

The Relationship between Two Specific Views in Islamic Theology and Environmental Destruction

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Abstract—The planet is facing an unprecedented and dangerous environmental crisis, environmental problems such as consumerism, increase in human population, soil erosion, drought, drying up of rivers and lakes, destruction of forests and plants, extinction of insects and animals, use of fossil fuels, greenhouse gas production, etc. Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Libya, and Sudan are also heavily involved with these problems. In Islamic theology, there are two influential approaches to the behavior of Muslims, which have caused the destruction of the environment in Islamic countries. The first approach is the Anthropocentric doctrine in Islamic theology. According to this view, Muslims believe that man is the supreme being on earth and God's successor on it (Khalifa Allāh), and everything on earth is created for man's use. The second approach is the Apocalyptic attitude (ākhir al-zamān) in Islamic theology. This view has also had an inappropriate effect on the behavior of Muslims toward the environment, because according to this approach, Muslims are waiting for the occurrence of Apocalyptic events that will lead to the destruction of the earth, and consequently in the end, the environment will be completely destroyed. For protecting the environment in Islamic countries, these two very influential attitudes toward the behavior of Muslims must be changed.

Keywords—anthropocentric, apocalypse, Caliph of God, environment, humility, Islam

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the earth faces the most severe environmental crisis in its entire history. The crisis stems from the accelerated development of industries and technologies, excessive reliance on fossil fuels, exponential growth of the human population, and rampant consumerism within human communities. A significant portion of the global population comprises Muslims residing in both Islamic and non-Islamic nations. Currently, numerous Islamic nations are faced with significant environmental challenges. While various factors contribute to the environmental degradation in Islamic countries and Muslim communities, a significant factor underlying such crises is the inadequate treatment of the environment by some Muslims. This treatment or interaction has been influenced by two perspectives within Islamic theology: anthropocentrism and apocalypticism. In 1967, White [1] referred to the anthropocentrism inherent in Christianity and Judaism, arguing that this viewpoint has, as a consequence, given rise to the development of modern science and technology, ultimately contributing to the degradation of the environment. According to anthropocentrism, humans are regarded as the superior species in the world, assuming ownership over everything within it. This perspective allows for an unrestricted and unlimited exploitation of nature, including mountains, forests,

seas, rivers, soil, plants, and animals. Anthropocentrism is also present within Islamic theology, as Muslims often perceive the world from a human-centric perspective, subsequently interacting with nature based on this perspective. Another perspective within Islamic theology, pertinent to the disregard for the environment, is the apocalyptic viewpoint that holds the belief in the imminent end of the world. Islamic theological doctrines continue to wield significant influence over the conduct and moral attitudes of both traditional and non-traditional Muslim communities. Islamic sources and texts contain valuable instructions regarding the preservation and reverence for nature. These teachings can be employed to rectify the aforementioned approaches and consequently enhance the manner in which Muslims interact with the environment. Given that human interaction with the environment is a significant problem within human and social sciences, this article aims to explore these two doctrines and put forth an alternative for them within Islamic theology.

This research is based on the library method and has analyzed the historical sources and books of the Qur'an interpretation.

II. THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC APPROACH OF HUMAN AS GOD'S SUCCESSOR (CALIPH OF GOD)

Muslim theologians uphold the belief that humans are the superior and most exemplary species on the earth (in Arabic, *ashraf al-khalā'iq va al-mavjūdāt*) [2–23].

While this notion is not explicitly mentioned in the Quran, the term "*khalīfa*" (successor and viceroy) is referenced twice, forming the foundation of the crucial anthropocentric doctrine in Islamic theology: the belief that humans are God's successors. Indeed, the Quran only mentions the term "*khalīfa*" rather than the specific phrase "*Khalīfa Allāh* (God's successor)". Furthermore, none of the main authoritative books that cite the words of Prophet Muhammad mention the phrase "God's successor" specifically in reference to humans [24, 25]. However, the phrase was used and gained popularity during the early Islamic centuries within the context of political developments by Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs [26–29]. Over time, the term transitioned from its political context to various theological domains of Quranic Exegesis, Theology (*kalām*), Hadith, Jurisprudence (*Feqh*), Mysticism, Philosophy, History, Literature, and Poetry [30–32]. As a result, theologians stated that humans are God's successor on Earth (in Arabic, *Khalīfa Allāh fī al-'arḍ*) [33–53]. This had a significant corollary in terms of the notion of human ownership and dominion over nature. This belief became deeply ingrained in the minds of Muslims over centuries,

passed down from generation to generation, profoundly influencing their attitudes and treatment towards nature. They held the belief that everything in the world was created for the benefit of humans, granting them unrestricted authority to exploit it. Muslims believed that humans as God's successors in the world are entitled to dominate and exploit the environment on behalf of the world's Creator. The doctrine has exerted such a significant influence on the collective and historical mindset of Muslims that it has garnered support from scholars who study the relationship between Islamic doctrines and the preservation of the environment, such as Nasr [54], Ozdemir [55], Haq [56], Llewellyn [57], Foltz [58], and Dutton [59].

