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Envisioning the Future of Islamic Studies Scholarship: Liberation, Healing, and Sustainability

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Abstract- There are striking interconnections between the dominations of all kinds with linking attitudes and consequences. Whether it is a matter of religion, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or even species, everything is interconnected. Globally, the most disadvantaged populations are marginalized. Since religion is a meaningful way whereby the roles of the present and future generations are defined and imposed, this article offers an investigation and analysis of current global issues surrounding environmental ruin and social inequality by highlighting the role of Islamic Studies scholarship. A vision of future scholarship in Islamic Studies and the perceived "shifting times" is presented in three parts: identification, explanation, and solution. Liberation, healing, and sustainability are the proposed solutions and outcomes for resolving current problems within an interpretation of Islam's sacred texts. In this regard, scholarship can make a significant contribution in challenging misconceptions that promote dominance, oppression, and violence.

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Envisioning the Future of Islamic Studies Scholarship: Liberation, Healing, and Sustainability

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Abstract- There are striking interconnections between the dominations of all kinds with linking attitudes and consequences. Whether it is a matter of religion, gender, race, ethnicity, class, or even species, everything is interconnected. Globally, the most disadvantaged populations are marginalized. Since religion is a meaningful way whereby the roles of the present and future generations are defined and imposed, this article offers an investigation and analysis of current global issues surrounding environmental ruin and social inequality by highlighting the role of Islamic Studies scholarship. A vision of future scholarship in Islamic Studies and the perceived "shifting times" is presented in three parts: identification, explanation, and solution. Liberation, healing, and sustainability are the proposed solutions and outcomes for resolving current problems within an interpretation of Islam's sacred texts. In this regard, scholarship can make a significant contribution in challenging misconceptions that promote dominance, oppression, and violence.

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I. Introduction

The most critical issues of our times encompass environmental ruin and social inequality. Within the current issues of environmental degradation and social injustice, striking interconnections have only become pivotal within the past decades. As in the words of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "*Ours is a period when the human community is in search of new and sustaining relationships to the earth amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet"* [1]. Globally, the most disadvantaged populations are marginalized people. Among them, women and children are the primary victims. This article aims to investigate and analyze the current global issues and highlight how Islamic Studies scholarship is in a prime position to inform and impact these issues by providing much-needed healing resources. The influences upon Muslim environmental ethics hold visions for the future of scholarship in Islamic Studies and the perceived shifting times. They are presented in three parts: identification, explanation, and solution. It is argued further that liberation, healing, and sustainability goals are the only viable outcomes.

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II. Identification: Contemporary Islamic Environmentalism and Critical Issues

The critical issue is a struggling planet due to resource depletion, species extinction, and water, air, and land pollution overload. These ecological predicaments have growing economic, political, and social dimensions. Connecting these issues to contemporary Islamic environmentalism has taken similar paths as environmentalism in other monotheistic worldviews. Islamic environmentalists draw from the Qur'an, hadith literature, and classical Islamic scholarship to address ecology, while Muslim environmentalists may incorporate these sources with others.

Historically, it was not until the 1960s that Islamic scholars turned their attention to the ecological crisis in reaction to Lynn White Jr.'s essay regarding the origins of the crisis and monotheistic religions [2]. Two Islamic scholars who devoted their lives to raising ecological consciousness among Muslims are Fazlun M. Khalid and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. They were among the first to respond. After that, more Islamic worldviews have been added to Islamic environmental ethics. In 2003, Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin edited a compilation of twenty-three articles in the book *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, to which Islamic and Muslim scholars responded [3].

The proposed actions and attitudes of the scholars focused on four broad categories: (1) a return to seeing the natural environment as sacred by utilizing the Qur'an and primary textual sources (hadith literature and classical interpretations) as a foundation; (2) the idea that Muslims are not living in proper balance with the environment and the possible reasons why. Some of the reasons provided pointed to the colonial and imperial past, Western paradigms of progress, political systems, internal migration, and the lack of concern or education of religious leaders on the environment; (3) social injustices leading to environmental destruction; and (4) included sustainability models which provided the most instructive paradigms through case studies, utilizing art and architecture to revive respect for the environment [4].

