

# Environmentalism and Sustainability as an Expression of Islamic Morality

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**Abstract** The present essay relates to a line of enquiry that focuses on the Islamic contribution to the values held in common by different cultural traditions, with the aim of working towards a shared ethical conscience and peaceful coexistence in the cities of a globalised world. The essay emphasises cultural specificities, starting with the terminology currently used to describe environmentalism and sustainability. Drawing on the works of a number of contemporary Arab Muslim intellectuals, my enquiry aims to look at environmental sustainability from an Islamic perspective, and to address it as part of the ethical heritage of Islam.

**Keywords** Islam. Sustainability. Environmentalism. Islamic law. Divine names.

**Summary** 1 Talking About Environmentalism and Sustainability. – 2 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law. – 3 Environmental ‘Corruption’. – 4 ‘Islamic Precedence’ and the *muhtasib*. – 5 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example. – 6 Conclusions.



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## 1 Talking About Environmentalism and Sustainability

When we cross from one language into another, we never say quite the same thing (Eco 2003, *passim*) – so much is evident from the etymology of words. Let us take as an example the English word *environment*, and its derivative *environmentalism*, and the Arabic equivalent *bī'a* – also in the constructions *difā'* or *munāṣarat* or *ri'āyat al-bī'a*, all meaning 'defence or care of the environment'. *Environmentalism*, in the ecological sense, is first recorded in the early 1970s<sup>1</sup> and derives from the French *environnement*, which describes the action of surrounding something, and the etymology is similar in most European languages, both Romance and others: 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 *bī'a* signifies 'a (place of) residence, a home', wherever it is that we return to: the great medieval dictionaries give *manzil* as a synonym – the place where you dismount after a ride. The term *bī'a* does not appear in the Qur'an – the bedrock of the Arabic language as well as of the Islamic faith – but the verbal root from which it derives, *bw'*, does often occur, as when used to say, for example, that the Jews settled in a 'safe haven' according to God's will, or that the Prophet's Companions, having been persecuted by the Meccans, found a warm welcome in Medina, or in Abyssinia, or that the blessed abide in Paradise among a thousand delights; or again, with a certain eloquence, that Abraham was given an abode in the precincts of the House of God, that is, in the Kaaba.<sup>2</sup> In so far as the root *bw'* centres on the idea of return, it has a synonym in *rj'* 'to return'. Furthermore, the ancient lexicographers tell us that it could also mean equal restitution or fair exchange, or even have to do with vendettas or blood money (Lane 1863, 270-2).

One might ask why, when talking of environmentalism in today's global world, Arab intellectuals and activists use the term *bī'a*, which stands, as I have said, in the first instance for 'home' or resting-place or retreat, instead of having recourse to nearer linguistic equivalents to environment, such as those deriving from the root *aḥṭ* (*muḥiṭ?* *muḥiṭiya?*).

In any case, it is clear that *environment* and *bī'a* presuppose two different conceptions of being a person in the world. In one, he or she is at the centre as a sort of absolute, surrounded by everything else, which is nevertheless external to him/her; in the other, he/she is within a world, where he/she has been put and which welcomes

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1 <https://www.etymonline.com/word/environmentalism> and <https://www.macmillandictionaryblog.com/environment>.

2 Sequentially: Q 10, 93; 16, 41; 29, 58; and 22, 26.

him/her, and which is also of equal weight to him/her: they deserve each other, as it were.

More eloquent still is the comparison between *sustainability* and *istidāma*, the latter being the term most commonly used for the former in Arabic, both in the environmental and in other senses.<sup>3</sup> *Sustainability* derives from the adjective *sustainable*,<sup>4</sup> which in its turn is from the Latin verb *sustinēre*, 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 *sustinēre* 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.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now look at *istidāma*. The word does not appear in this form in the Qur’an, but we do find there the root *dwm*,<sup>6</sup> indicating persistence and insistence,<sup>7</sup> the enduring nature of a state of affairs,<sup>8</sup> permanency.<sup>9</sup> 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 words: continue, exist or remain for a long time, incessantly, constantly, always (cf. *dā’im<sup>an</sup>*), in perpetuity (cf. *dawām*) (Lane 1863, 935-8). The invocation *astadīmu li-llāh ‘izza-ka* (I pray that God preserve always your power) is cited as an exam-

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**3** Alongside other less common terms, such as *daymūma*, from the same root *dwm*, or *istimrāriya*, this last very similar to *istidāma* in that it shares the same sense of continuity and endurance.