III. THE HUMBLE APPROACH (SERVITUDE TO GOD)

In his critique of anthropocentrism, Lynn White proposed a solution for addressing environmental crises by drawing inspiration from Saint Francis of Assisi, known for his friendly relationship with the environment. White highlights that Saint Francis believed in the virtue of humility, not just for individuals, but for the entire human species. He endeavored to supplant the notion of humans as unrestricted rulers of the world with the concept of the equality of all creatures, including humans. As White [1] suggests, the rescue of nature becomes possible only through humanity adopting a humble approach towards it. In order to rectify the prevailing anthropocentric attitude of Muslims towards the environment, it is imperative to replace this mentality with a humble approach within Islamic theology. The Quran describes all creatures, both humans and nonhumans, as "servant" (in Arabic, *'abd*) [60], which implies humility [61]. The Quran symbolically emphasizes the relationship between humans and the earth in terms of the virtue of humility [62]. Another verse in the Quran highlights the value of the earth and mountains in relation to humans [63]. Additionally, there is a verse that underscores the refusal of humble people to destroy nature [64]. Furthermore, another verse asserts the correlation between humility (in Arabic, *'obūdīyya*) and the virtuous treatment of others [65]. There is a hadith from the Prophet to the effect that humility precludes transgression of other people's rights and dominance over them [66]. In particular, there is extensive material in this regard in Islamic Sufi texts and books [67]. The non-anthropocentric and humble approach towards nature implies that humans are on a par with nature, preventing selfish encroachments on it. When humans view themselves as superior to other creatures, they often engage in their exploitation and violate their rights. However, by embracing humility towards the environment, they refrain from exerting selfish dominance over other creatures. According to Francis of Assisi's perspective on nature as quoted by Lynn White, the principle of general humility towards all beings and creatures entails a deep sense of inner respect and recognition of their inherent value. It also implies respecting their rights and striving for their preservation.

IV. THE APOCALYPTIC APPROACH

Within the Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the concept of the apocalypse holds special significance. While the term "apocalypse" (in Arabic,

ākhir al-zamān) is not specifically mentioned in the Quran, it does appear in hadiths and writings by Muslims. Islamic sources primarily associate the term "apocalypse" with the timeframe preceding the Day of Resurrection (in Arabic, *qiyāma*), characterized by wars, significant events, chaos, devastation, riots, and social upheaval. Muslim historical sources and books from the seventh century CE until the present day consistently depict Muslims perceiving the period they lived in as the end time or the apocalypse. This idea has been reinforced by specific wars, devastations, and periods of turmoil that occurred in their times. For instance, Muslims held the belief that the periods of the Umayyad [68–73] and Abbasid caliphates [74–79] marked the end times. Subsequently, following the devastating invasion of the Mongols, they began to perceive that era as the apocalypse [80–88]. In North Africa, some Muslims in the tenth century believed that they were in the apocalypse [89]. On the other hand, some Muslims in the twelfth century in Northwest Africa claimed that the apocalypse had arrived [90]. Similarly, in Iran, the Safavid era was seen as an apocalyptic period [91, 92]. Ottoman Muslims also embraced this belief towards the end of the eighteenth century CE. According to Hourani [93], during this time when the Russians occupied Crimea and their naval fleets entered the Mediterranean Sea, ordinary people in the Ottoman Empire held the belief that the end times were approaching, while the ruling class was convinced that decisive action needed to be taken. In Sudan, in the nineteenth century, some Muslims believed that the apocalypse had arrived [94]; also, in India [95]. Nevertheless, pinpointing specific moments for the end time contradicts the Quranic assertion that the Day of Resurrection remains indeterminable [96] and beyond human prediction [97]. The apocalyptic perspective, primarily a masculine perspective, holds significant sway within fundamentalist Shiite and Sunni Islamic factions. These groups fervently anticipate the culmination of apocalyptic battles and events, eagerly awaiting the ultimate war. Even today they believe that the period in which they live is the instance of the end time. In practice, proponents of this perspective have succumbed passively to an inescapable destiny they believe to be predetermined. This fate leads to the ruin of the earth and its environment through apocalyptic conflicts and events. From this theological standpoint, our main objective is to ready ourselves for the impending apocalypse, relegating environmental preservation to a peripheral, insignificant, and even absurd matter. Consequently, the necessity to actively pursue environmental protection is deemed unnecessary. This is in stark contrast to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, who is quoted as saying that even if the Day of Resurrection is upon us and you have a sapling in your hand to plant, you should go ahead and plant it [98].