Fast forward twenty-plus years, while there is great diversity in perspectives, most scholarship on Islam and ecology is theoretical and focuses on Islamic

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environmental ethics. While environmental degradation is a growing concern among Muslim populations, Islamic environmentalism is still a minority phenomenon among Muslims. There remain some critical areas of research that need to be addressed among Islamic scholars, such as taking a self-critical stance on connecting social dominations of all kinds to ecological decay, climate justice and climate change adaptation, how to move gender issues beyond the topic of population and birth control, and how to connect theory better to practice. Most importantly, how to address humanism in Islamic environmental ethics is a rarity. Islamic environmentalists, by and large, agree and note that the environment is held in great value in an Islamic worldview. In essence, the majority of scholarship on Islam and ecology are prescriptive theologies rather than constructive theologies and are either apologetic or in the genre of religious exhortation [5]. Table 1 show viewpoints of a majority of Islamic environmentalists on the role of humans. In some of the articles, it might be argued that the environment, nature, or ecology was only mentioned in passing. The interconnectedness of injustice to environmental destruction is essential for all people; as noted by Lucas Stuart: *"These perceptions of the relations of humanity, God, and the environment are ecologically sound, but often they do not reflect people's actual practices. The ecological dimension of Islamic theology is still developing and there is diversity"* [6].

Table 1: Viewpoints of Islamic Environmentalists on the Role of Humans

Scholars	*Khalīfat* definition/translation	Characterization
Seyyed Hossein Nasr	Vicegerent of God (*Khalīfat Allah*)	Human beings are servants and vicegerents of God (*'abdAllah* and *Khalīfat Allah*). "Permission to dominate" the earth but insists that "submission and servanthood of God" are maintained.
Fazlun M Khalid. Nasr	Stewardship and viceroy	"Sacred duty," "appointment," "ascribed" to the human race. Permission to dominate.
Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti	Vicegerent of God and then adds "steward," "custodian," "trusteeship	The earth is presented to the vicegerent in the Shari'a as usufruct. Insisting on the need for "human sensitivity" to its earthly co-inhabitants, Chishti emphasizes the moral dimension of the *Khalīfat*.
Ibrahim Özdemir	Vicegerent of God	Human beings are at the "top of the great chain of being."
S. Nomanul Haq	Vicegerent of God	Custodians of the entire natural world, humanity is reined in by a set of moral and metaphysical controls. Characterized humans as theomorphic, supreme creatures.
Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan C. Fink	Vicegerent of God	Humans have special privileges and responsibilities. They emphasized the covenantal role of trust (*amana*). Vicegerency is the human challenge. Every human's potential is to fulfill the role of vicegerency and human dignity.
Othman Abd-ar Rahman Llewellyn	Vicegerent of God, "stewardship"	Manager of the earth, and sees it not as a privilege, but as an honor, "trust, a responsibility, and a trial.
Yasin Dutton	Stewardship, God's Deputy/representative	Everything on Earth created for humans.

III. Explanation: Contemporary Islamic Environmentalism and Critical Issues

The diversity of Muslims illuminates their diverse perspectives, yet the modes or rationales employed offer additional insights. Concerning an explanation, what is missing from contemporary descriptions, rationalizations, and overt and latent justifications in environmental ethics among Islamic scholars?

Anna M. Gade describes two primary rationales regarding environmentalism among Muslims: (1) "*Islam for the sake of the environment,"* and (2) *"Muslims who cast environmentalism for religious goals"* [7]. According to Gade, when Muslims engage in "Islam for the sake of the environment" there is a "greening" or "green-washing" of normalized rituals and theology; they often use prescriptive messages that requires some essentialization of Islam to assert authority to the desired degree; and motivation is usually from some

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form of care and concern to address a problem or a crisis with an authoritative pronouncement and for specific programs and purposes [8]. For example, when already existing "programs of states and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)" enlists and "invent" programming for Islam and the environment to incorporate Islamic value along with an array of world religions [9]. These include organizations such as the "Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC), the Nature Conservancy, and World Wildlife Federation (WWF) [10]. The following excerpt from Richard C. Foltz's book *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*, provides another example of how the Islamic tradition is expected to address environmental issues similarity with other religions, particularly alongside Christianity: *"The articulation of an explicitly Islamic environmental ethic, on the other hand, is quite recent and has arisen largely in response to the critique of Christianity launched by Lynn White Jr. several decades ago. It has also been a discussion held primarily among Muslim intellectuals in the industrialized world, although recently this has been changing. At present, it remains to be seen what role, if any Islamic values will play in addressing the environmental problems faced by more than a billion Muslims in diverse societies throughout the world"* [11].

