a long view of time, contains also a retrospective element and looks simultaneously to the past and the future, one generational cycle after another, in the essential immobility of a perpetual present which is God's time. The medieval lexicologists point out that its root also expresses a circular movement, which is relatively maintaining one's position, and give as an example the vulture which '*dawwama*' دوّم when it circles above its prey; while *istadāma* استدام indicates the kind of flight that exploits the air currents and allows the wings of a bird to remain immobile.[4]

15.1 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law

According to a number of contemporary authors from various religious backgrounds and schools of thoughts, the environmental degradation which we have to deal with today can be traced back to the foundational texts of Western civilisation, to the biblical heritage in fact, and specifically to the 'dominion' over nature which God conceded to man according to the first chapter of Genesis (1,28). This observation might easily be extended to the Qur'ānic tradition, except that this Holy Book tempers the anthropocentrism by constantly reaffirming the divine lordship over all things, alongside

3 Lane 1968, root d-w-m.

4 Cf. again Lane 1968, root d-w-m.

a human 'vice-regency' (*khilāfa* خلافة), entailing man's right to benefit from creation as a usufruct or trusteeship.

Those Muslim scholars who regard environmental sustainability through a religious lens and consequently insist on the conservation of the natural world as an Islamic duty, are increasingly numerous. Among them, we find a female voice, that of the Algerian economist Ṣalīḥa ʿAshī, in a 2019 essay entitled *Ḥimāya wa-riʿāyat al-bīʾa fī l-Islām* or 'Protection and Care of the Environment',[5] in which the author examines in an environmental light certain general principles of classical Islamic Law; for example: 'neither mutual harm or damage', the well-known saying of the Prophet governing the individual's freedom to dispose of his own property; 'avoiding damage takes precedence over obtaining a return'; 'a harm is not cancelled by a comparable one; 'a minor harm should be accepted if it leads to the elimination of a greater harm'; or 'what results in something unlawful is itself unlawful'.

Also recent, but much wider in scope, is an essay by the Kuwaiti Jābir al-Wanda, *Mawqif al-sharīʿa al-islāmiyya min al-istidāma al-bīʾiyya* or 'The Position of Islamic Law on Environmental Sustainability',[6] which emphasises the contribution of Islamic Law to the achievement of the seventeen goals detailed in the UN's 2030 Agenda. His text is representative of others and is worth summarising here. Taking his cue from various passage in the Qurʾān and a number of Prophetic sayings, al-Wanda maintains that the natural environment is a divine 'bounty' (*niʿma*, cf. Qurʾān XXXI,20), and for that reason demands the utmost safeguarding. The Muslim should avoid any abuse or excessive exploitation of natural resources (VII,31; XV,19), and must not alter the perfect measure and proportion (XIII,18), or disturb the perfect equilibrium of the environment that surrounds him, bearing always in mind that Islam is a religion of moderation and equanimity. The perfection of creation is mirrored in its beauty, which man is able to appreciate (cf. XXXV,27-8; XXV,61) because an aesthetic sensibility has been wired into his soul. Caring for the environment also meets the Islamic principles of benevolence and goodness.[7]

Turning to the specific prescriptions of Islamic Law, al-Wanda observes that it, as well as fostering in the believer an awareness of the environment he lives in, provides him at the same time with all the indications necessary to maintaining the *status quo* and even instructs him in different methods of conserving and caring for the Earth. Point by point, and always scrupulously backing himself up with quotations from the Qurʾān and the Sunna, the author explains that environmentalism forms an important part of the ethical values and behaviours instilled by Islam;[8] that the principles and methods of the Law (*fiqh* فقه), augmented by the practical experience of the jurists, are sufficient to resolve all the great ecological issues;[9] and that the conservation of the environment fits perfectly with the five fundamental pillars of the religious Law – which are: the safeguarding of the faith, the person, the intellect, lineage and property.[10] He closes his discussion with the

5 ʿAshī 2019.