V. THE ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACH

Rather than embracing the apocalyptic approach, Muslim theologians should emphasize an environmental perspective. By doing so, Islamic theology can align itself with efforts to collaborate on mitigating the consequences of the environmental crisis. Consequently, they can draw upon the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet highlighting the significance of the environment, and increasingly redirect the

focus of Muslims towards the conservation of nature and improve their treatment of the environment. Moreover, instead of adhering to a masculinist apocalyptic approach, consideration of feminist and ecofeminist perspectives would be beneficial. Embracing an environmental approach places paramount importance on the preservation and reverence for the environment, which should be instilled within Muslims as the highest moral virtue and duty. For instance, the Quran imparts teachings about the significance and worth of vegetative species [99]. Additionally, it emphasizes the value of all animal species and living beings [100]. It subtly recounts a dialogue between Solomon and ants [101]. Furthermore, the Quran sternly admonishes and blames certain individuals from the past for their acts of harming mountains [102] and taking the life of an animal [103]. The Quran and the teachings of the Prophet encompass principles that emphasize the preservation and reverence for nature. These principles include avoiding consumerism and extravagance (*isrāf*), preventing the destruction of nature (*fasād*), preserving the balance of ecosystems (*mīzān*), upholding environmental justice (*‘adl*), preventing pollution (*tahāra*), cultivating a love for nature (*muḥibba*), treating nature with kindness (*ihsān*), assuming responsibility for the environment (*amānah*), establishing and safeguarding protected areas (*ḥaram*, *ḥimā*), and abstaining from the hunting of animals.

VI. CONCLUSION

In order to address the crisis and alleviate the rapid environmental degradation on the earth, especially within Muslim countries, it is crucial to not only implement scientific and technical solutions to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, but also to make significant changes in the consumerist lifestyle, reduce plastic consumption, manage human population growth, increase the utilization of renewable and clean energies, and prioritize the preservation of diverse plant and animal species and their habitats. However, equally important is the need for Muslims to transform their current approach and behaviors towards the environment. Given the influence of religious institutions and Islamic teachings on the conduct and moral attitudes of Muslim communities, it is imperative for Muslim theologians to revise and amend anthropocentric and apocalyptic approaches within Islamic theology. Instead of these environmentally unfriendly perspectives, they should embrace and promote humble, non-human-centric, and non-apocalyptic approaches that prioritize the environment. By doing so, they can inspire Muslims to adopt a humble, altruistic, and environmentally friendly mindset. Through the teaching and promotion of theological principles that align with the reverence and preservation of the environment, Muslims can undergo a transformative change in their lifestyle and behaviors, effectively mitigating the consequences of climate change on the earth.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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- [95] A. Najjar, *Al-Qadiyaniyyah*, Beirut, Mu'asesa al-Jame'iyah le-al-Derasat va al-Nashr va al-Tavzi', p. 24, 2005.
- [96] They ask thee about the (final) hour when will be its appointed time? Say: "The knowledge thereof is with my Lord (alone): none but He can reveal as to when it will occur. Heavy were its burden through the heavens and the earth. Only all of a sudden will it come to you. They ask thee as if thou wert eager in search thereof: Say: "The knowledge thereof is with God (alone) but most men know not." (A'raf/187)
- [97] "Verily the Hour is coming—My design is to keep it Hidden for every soul to receive its reward by the measure of Its Endeavour; With Him is the knowledge of the Hour (of Judgment); Verily the knowledge of the Hour is With God (alone) (Taha/15; Zukhruf/85; Luqman/34).
- [98] Bukhari, *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-'elmyya, p. 146, 1995.
- [99] Do they not look at the earth—How many Noble things of all kinds We have produced therein? (Shu'ara'/7).
- [100] 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 (An'am/38).
- [101] At length, when they came to a (lowly) valley of ants, One of the ants said: "O ye ants, get into Your habitations, lest Solomon And his hosts crush you (Under foot) without knowing it."; So, he smiled, amused at her speech; and he said: "O my Lord! so order me That I may be grateful for Thy favours, which Thou Hast bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may work the righteousness That will please Thee: And admit me, by Thy Grace, to the ranks of Thy Righteous Servants." (Naml/18-19).
- [102] Out of the mountains Did they hew (their) edifices, (feeling themselves) secure (Hejr/82).
- [103] "And O my people! This she-camel of God is a symbol to you: Leave her to feed on God's (free) earth, and inflict no harm on her, or a swift Penalty Will seize you!" (Hud/64); He said: "Here is A she-camel: she has A right of watering, and ye have a right of watering, (severally) on a day appointed; "Touch her not with harm, Lest the Penalty of a Great Day Seize you." (Shu'ara'/155–156).

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