Muslims who cast environmentalism for religious goals highlight a different rationale, one that is individualized and practical. In the discussion of Islam and the environment, Gade argues that this relationship can be consistently observed across various spheres, such as cultural, political, and social contexts [12]. The prominence of the power structure involved makes Islam and the environment a "natural" outflow of life and existence. It exposes the lived experiences of Muslims.

Significantly, both rationales overlap, yet when they do, something is overshadowed. The first (Islam for the sake of the environment) is authoritatively theological, and the latter (Muslims who cast environmentalism for religious goals) is exceedingly practical. The ideas forming the relationship involve a power dynamic: authority versus lived experiences, theory versus praxis. The first usually view Islam and the environment within a "framework of plurality of religion, filtered through secular and essentially non-Muslim language" [13]. It focuses on religious teachings, like *khilāfah*—human vicegerency, rituals like "greened" pillars of Islam, and authoritative public pronouncement, or *fatwa*. Contemporary Islamic scholarship on the environment has emphasized the concepts of *tawḥīd* (God's oneness), *khalīfa* (human viceregency), amana (the bestowing of divine trust to humans), and *mizan* (balance) [14].

Of these concepts, *khalīfa*, referring to the role of humans as vicegerents of God on earth, is the essential idea regarding Islam and ecology [15]. Greening this idea, Muslim environmentalists now interpret this role of humanity as "stewards of God's creation."

Muslims who cast environmentalism for religious goals are what Muslims themselves create when starting from religious commitment. The dynamic begs the question—is Islam being greened, or are environmental efforts Islamicized? When environmentalism is integral to religious piety, different voices are heard. The voices of the politically, culturally, and religiously subaltern Muslim communities in the ethnographic fieldwork take prominence. A critical example of the disconnection is evident in a study on Muslims and climate change by Jens Koehrsen. A disconnection is revealed in that *"so far, little is known about the relationship between Muslim communities and climate change"* [16]. Although there are concentrations of Muslims in regions that are particularly affected, climate justice is not connected to normative Islamic scholarly discourse. Climate justice is a framework that "connects the climate crisis to the social, racial, and environmental issues" [17]. There is a need to recognize the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities worldwide. There is a disconnection between Islamic authorities and the lived experiences of the marginalized, especially concerning women. Koehrsen noted the following: *"Contributions to this research field are often theoretical and stress theological and normative aspects of Islam. Empirical studies have particularly addressed Indonesia and the United Kingdom, whereas knowledge about Muslim climate activism in other world regions is fragmented. Against this backdrop, there is a need for comparative studies that consider regional and religious differences among Muslims and address the role of Muslim environmentalism in climate change mitigation and adaptation at the international, national, and local scales* [18]. This analysis showed a need to synthesize research about environmental issues and Muslim communities.

Again, Gade asserts that Muslims who pursue environmentalism for religious goals deviate from customary paradigms that identify and describe the theory and practice of environmental studies in response to a crisis or as "problems" to solve [19]. She describes them as committed Muslims practicing self-conscious environmentalism as they view environmentalism strictly as a religious practice and that there is a "growing genealogical recognition that Muslim sources represent autonomous systems of knowledge not only for European sciences but also for its humanities" [20].