**4** Recorded from 1845 in the sense of ‘defensible’ said of an accusation or a theory; cf. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sustainability> e <https://www.etymonline.com/word/sustainability>. The expression “sustainable growth” first appeared in 1965, while the particular idea of ‘environmental sustainability’ was introduced in 1972, during the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, known as *The Stockholm Conference*. In 1987, with the publication of *Our Common Future*, a report from the World Commission on Environment and Development set up by the UN and chaired by G.H. Brundtland, a definition of “sustainable development” as “development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” was established.

**5** This meaning can be found, for example, in the use of the verb *sostenere* by Dante Alighieri, the ‘father of the Italian language’, the romance language closest to Latin: “hold up” (*Inf.* XVII, 96), “hold over” (*Purg.* XXX, 121); “help”, “protect”, “defend” (*Conv.* XXVI, 10); but also “bear” (*Inf.* XI, 87; *Purg.* XI, 137), “suffer” (*Vita nuova* III, 7; *Rime* LXVII, 60) and finally, again, “bear” in the eloquent line: “la morte ch’el [Dio] sostiene perch’io viva” (the death he bore that I might live) (*Par.* XXVI, 59). See [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sostenere\\_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/sostenere_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/).

**6** [https://www.altafsir.com/Quran\\_Search.asp?LanguageID=1](https://www.altafsir.com/Quran_Search.asp?LanguageID=1)

**7** Q 3, 75 (when asking for something); 70, 23 (when praying).

**8** Q 5, 24 (the presence of giants in the promised land); 5, 96 (the condition of sacredness); 5, 117 (Jesus’s span on earth); 19, 31 (length of Mary’s life).

**9** Q 11, 107-108 (of the earth and the skies); 13, 35 (of food for the blessed).

ple, as well as the more prosaic *istadāma lubs<sup>a</sup> ath-thawb*, (he wore the same clothes constantly). Another example, *istadamtu ‘āqibat<sup>a</sup> al-amr* (I postponed the conclusion of the deal for a long period), introduces a figurative sense of acting with patience and calm, watching where you tread. Finally, in such a line of verse as *fa-lā taj’al bi-‘amrika wa-stadim-hu* (hurry not, but take your time), *istidāma* can specify the ability to wait, the opposite of rushing. The synonyms offered are *baqiya* (continue, stay), *thabata* (persist, insist), *imtadda* (be extended, prolonged in time), *intazara* (wait, be patient, act with circumspection) and *raqaba* (examine, study carefully). Given these connotations, which link to duration and not the burden sustained, *istidāma* appears in many expressions that have nothing to do with sustainability in its modern technical sense, such as *istidāmat al-awrāq* or ‘permanence of foliage’ in evergreen plants (Lane 1863, 937).

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. And again we can ask whether the choice of *istidāma* – as we have seen: ‘conserve, maintain in the long term, or forever’ – instead of loan translations of *sustainability* – for example, derivatives of the root *da’m*: *muda‘amiya*? – was deliberate or spontaneous. It is nonetheless the case that, 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.<sup>10</sup> 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 that is God’s time. The medieval lexicologists point out that *dwm* also expresses a circular movement, which is relatively maintaining one’s position, and give as an example the vulture that *dawwama* when it circles above its prey; while *istadāma* indicates the kind of flight that exploits the air currents and allows the wings to remain immobile.<sup>11</sup>

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**10** The notion of ‘environmental conservation’ is by no means alien to Western thought, but it belongs particularly to the initial phase of ecological thinking. A pioneering example is the journal *Environmental Conservation*, founded in 1974 and still published by the Cambridge University Press for the Foundation for Environmental Conservation in Geneva (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/environmental-conservation>).