6 Al-Wanda 2019.

7 Al-Wanda 2019, 163-4.

8 Al-Wanda 2019, 165-6.

9 Al-Wanda 2019, 166-7.

10 Al-Wanda 2019, 169.

hope of a greater involvement of religious institutions in the search for solutions appropriate to the challenges of our time, with an emphasis on the concept of 'social responsibility'.[11]

15.2 Environmental Corruption

In pursuing his theme, al-Wanda dwells on the Qur'ānic contrast between 'reformation or amendment' (*iṣlāḥ*), and 'corruption' (*fasād* فساد or *ifsād* إفساد), the latter a term frequently used nowadays to cover environmental degradation, as also pollution (technically *talawwuth* تلوّث); and cites the prohibition of wreaking 'corruption upon the earth', referencing, among others, the sura 'The Heights': "Cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation" (Qur'ān VII,56). By giving both terms, 'corruption' and 'reformation', a deftly ecological reading – bypassing, as many contemporary commentators are prone to do, a long exegetical tradition that interprets them principally in relation to faith, as acceptance or refusal of the divine Word – al-Wanda manages to comfortably include the conservation of the environment among the ethical imperatives of the Islamic religion.

There is another quite recent essay on the same themes by the Egyptian educationalist and linguist Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim, *Al-tarbīya al-bī'iyya fī l-Islām* or 'Environmental Education in Islam',[12] where what strikes one particularly, as indeed in many other cases, is the vast expansion of the notion of 'environment' (*bī'a*):

> it embraces the sum of things that surround man, from the earth that sustains him to the heavens that overarch him, including every force and agent between the two, everything that penetrates deeply into the human soul […]. This is so, because Islam is not limited to material things and their exterior forms, but makes them instruments for the purification of the soul – and here lies the uniqueness of Islam! – that soul which, as God has promised, "he who makes pure will have success, and he who corrupts will fail". (Qur'ān XCI,9-10)[13]

The environment – Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim continues – is a living, vibrant entity, equipped with emotions and feelings, and perfectly balanced in its proportions. God has placed man in this environment and instructed him not to abuse it because disturbing its order and equilibrium will damage not only the environment itself but also man who is part of it. The importance which Islam attributes to the environment derives from the sanctity of Him who created it, He who stands behind the sanctity of Islamic sources, of the principles which underlie the religion and the creed rooted in the hearts of believers. On the basis of this sanctity, respect for the environment is a constituent element of the faith.[14]

Another interesting aspect of Qāsim's work is his extension of the concept of 'pollution' (*talawwuth*). In the scheme proposed by the author, pollution

11 Al-Wanda 2019, 170.

12 Qāsim 2007, 117-37.

13 Qāsim 2007, 120.

14 Qāsim 2007, 122.

can be subdivided into water, atmospheric, food, aesthetic and noise pollution. Especially worthy of mention is his treatment of food pollution, which, in taking the reader to the heart of Islamic Law, and to the fundamental legal categories, underlines its holistic nature:

> Whether it be of animal or vegetable origin, God has allowed what is good, and forbidden what is bad [cf. Qur'ān II,172-3]. Islam also forbids the adulteration of foodstuffs and the sale of expired products. Deaths resulting from food poisoning, being the consequence of 'corruption upon the earth', are regarded as homicides.[15]

As far as aesthetic pollution is concerned, Qāsim too returns to the beauty and harmony of creation, man's ability to perceive that beauty and the joy it kindles in him. He notes that man should not compromise the beauty of the world, which includes his own, and explains that among the elements that make up human beauty are the cleanliness and purification of one's person. By this route he doubles back to the ethical/juridical sphere, to the legal purity demanded of the Muslim before any devotional act, to the necessity of full ablution every Friday, and thence to the cleaning of clothes, houses and streets, so that they are pleasing both to man and to the Lord.[16]

Also of relevance to Qāsim's work is the famous Qur'ānic passage on Adam's vice-regency:

> And when thy Lord said to the angels: – I am setting in the earth a vice-regent – they said: – Will You place therein one who will wreak corruption [*yufsidu*] therein and will shed blood? […] He said: – Surely, I know that which you know not. And He taught Adam the names of all things and he presented them unto the angels and said: – Now tell Me the names of these, if you speak truly. (Qur'ān II,30-1)

The author reminds us of the perfection of the divine knowledge and explains that God, well aware that man would in due course corrupt the earth, had instilled in him some fragment of his own knowledge so that he might use it one day to amend (cf. *iṣlāḥ*) what he had ruined (cf. *fasād*). Seen thus, environmental degradation can itself be understood as part of the divine plan, and that man's knowledge, superior to that of the angels as God had willed it, would provide the means of resolving the problem.[17]