IV. A Solution: Liberation, Healing, and Sustainability

Islamic scholarship at the intersection of ecological and social concerns is a developing field,

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particularly at the intersection of the sacred, ecology, and gender. Islamic environmentalism and the critical issues should always begin with awareness of the striking interconnections between dominations of all kinds and the ecological and social injustice that ensues. How do we recognize the interconnections between the domination of nature, women, and marginalized populations and the typical attitudes and consequences of cause? They manifest in the characteristics of some beliefs found in commentaries, dogma, and collective practices. When groups, humans and non-humans, are categorized in a value hierarchy, words like "natural" and "the will of God" are used against them. Connections are observable in the idea that some ethnic, racial, economic, or gender groups are closer to animals and or nature, indicating that they are "naturally" subordinate or inferior, and therefore, domination is in order. Some interpretations and commentaries support these beliefs using sacred stories and legends. They are apparent in the body placements and performances in some collective practices. The way our beliefs attributes influence our attitudes and behaviors often leads to gross discrepancies.

Liberation, healing, and sustainability are proposed solutions and outcomes for resolving current environmental problems. Islamic Studies scholarship is in a prime position to inform and impact societal and environmental degradation. In this regard, scholarship can significantly challenge dominance, oppression, and violence. The role that Islamic Studies scholarship can play is to initiate awareness and then ask some tough questions. The synthesis of theological and practical components of Muslim/Islamic environmentalism must happen at the most basic levels.

What stands to be gained from including ethnographical fieldwork, gender issues, and sustainability paradigms is an impact on the theological episteme. Environmental justice is the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies" [21]. Islamic Studies scholarship on environmental justice should:

- Challenge speciesism.
- Include public campaigning to raise awareness about climate change and environmental justice.
- Address the role of Muslim environmentalisms, in various mitigation and adaptation.
- Disseminate pro-environmental interpretations of Islam.
- Conduct comparative studies, considering regional and religious differences among Muslims.
- Welcome instructive paradigms of sustainable development and possible contributions found in case studies can be beneficial and revive respect for the environment.
- Address gender inequality.

Addressing gender inequality is also crucial to the undertaking. Nawal Ammar, an Islamic scholar who is adding to this field of study, attempts to move the focus of Islam, women, and ecology away from only discussing population and reproduction. Ammar's solution for establishing a just society is grounded on empowering women [22].

This vision requires a fundamental shift in Islamic consciousness that facilitates connections. What Muslims themselves create when starting from religious commitment will impact environmental and Islamic discourse. The task of developing an Islamic ecotheology is upon us. As an Islamic worldview sees no separation between sacred and profane environments, Islamic scholarship can be influential in shaping attitudes and actions toward the environment. Consequently, the possibility of a comprehensive ecological theology that bypasses speciesism in Islam should not be ruled out. Islamic scholarship must encompass human rights, social justice, and gender equality with environmentalism. Islamic scholarship must address uncomfortable history and create a fairer future for the planet and all people. As the lived experiences of Muslims are incorporated, we will begin to see them and give voice and flesh to them. By doing so, we shift the episteme. The epistemologies that shape this distinct view require Islamic scholarship to embrace diverse perspectives. Monolithic views are suffocating and deny liberty. Accepting that academic discourse is critical to scholarship can redirect what we observe in the immediate world. Conservation and protection efforts require re-visioning to participate in sustainable environmentalist goals.

Liberation is the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression. Liberation is also freedom from limits on thought or behavior [23]. As a noun, healing is the process of making or becoming sound or healthy again; as an adjective, healing is therapeutic [24]. As we awaken to the correlation between ecological crises, human injustices, and greed, Islamic scholarship must challenge social dominations and dominations against the environment by reading the Qur'an with a lens of divine justice. The Qur'an states, "For, true servants of the Most Gracious are they who walk gently on the earth, and who, whenever the foolish address them, reply with words of peace" [25].

Focusing on the causes, enforcement factors, and consequences to a more just and sustainable global society is necessary—the "cause" is in the history of the "enforcement factor," which is how stories of separation are used to dominate. The "consequence" is identifying our current situations. As a Muslim scholar,

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incorporating lived experiences, the solution to the problem must have Islamic dimensions that are both ecological and gender-inclusive. This proposition is one possibility and not a claim of theological finality. Therefore, the following three parts of the process of liberation and healing is in Islamic contexts:

First, realign ontology. Islamic theology must be rooted in the belief that every human has equal intrinsic value. The Qur'an characterizes God by justice and mercy [26]. If theology is conducted from this "corrected" ontology, the first fundamental shift in consciousness is an awareness that our creation, in its essence, is already perfect. Although, there are contradictions in some commentaries, folklore, and other sources. The process must begin from an ontological awareness of the divinely bestowed egalitarian value, not superiority nor inferiority [26]. How does consciousness-raising unpack within Islamic contexts? The Qur'an recognizes humanity with the same ontological status as the rest of creations. The Qur'an, 6:38 states: "And there is no creature on [or within] the earth or bird that flies with its wings except [that they are] communities like you. We have not neglected in the register and then unto their Lord they will be gathered" [27]. This understanding is critical to establishing an egalitarian consciousness. Creation is innately worthy because it is God's creation.

Second, challenge dualisms, hierarchies, and dominations. Dualism or binary opposition is the system of language and thought by which two ideological opposites are strictly defined and set off [28]. Dualism informs hierarchical structures in society and our perceptions of nature. The causes of our current disconnection from one another and the earth happen through stories and legends of separation. Gradually, practices of gender inequity became part of the culture, which influenced religious interpretations. Forms of oppression are a parallel dominance-subordination model that describes some male-female relationships and are applied to oppress other humans and the environment [29].

Third, realign our critical relationships. What should be the relationship between God and humans, humans to humans, and humans and non-humans? The relational aspect of God to creation must highlight the root metaphor that "God cannot be unjust" [30]. This happens best when we insist on divine justice from the position of the realigned ontology. The words of the Qur'an forbid injustice and oppression and tell us that the rights of nature are as necessary as social rights among humanity. Humanity's place in creation does not take center stage. The Qur'an states: "The creation of the heavens and earth is greater by far than the creation of humankind, though most people do not know it" [31]. Humanity does not have an exclusive claim to the earth. As evidence, the Qur'an 51:56 states: "I created jinn and humankind only to worship Me" [32]. All creation is interconnected, interdependent, and inclusive in the definition of nature [33].

Healing occurs with making better connections. We must challenge imbalanced social and species dominations to heal relationships among creation. A key element in equalizing nature and marginalized humans requires realigning and conceptualizing ourselves, others, and our environment (ecology) in egalitarian terms. Resolution occurs by understanding the cause or reason for the dominations. The focus of intention must always remain that there are ways to live that do not harm the land we live on, the air we breathe, and the people in the societies we build.

Respect and concern for the planet and the need for solutions and sustainability are equally essential motivations. Sustainability is the capacity to maintain at a specific rate or level. Ecologically, sustainability is defined as avoiding the depletion of natural resources to maintain an ecological balance [34]. Beginning from a position of egalitarianism and divine justice are foundational to eradicating structures of It is the cornerstone to liberation and healed relationships.

V. Conclusion: Islam, Ecology, and the Future of Islamic Scholarship

The Qur'an commands observation, reflection, and sums up critical responsibilities for believers in chapter 16, verse 78 by stating, "Indeed, God orders justice and good conduct and giving [help] to relatives and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. God admonishes you that perhaps you will be reminded" [35]. Oppression is forbidden and is a hierarchical framework for domination. When an unequal and inferior value is assigned by authority figures, it sets the stage for oppression. The Qur'an states that "oppression is worse than murder" in chapter 2, verses 191 and 217 [36]. The crisis of environmental degradation is apparent from air pollution, radiation, water contamination, and the extinction of entire species of animals and plants. The processes that cause environmental decay resulting from human injustices and cultural arrogance must now be corrected.

First, see ourselves in the whole light that God sees us. Second, challenge all injustices. Third, heal our relationships with each ourselves, others, Earth, and God. The most significant problem with contemporary Islamic perspectives is that they mainly provide apologetic responses. Speciesist gazes are inevitable if theology places humanity at the top of the creation hierarchy. As a result, nature is not cognitively, conceptually, and narratively appreciated on its terms. The alternatives proposed foster constructing and establishing healed expressions. This position is the starting point for realigning critical relationships. In this case, the practices that will take us toward a more

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liberated present concentrates on changing how we perceive ourselves and creation as a whole while insisting that interpretations promoting the full and equal intrinsic value of all creation are authentic theology in Islam.

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