**11** So that the very common Arabic expression for ‘sustainable development’ – *tanmīya mustadāma* – can sound something of an oxymoron.

## 2 Environmental Sustainability and Islamic Law

According to a number of contemporary authors from various backgrounds and schools, the environmental degradation that we have to deal with today can be traced back to the foundational texts of Western civilisation, to the biblical heritage in fact<sup>12</sup> and specifically to the 'dominion' over nature that God conceded to man according to the first chapter of the Genesis.<sup>13</sup> An observation that might easily be extended to the Qur'anic tradition,<sup>14</sup> except that the Arab Holy Book tempers the anthropocentrism by constantly reaffirming the divine lordship over all things,<sup>15</sup> alongside a human *khilāfa* or 'vice-regency', entailing man's right to benefit from creation<sup>16</sup> as a usufruct or trusteeship.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> Among them, we find a female voice, that of the Algerian economist Saliha Ashi, in a 2019 essay entitled "Protection and Care of the

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**12** Kula 2001, 1-9; White 1967, 1203-7; Toynebee 1972, 141-6; McHarg 1964, 2-12; Afzaal 2012, 239-62.

**13** "And God blessed them, and God said unto them: Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (1,28). For the Christian response, see again, among others, Kula 2001.

**14** On the controversy regarding anthropocentrism in the Qur'an, may I direct the reader to (Zilio-Grandi 2019, 399-414).

**15** See *li-llāh mā fī as-samawāt wa-mā fī l-ard*; Q 3, 109, 129, 180-9; 4, 126, 131-2, 170-1; etc. (God is "the Irresistible Subduer", *al-Qāhir*, in Q 6, 18; 38, 65; 39, 4; 40, 16; 59, 23).

**16** Cf. "*la-kum*", Q 2, 267; 16, 5; 36, 73; 40, 80; and "*ālā*" in Q 55 *passim*.

**17** "Trusteeship" according to the alternative, halfway between religious and secular, known in fact as *i'timāniya*, "*trusteeship paradigm*", proposed by the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahman (b. 1944). On this see particularly the studies of Hashas 2015 and Hashas, Al-Khatib 2020.

**18** And still underconsidered by Western pronouncements on the subject. Among those in English I would signal (Izzi Dien, 2000 33-52); in the latter, the author takes his cue from the thought of Sayyed Hossein Nasr, Muḥammad ibn al-Uthaymīn and 'Alī Jum'a. Again in English (Rizk 2014, 194-204).

Among those in Arabic, I note especially the pioneering Al-Ḥakīm, Al-Laṭīf aṣ-Sa'īdī 1994. And then Al-Zayyādī 2009, 219-52; Al-Khiḍḍī, Samāra 2009, 71-89; Sway 2012 at <https://www.qscience.com/content/journals/10.5339/reIs.2012.environment.26>; (Al-Kaylānī 2014, 1209-28); Bin Hamza 2016; Zafar 2019. Interesting too Schwencke 2012 (<http://ppi.unas.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/report-globalized-eco-islam-a-survey-schwencke-vs-24-february-2012-pdf.pdf>). I would also signal the useful mapping of the environmental issue in the Qur'an in Helfaya, Koth, Hanafi 2018. Also useful on ecological movements in the Islamic world is Vincenti doctoral thesis (Vincenti 2016), which can be consulted at <https://iris.luiss.it/handle/11385/201123#.YQDUXR1S9E4>. Finally, the very recent Idlālène 2021, which is, however, almost wholly based on a Western bibliography.

Environment”,<sup>19</sup> in which the author examines in an environmental light certain general principles of classical Islamic law (*al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyya*); for example: ‘neither mutual harm or damage’ (*lā ḍarar<sup>a</sup> wa-lā ḍirār<sup>a</sup>*), 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’ (*dar' al-mafāsīd muqaddam 'alā jalb al-masāliḥ*); “a harm is not cancelled by a comparable one” (*al-ḍarar lā yuzālu bi-mithli-hi*); ‘a minor harm should be accepted if it leads to the elimination of a greater harm’ (*aḍ-ḍarar al-ashadd yuzāl bi-l-akhaff*); or ‘what results in the illegal is itself illegal’ (*mā yu'addī ilā l-ḥarām huwa ḥarām*).