15.3 Islamic Antecedence and the '*Muḥtasib*'

Again devoted to 'corruption upon the earth' is an essay by the Moroccan sociologist and educationalist Mawlay al-Muṣṭafā al-Barjāwī published in 2011, *Mawqif al-Islām min al-'abth bi-l-bī'a* or 'Islam's Position Vis-à-vis the Maltreatment of the Environment'.[18] His is an even broader understanding of what constitutes 'the environment', which includes the fields of economics,

15 Qāsim 2007, 129-30.
16 Qāsim 2007, 131.
17 Qāsim 2007, 122.
18 Al-Barjāwī 1433/2011.

politics and technology; and similarly wider is his definition of pollution as "the occurrence of any change in environmental wellbeing through corruption, excess, waste, devastation and disfigurement". But essentially the emphasis is on a vision of the pervasiveness of religious Law, which oversees both the exterior and interior aspects of man, to the extent that the author ends by putting environmental pollution and climate change on the same plane as moral corruption, desertification and deforestation as deceit and treachery, the exploitation of the earth's resources as gambling and usury, everything bundled together under the umbrella of 'excess' (*isrāf* إسراف), that is, exceeding and transgressing the limits laid down by God. All of this reflects a fiercely negative view of the impact of man – especially Western man – on the world of today, and continually insists, often in quite polemical tones, on 'Islamic antecedence' in environmentalist terms. Al-Barjāwī writes, for example:

> The West boasts […] of having […] led the way with its concern for environmental issues. Yet, whoever has studied the Book of God and the Sunna of the Prophet will see that Islam with its prescriptions was actually the first to lay the foundations and build brick by brick a response to all environmental questions, great and small, about which environmental and intergovernmental organisations continue from morning to night to emit slogans and hold conferences – the Tbilisi Conference, the Rio di Janeiro Conference, the Kyoto Conference, the Johannesburg Conference – all in vain.

Respect for the environment, al-Barjāwī concludes, does not mean that the Muslim is called upon to live in the wild, turning his back on civilisation and scientific progress, but that he should respect the preordination and proportions of the world and treat nature in a disciplined and gentle way.[19]

Islam's claim to antecedence in environmental matters, together with denunciations of the Western way of life – considered to be at the root of the widespread contemporary ecological degradation – are threads running through many works; among them a fine essay by the Yemeni economist ʿĀdil ʿAbd al-Razzāq focusing on the Sunna of the Prophet: *Al-manhaj al-nabawī fī taʿzīz al-sulūk al-ījābī tujāh al-bīʾa* or 'The Prophetic Way of Promoting Positive Behaviour towards the Environment'.[20]

The author maintains that the reason why Muslim societies are (also) afflicted by environmental problems is that they blindly imitate the failings of others, thus betraying the respect for the Earth required by Islamic Law. It is essential therefore to return to the 'Prophetic way' and reclaim the benefits that come with it; to promote an environmentally educational methodology based on the teachings of the Prophet, which could call itself truly Islamic. Applying such a methodology would not in fact be difficult – he argues – since it is fundamentally a religious obligation.[21]

In ʿAbd al-Razzāq's essay there is a stimulating section dedicated to the duty of every individual to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong (cf. Qurʾān III,104,110 and 114; VII,157; IX,71 and 112; XXII,41; XXXI,17) – the so-called *ḥisba* حسبة – as a system of control, as 'environmental monitoring'.

19 Al-Barjāwī 1433/2011.

20 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 148-82.

21 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 176-9.

Taking his cue from the early Aleppo jurist al-Shayzarī (d. 589/1193) and the Egyptian traditionist Ibn al-Ukhuwwa al-Qurashī (d. 729/1329), the author directs our attention to the legal personage who was essentially the incarnation of the aforementioned duty, the *muḥtasib* محتسب, a municipal functionary charged with overseeing the moral behaviour of the citizenry, particularly with regard to bazaars and trade. He details the practical and technical responsibilities of this official, and his different competencies, at once administrative and religious: alongside keeping an eye on weights and measures and on prices, being alert to fraudulent practices and ensuring unimpeded circulation on the roads, the *muḥtasib* also, for example, subjected bakers to a strict regime of personal hygiene on top of requirements for the cleanliness of their premises, their ingredients and the tools of their trade; he obliged keepers of animals to give them sufficient fodder and rest, and not burden them with excessive loads; he saw to it that butchers and farriers did not cause animals unreasonable suffering and forbade castration; he also barred ram- and cockfighting. ʿAbd al-Razzāq thus proposes a reinvention of the *muḥtasib* in modern guise, a 'sustainability officer' charged with monitoring the environment and seeing that the Prophet's teachings are respected in the ecological sphere.