Also recent, but much wider in scope, is an essay by the Kuwaiti Jābir al-Wanda<sup>20</sup> (Al-Wanda 2019, 159-72), which emphasises the contribution of *sharī'a* to the achievement of the seventeen goals detailed in the UN’s 2030 Agenda.<sup>21</sup> His text is representative of others and is worth summarising here.

Taking his cue from various passage in the Holy Book and a number of Prophetic traditions, Jābir al-Wanda maintains that the natural environment is a divine ‘bounty’ (*ni'mat<sup>u</sup> -llāh*: Q 31, 20) and for that reason demands the utmost safeguarding. The Muslim should avoid any abuse or excessive exploitation of natural resources (Q 7, 31 e 15, 19) and must not alter the perfect measure and proportion (*miqdār*) (Q 13, 18), or disturb the perfect equilibrium (*tawāzun*) of the environment that surrounds him, bearing always in mind that Islam is a religion of moderation and equanimity (*wasatīyya, i'tidāl*) (Al-Wanda 2019, 163). The perfection of creation is mirrored in its beauty, which man is able to appreciate (cf. Q 35, 27-28; Q 25, 61) because an aesthetic sensibility has been wired into his soul.<sup>22</sup> Caring for the environment also meets the Islamic principles of benevolence and goodness (*khayrīya, ihsān*) (164).

Turning to the specific prescriptions of the *sharī'a*, Jābir al-Wanda observes that it, as well as fostering in the believer an awareness of the environment he lives in (*al-wa'ī al-bī'ī*), provides him at the same time with all the indications necessary to maintaining the *status quo* and even instructs him in different methods of conserv-

<sup>19</sup> *Ḥimāya wa-ri'āyat al-bī'a fī l-Islām* (24 December 2019), which can be consulted at <https://platform.almanhal.com/Files/2/90351> and <https://islamonline.net/مجلات-الإسلامية-تذيبا-لتأثيرات-تأثيرات>.

<sup>20</sup> <http://45.35.151.61/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/831/Part%209.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>21</sup> As approved by the United Nations in September 2019; <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>.

<sup>22</sup> The innate human capacity to appreciate beauty justifies the necessity of converting to Islam: appreciating the perfect beauty of the Qur'an leads to understanding its divine origin.

ing and caring (*hifāz*, *ri'āya*) for the world. Point by point, and always scrupulously backing himself up with quotations from the Qur'an and the Sunna, the author explains that environmentalism forms an important part of the ethical values and behaviours (*qiyam akhlāqiyya, sulūkiyyāt*) instilled by faith (165-6); that the principles and methods of the law (*fiqh*), augmented by the practical experience of the jurists, are sufficient to resolve all the great ecological issues (166-7); and that the conservation of the environment fits perfectly with the five fundamental pillars of the religious law (*maqāsid al-sharī'a*), which are: the safeguarding of the faith, the person, the intellect, lineage and money (*dīn, nafs, 'aql, nasl/ird, māl*) (169). He closes his discussion with the 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' (*mas'ūliya mujtama'iyya*) (170).

### 3 Environmental 'Corruption'

In pursuing his theme, al-Wanda dwells on the Qur'anic contrast between *iṣlāḥ*, 'emendment or correction', and *fasād*, 'corruption'<sup>23</sup> (Al-Wanda 2019, 168-9), the latter being a term frequently used nowadays to cover environmental degradation, as also pollution (technically *talawwuth*); and he cites the (again Qur'anic) prohibition of wreaking 'corruption upon the earth' (*al-fasād fī l-arḍ*), referencing, *inter alia*, the surah of the Heights: "Cause not corruption upon the earth after the fair ordering thereof (*ba'd iṣlāḥi-hā*)" (Q 7, 56).<sup>24</sup> By giving both terms, *fasād* and *iṣlāḥ*, 'corruption' and 'correction', a deftly ecological reading – bypassing, as many modern commentators are prone to, 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 essay on the same themes by the Egyptian educationalist and linguist Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim<sup>25</sup> (2007, 117-37), where what strikes one particularly, as indeed in many other cases,

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<sup>23</sup> Or *ifsād*.

<sup>24</sup> He also points to Q 7, 85: "O my people [...] fulfil the measure and weight and do not deprive others of their due and cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation". "Corruption upon the earth", as something specifically forbidden and as a behaviour typical of the wicked, appears dozens of times in the Qur'an: Q 2, 11; 2, 27; 2, 30; 2, 60; 2, 205; 5, 32-33, 64; 7, 56; 7, 74; 7, 85; 7, 127; etc.

<sup>25</sup> The author frequently backs up his argument with quotations from another Egyptian thinker, the above-mentioned aṣ Ṣa'īdī, *Al-bī'a fī l-fikr al-insānī wa-l-wāqī' al-imānī* (The Environment in Human Thought and in the Faith). I note here a more recent work

is the vast expansion of the notion of 'environment' (*bī'a*) that his argument 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 [*taḥhīr*, *tazkīya*] 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” (Q 91, 9-10). (Qasim 2007, 120)<sup>26</sup>

Under Islam – Muḥammad Jābir Qāsim continues – the environment 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 [*fasād*] 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 [*qudsiyya*] of Him who created it, He who stands behind the sanctity of Islamic sources, of the principles which underlie the religion and the credo rooted in the hearts of believers. On the basis of this sanctity, respect for the environment is a constituent element of the faith [*īmān*]. (122)

Another interesting aspect of Qāsim's work is his extension of the concept of 'pollution' (*talawwuth*). In the scheme proposed by the author, pollution 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 of the allowed and the forbidden (*ḥalāl*, *ḥarām*), underlines the holistic nature of Islamic law:

Whether it be of animal or vegetable origin, God has allowed [*aḥalla*] what is good, and forbidden [*ḥarrama*] what is bad [see Q 2, 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. This was the reason for the creation in times

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in the same spirit, with many references to the classical literature: Murad 2017 (<https://journals.qu.edu.qa/index.php/sharia/article/view/65/65>).

**26** Translation from Arabic by the Author.



past of the role of *muḥtasib*,<sup>27</sup> one appointed to oversee the markets and monitor the safety of the goods for sale.<sup>28</sup> (Qasim 2007, 129-30)

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 go to make up human beauty are the cleanliness and purification (*naḡāfa*, *ṭahāra*) 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 (*ghusl*) every Friday,<sup>29</sup> and thence to the cleaning of clothes, houses and streets, so that they are pleasing both to man and to the Lord (131).

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

And when thy Lord said to the angels, "I am setting in the earth a viceroy", they said: "Wilt thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood?" [...] He said: "Surely I know that which ye 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". (Q2, 30-31)

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 make good (as in *iṣlāh*) what he had ruined (as in *fasād*). Seen thus, environmental degradation can itself be understood as part of the divine plan, and man's knowledge, superior to that of the angels as God had willed it, would provide the means of resolving the problem (Qasim 2007, 122).

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**27** From *ḥisba*, a term used partly to indicate the duty of every Muslim to "promote the good and prevent the bad" and partly for the functions of the person appointed to apply this dictum in a given city. This will be explained further below.

**28** His argument continues with a series of Prophetic sayings on the cleaning of kitchen utensils.

**29** On the basis of the well-known Prophetic saying reported by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Salmān al-Fārisī: "Man should perform a complete ablution on Fridays and purify himself as best as he can, and anoint himself with his ointment...".

#### 4 'Islamic Precedence' 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.<sup>30</sup> This is an even broader understanding of what constitutes 'the environment', which includes the fields of economics, 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" (*ifsād, isrāf, tabdhīr, takhrīb, tashwīh*). 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*), exceeding and transgressing, that is, the limits laid down by God. All with a fiercely negative view of the impact of man – especially Western man – on the world of today, and a continual insistence, often in quite polemical tones, on 'Islamic precedence' in environmentalist terms. He 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 (pbuh) 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. (al-Mustafa al-Barjawi 2011, s.p.)