15.4 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example

Islamic Law – writes ʿAbd al-Razzāq elsewhere – "asks us to treat nature with the maximum courtesy […] in all its parts, and to be good towards her, to be alive to her sufferings and to love her as she loves us".[22] He reminds us of man's assimilation into his environment quoting the famous Prophetic saying "The palm tree is like the Muslim", and also the well-known 'story of the ship' (*ḥadīth al-safīna*) which compares those who exceed the limits set by God to one who, in order to obtain some seawater more easily, makes a hole in the hull, bringing disaster to himself and his fellow passengers, themselves at fault for not having stopped him.

The many sayings quoted by the author, commented on and applied to modern life by utilising 'analogy' (*qiyās*) – the legal principle based on similarity of circumstances – often have a general import, for example: "God has ordained goodness in all things", "the Earth has been entrusted to me like a mosque and like purification", and "there is a reward for every moist liver", the already mentioned saying that enjoins compassion for all living things.[23] But others are more specifically focused on the protection and fair distribution of the water supply, respect for animals, cleanliness of the streets, the fight against disease and epidemic, including the imposition of quarantines, and noise pollution. Some examples: "Removing a hazard from the street is one of the branches of the faith", "Do not corrupt water, though you be at a flowing river", "Do not curse the wind", or "Do not curse the cockerel" when it crows early in the morning.[24]

Among the numerous sayings reviewed by ʿAbd al-Razzāq from an environmental perspective, two in particular stand out because they reference

22 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 169.

23 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 149-62.

24 ʿAbd al-Razzāq 1438/2017, 163-76.

the 'Beautiful Names', specifically: "God is the Beautiful and he loves beauty", and "God is the Kind and he loves kindness". The author, then, by means of the Prophet's words, calls on the believer to respect the beauty and fragility of the world, pointing out the example of God himself – a distinction worth noting because by so doing, even if he doesn't labour the point, he places environmentalism squarely within the framework of the Islamic ethics of virtue.

Also to be found among the divine Names is *al-ḥafīẓ* الحفيظ,[25] 'He who preserves many things', 'the Protector' or 'the Guardian'; the Qur'ān employs it several times in relation to God (Qur'ān XII,64; cf. XI,57; XXXIV,21; XLII,6), but also applies it to human beings: among men dubbed 'protectors' or 'guardians' are the Prophet (IV,80; VI,104 and 107; XI,86; XLII,48) and Joseph son of Jacob, the "wise guardian" of the Pharaoh in Egypt (XII,55); also 'guardians' are the blessed in paradise (L,32), because they have been able to defend their own adherence to the faith.

When glossing *al-ḥafīẓ* in his famous work on the Names, the medieval thinker al-Ghazālī pens a hymn to the biological, chemical and physical perfection of the environment. He tells us that the divine 'protection' or 'guardianship' means that God preserves on the one hand the existence and permanency of things, and on the other He sustains natural enemies and opposites, each against the power of the other, like water and fire, or heat and cold, or the wet and the dry, which, but for divine intervention, would obliterate one another. As for the man, al-Ghazālī teaches his readers that he is one who guards himself, in his body and his heart, observing his religion, preserving himself from the deceits of the animal soul and the machinations of devils.[26]

The other eminent medieval theologian who concerned himself with the divine Names and their potential transmission to the virtuous man, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, offers another interpretation of divine tutelage, which is preservation from oblivion, linked to the divine knowledge; al-Rāzī explains that God is 'The Guardian' not only because He protects things from dissolution but also because He remembers everything, and therefore knows everything permanently, both in general and in particular. He then describes the man as one who safeguards his own rational capabilities from suspicion and heresy, and his practical capabilities from the twin assaults of lust and anger, knowing that virtue lies in the middle way.[27]

An ethical-ecological interpretation of the Name *al-ḥafīẓ* is to be sure a long way from the medieval and early modern theological sensibility, nor indeed is there much sign of it even today. And yet, its possible translation into the Islamic virtue of 'environmental awareness' is actually simple enough.

25 No. 38 in the most widely recognised lists.

26 Cf. al-Ghazālī 1971, 119-23.

27 Al-Rāzī 1323/1905, 1: 263-6.