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 limits and proportions (*qadar, miqdār*) of the world and treat nature in a moral and gentle way (cf. *adab, ḥanān*).

Islam's claim to precedence 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 2017 essay by the Yemeni economist 'Adil 'Abd ar-Rashīd 'Abd ar-Razzāq fo-

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<sup>30</sup> Downloadable at <https://www.alukah.net/culture/0/36923/>.

ocusing on the Sunna of the Prophet (2017). 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 (*ilzām dīnī*) (176-9).

In 'Abd ar-Razzāq's essay there is a stimulating section dedicated to *ḥisba* – the duty of every individual to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong<sup>31</sup> – as a system of control, as 'environmental monitoring' (*raqāba bī'yya*). Taking his cue from the early Aleppo jurist ash-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 *ḥisba*, the *muḥtasib*,<sup>32</sup> 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 as 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. 'Abd ar-Razzāq proposed a reinstatement and reinforcement of *ḥisbah* as a solution to inadequate environmental policing in the Arab and Islamic world, along with 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.

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31 Cf. Q 3, 104; 3, 110 and 3, 114; 7, 157; 9,71 9, 112; 22, 41; 31, 17.

32 Cf. s.v. "Ḥisba". *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0293](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0293).

## 5 From the Prophetic to the Divine Example

Sharia - writes ‘Abd ar-Razzāq elsewhere - asks us to treat [*adab*] 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. (2017, 169)

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 as-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 (149-62) - often have a general valency, for example “God has ordained goodness [*iḥsān*] in all things”, “the Earth has been entrusted to me like a mosque and like purification [*masjid wa-ṭahūr*]”, and “there is a reward for every moist liver”, the celebrated saying that enjoins compassion for all living things. 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”, also “do not curse the cockerel”. Finally, “Uhud is a mountain that loves us and we love it”, which teaches us not only to protect the natural world but to love it. ‘Abd ar-Razzāq thus ends up by supplying a whole treatise of environmental education under the Prophet’s guidance (163-76).

Among the numerous sayings reviewed from an environmental perspective, two in particular stand out because they reference the ‘Beautiful Names’ (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), the qualities that traditional Islamic theology attributes to God on the basis of the foundational texts, specifically: “God is the Beautiful and he loves beauty” (*al-Jamīl yuḥibbu al-jamāl*), and “God is the Kind and he loves kindness” (*ar-Raḥīm yuḥibbu al-riḥq*). The author, then, by means of the Prophet’s words calls on the believer to respect the beauty and fragility of the world, but the example he points to is not that of the Prophet, but that of God himself - a distinction worth noting, because by so doing, even if he does not labour the point, he places environmentalism squarely within the framework of the Islamic ethics of virtue.

In fact, while it is true that the Muslim should always model himself on Muhammad, it is also true that the peculiarity of the moral, as opposed to the legal sphere, lies in its having for a model *muta-*

*tis mutandis* no less than ‘the supreme example’ (*al-mathal al-a‘lā*, Q 16, 60) of God himself and his attributes. The notion that the Islamic ethics of virtue are inspired by the divine Names, and by the imitation of God, for all his obvious inimitability, finds its origin in those cases where the Qur’an or the Sunna acknowledge the same qualities in God and in humankind. Thus, for example, we find gratitude (*shukr*) numbered among the cardinal virtues, because the Qur’an applies *shakūr* both to God, “the All-forgiving, the All-thankful” (Q 35, 34; 42, 23; 64, 17) and to the good believer (Q 14, 5; 31, 31; 34, 19; 42, 33). The medieval theologians defined such divine attributes ‘ambiguous’ (*mutashābiha*) or ‘shared’ (*mushtaraka*), precisely because they can be transmitted to humanity to the extent that God wills or permits;<sup>33</sup> an idea that is also to be found in Christian theology in the form of ‘communicable divine attributes’.

Also to be found among the divine Names is *al-Ḥafīz*,<sup>34</sup> ‘He who preserves many things’, ‘the Protector’ or ‘the Guardian’: a ‘shared’ name, in so far as the Qur’an employs it several times in relation to God, who is “the best Guardian” (Q 12, 64),<sup>35</sup> but also applies it to human beings: among men dubbed ‘guardians’ are the Prophet<sup>36</sup> and Joseph son of Jacob, the ‘wise guardian’ of the Pharaoh in Egypt (*ḥafīz ‘alīm*, Q 12, 55); also ‘guardians’ are the blessed in paradise (Q 50, 32) because they have been able to defend their own adherence to the faith, while the Qur’an itself is a “book that guards/preserves” (*kitāb ḥafīz*) (Q 50, 4).

When glossing *al-Ḥafīz* in his famous work on the Names, the medieval theologian and philosopher al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) pens a hymn to the biological, chemical and physical perfection of the environment. He tells us that the divine ‘guardianship’ (*ḥifẓ*) 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. God looks after all living things, people, plants and animals, maintaining a balance between their components, regulating oppositions, adding and recreating, and ultimately preserving every single atom on earth and in the heavens. As for the *ḥafīz* man, al-Ghazālī explains that he is one who guards himself, in his body and his heart, observing his religion, preserving himself from attacks of anger, from the lure of desire, the deceits of the animal soul and the machinations of devils. Because man, he writes:

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**33** See, for example, Zilio-Grandi 2020, 12.

**34** At no. 38 in the most widely recognised lists.

**35** See also Q 11, 57; 34, 21; 42, 6.

**36** Q 4, 80; 6, 104 and 6, 107; 11, 86; 42, 48.

“stands at the edge of a precipice, surrounded by these many perils that would lead him to ruination” (Al-Ghazālī 1971, 119-23) (cf. Stade 1970, 76-80).<sup>37</sup>

Another eminent medieval theologian who concerned himself with the divine Names and their potential transmission to the virtuous man was Fakhr al-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606/1209). In his work on the Names we find another interpretation of divine tutelage, which is preservation from oblivion, linked to the divine knowledge (*‘ilm*); ar-Rāzī explains that God is *al-Ḥafīz* 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 applies *ḥafīz* to men and describes the *ḥafīz* 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 (*faḍīla*) lies in the middle way. Therefore, one must walk by a straight path deviating neither to one side or the other, a path that some follow lightning fast while others toil ahead among a thousand difficulties.<sup>38</sup>

An ethical-ecological interpretation of the Name, and its possible translation into the Islamic virtue of ‘environmental awareness’ is indeed a long way from the medieval and early modern theological sensibility, nor indeed is there much sign of it even today. And yet, deploying the resources of Islamic theology and working under the guidance of the masters of the past, it is actually simple enough, exactly through meditating on this Name, to predicate the ‘Islamness’ of environmentalism and sustainable behaviour.

What is surprising is that the various Arab authors cited so far, when they insist on conservation and the guardianship of the world after the Prophet’s example, have continual recourse to terms deriving from the same verbal root as *al-Ḥafīz*, such as *hifz*, *ḥifāz* or *muḥāfaẓa*, all deputed to mean conservation, but do not take the next vital step. One might object that their background tends to be juridical or other rather than theological, were it not that we observe the same omission among theologians. An example is Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (b. 1926) in his well-known 2001 essay *Caring for the Environment in Islamic Religious Law*.<sup>39</sup> An ecological reading of the Name *al-Ḥafīz* does not seem to have been attempted even by those preachers who take the Names as models for human virtues, as is the case with the Syrian Muḥammad Rātīb an-Nābulusī (b. 1939) in his *Encyclopaedia*

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<sup>37</sup> See <https://www.ghazali.org/books/Ghazali-99-Name-of-God.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> <http://ar.lib.eshia.ir/12180/1/369>, vol. 1, 263-6.

<sup>39</sup> Downloadable at <https://www.al-qaradawi.net/node/5064>. Cf also Qaradāwī 2010.

of the Beautiful Names.<sup>40</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

The contemporary Arab Muslim authors pushing for increased environmentalist thinking from a religious perspective are becoming more numerous throughout the MENASA area. It is one of the principal aims of this essay to provide a platform for these authors, too often ignored in the West because of the relative inaccessibility of their chosen linguistic medium.

Their works have certain basic convictions in common. First of all, the position of man in the world, which is viewed as internal (as in *bī'a*) rather than separate (as in *environment*). Secondly, a specific conception of sustainability, based on the permanence of the world (as in *istidāma*) and not the burden that its maintenance imposes (as in *sustainability*). The unregulated exploitation of natural resources is seen as 'excess' (*isrāf*), and excess is directly contrary to the principles of Islam - "God does not love those who exceed the limits" (Q 2, 190) - and to its cardinal virtues, moderation and equanimity (*wasāṭiyya*, *tawāzun*). Our ongoing degradation of the environment is assimilated to the Qur'anic expression "corruption upon the earth" (*fasād fī l-ard*), something sternly prohibited, although part of the divine plan. God has equipped man with a brain precisely to enable him to tackle it (cf. Q 2, 30). Making good the inevitable corruption of the world and returning it to its pristine state (as in *islāh*, 'rectification') are therefore ethical imperatives demanded by the Islamic religion.

Another recurrent theme is that of 'Islamic precedence' in the environmental field. All the authors state, or simply assume, that *sharī'a* - the ethical/legal teachings contained in the Qur'an and the Sunna - ensures the environmental awareness of the believer and provides him with all the necessary tools to live respecting, and loving, nature. This means that the Prophet's teachings preceded Western ecological ideology and its political programmes by many centuries,<sup>41</sup> and thus, if the Islamic world is also afflicted with ecological problems, this is due to the adoption of styles of life at odds with the autochthonous cultural tradition. It is essential, then, to re-

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<sup>40</sup> An-Nabulusi 2014, 71-93 (commentary on *al-Hafīz*). The Kurd Said Nursi (d. 1960), although convinced that the Names can be transferred to the natural world, man included, and perhaps the first Muslim thinker to reveal the environmentalist component in the foundational texts of Islam, is none the less no exception; see Nursi 2010, 655-60 (<http://www.erisale.com/index.jsp?locale=en#content.en.201.619>), and Sempo, Khosim 2020, 107-32.

<sup>41</sup> Clearly the 'environmental' cultural heritage of the Christian West is itself insufficiently known.

turn to the 'Prophetic way', spreading as widely as possible an Islamic alternative to Western ecology, one which, constructed on the firm foundations of the faith, will be seen as a religious obligation (*ilzām dīnī*). Within such an alternative it has been proposed that *ḥisba* – the Qur'anic duty to promote right and prevent wrong – be re-established and the personage associated with it, the *muḥtasib*, be reinstated in a new kind of sustainability official.

Despite a frequent recourse to religious sources, the cultural provenance of these authors is generally not strictly theological. Indeed, a survey of recent Arab texts on environmentalism reveals an almost complete absence of theological discussion (*'ilm al-kalām*) of the subject,<sup>42</sup> with the result that missing from contemporary discourse is, among other things, the *mutatis mutandis* human translation of the Divine Name deputed to express conservation, *al-Ḥafīz*, which, in portraying an 'environmental' aspect of God, furnishes a textual basis for promoting the associated Islamic virtue.<sup>43</sup> Suggesting this approach has been another aim of the present essay.

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**42** This may well be due to the preponderance of law over theology in modern Islamic education. Louis Gardet's contribution, *'Ilm al-Kalām*, in "Encyclopaedia of Islam", Second Edition, remains relevant: "In the universities of Muslim countries the faculties of religious sciences are called *kulliyāt ash-sharī'a*, a term generally rendered by "Faculties of theology"; *fiqh* is there taught as much as, if not more than, *kalām*. *Kalām*, based as it is upon its function of defensive apologia, does not hold the leading place in Muslim thought that theology does in Christianity".

**43** Just as, among other things, there is no focus on the apocalyptic dimension of the divine punishment of 'corrupters' cf. Q2,12; 5,33 and 64,7,85-86 and 103; 10,81, 29,36; etc.), nor the habitual behaviour of God (as in *sunnat Allāh*) who "changes not" (cf. Q17,77; 33,62; 35,42; 48,23).



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