

**Report on Conference on Islam and the  
Environment  
Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies  
Ditchley Park, 17-19 October, 2008**

The conference, which was proposed and encouraged by HRH The Prince of Wales, was attended by scholars, religious leaders, diplomats, environmental practitioners and policymakers from different parts of the world (Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UK, US, Yemen), and representatives from major international agencies including the United Nations and the World Bank. The participants were unanimous in their appreciation of the interest taken by HRH The Prince of Wales in the subject.

The participants were asked to consider ways in which the Centre could encourage awareness Of Islamic teaching about man's responsibility for the natural environment, and of the need to translate this awareness into practical action. In particular, they were invited to reflect on the following:

- i. What are the means within Islam by which Muslims and others can learn how to recover the balance and harmony between man and nature that is so crucial for our survival? What are the best ways to revive the Islamic understanding of the natural environment and of human responsibilities towards God' s creation outside the human world?

- ii. How can we bring the numerous sayings of the Prophet relevant to this topic to the attention of the general public?
- iii. How can religious scholars in the Islamic world affirm Islamic teachings about the natural environment in ways which will influence both governmental and non-governmental agencies in this respect?
- iv. Should there be a concerted effort to recruit writers and poets within Islamic societies to assist in the urgent task of raising awareness by using the wealth of material within the various literatures of their societies on the relationships between human beings and the natural environment?
- v. Would it be useful to hold a series of conferences, or colloquia amongst ulema, economists, accountants, industrialists and others, with the specific intention of promoting awareness of the relevance of Islamic teaching to achieving sustainable and balanced environmental management?
- vi. What can the Centre do to encourage study of an economic order in which the Islamic view of the relation of human beings to the natural environment would be central?
- vii. How can the Centre establish a major initiative to raise throughout the Islamic world a better appreciation of the environmental crisis we all face?

Three main outcomes of the meeting were:

- That the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies should initiate a global forum on Islam and the Environment clearly associated with the name of HRH The Prince of Wales.
- Some of the participants undertook to explore the possibility of establishing an endowment fund to progress research on this theme.

- Consideration was given to the possibility of joint conferences between the Centre and institutions in Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, Malaysia, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

These conclusions were the outcome of detailed discussion in three working groups during the conference. The following group reports were prepared.

### **Group One: Islamic Teaching and Environmental Ethics**

1. Islamic teaching provides the moral and religious foundations of a vigorous environmental ethic. Respect for the natural environment and conservation of resources are emphasized throughout the Qur'an and the Sunnah and is connected with such theological doctrines as the oneness of the Creator; the inherent worth and interdependence of all created beings; human stewardship, and man's accountability for his actions. This ethic allows for the use - but not abuse - of the boundaries that God has bestowed on humans and other living beings. Beyond basic principles, the Islamic tradition has evolved specific rules and injunctions governing our relations with living and non-living creatures. The overall aim of Islamic environmental ethics is to seek the pleasure of the Lord of all beings and to avoid incurring His anger. That said, this holistic approach based on normative Islamic teachings has often been forgotten or neglected by Muslims, with a resulting disconnect between religious knowledge and the formulation of environmental policies and a widening gulf between specialists in the Islamic sciences and practitioners in the environmental fields.
2. The various Qur'anic verses, Prophetic teachings, and legal rulings that pertain to the environment have been identified reasonably well over recent decades. There are now useful paradigms for approaching environmental issues from an Islamic perspective.

The present need is to move ahead and address deficiencies in the growing body of Islamic publications on the environment.

3. Rather than reiterating platitudes and generalities, there is a need to concentrate on practical approaches that address actual environmental problems in all their complexities and paradoxes. There is a need to initiate an ongoing process exploring the right questions and the relevant values, objectives, principles, and the precedents in the Islamic tradition that will enable us to resolve environmental issues equitably.
4. Clarity about the universal and positive nature of Islamic ethical teaching will help to avoid dilution of the requirement that man's moral obligations extend to all created beings and that, in all circumstances, should seek the greatest good and avoid injustice and evil.
5. A range of practical actions was proposed to encourage the application of Islamic teaching to environmental issues:
  - a. Identify target groups for environmental education and awareness, including teachers in schools and *madrasahs*, imams, *fuqaha* and decision-makers, and prepare educational curricula at all levels.
  - b. Make creative use of the arts, mass media, the internet, imam training, and other means for environmental education and awareness.
  - c. Call on mothers and fathers, teachers in schools and *madrasahs*, imams and all leaders to provide good role models of environmental practice and to train children and youth on how to translate Islamic teachings in a practical way.
  - d. Cooperate with all, including other faith communities, for the common good through fostering local, national, regional and

global cooperation to deal with the environmental crisis. The importance of inter-faith collaboration deserves emphasis given that the core concepts of mutual cooperation for the common good, justice and moderation are at the heart of religious teaching.

- e. Call on all Muslim governments to: raise the standards of their environmental legislation; ensure its enforcement; make use of international environmental treaties and agreements; and conduct scientific assessment and monitoring of environmental changes and threats.
- f. Call on academic and other institutions and Muslim thinkers to conduct research exploring the implications of Islamic teachings of justice and moderation as values that endorse the principles of sustainable development.
- g. Call on Muslim *fuqaha*, ethicists and thinkers to examine critically the ethical implications of moral issues that have not yet received adequate attention in the Islamic world, such as consumer lifestyles and approaches to development, human population increase, genetic resources and genetic engineering, and industrial farming practices, in relation to Islamic values.
- h. Develop partnerships, perhaps coordinated by the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, between universities, research foundations, environmental agencies and other relevant institutions, in order to:
  - i. commission a critical survey of literature on Islam and the environment in Arabic and English at the very least, and preferably in other major languages of the Muslim world;
  - ii. bring together specialists in Islamic jurisprudence and ethics with professionals in environmental fields to explore the applications of Islamic law and ethics to environmental concerns;

- iii. explore ways and means to support the establishment of a discipline of Islamic environmental law;
- iv. prepare an environmental studies curriculum for interested specialists in Islamic law, and an Islamic law and jurisprudence curriculum for interested specialists in the environmental fields; and
- v. conduct research into traditional Islamic conservation practices and legal instruments such as the *hima* (protected areas), waqf(charitable endowment), and *harim* zones (easements and greenbelts).

### **Group Two: Economy, Technology and the Environment**

1. The future of the world's *rainforests* - whose destruction accounts for 20 per cent of greenhouse emissions - affects Muslim countries in widely varying degrees. It is an issue of immediate concern for countries in South-East Asia and Africa but seems remote and theoretical for the desert countries of the Middle East.
2. Yet a consciousness of the common destiny of mankind and the planet flows naturally from Islam's uncompromising universality, its concern for the whole of mankind, and its belief in the ultimate unity of all things. An awareness of human responsibility for the planet as a whole flows from the Muslim's keen sense of accountability before God for every action, large or small; and from their certainty that they will be judged for their actions in the hereafter.
3. That said, people find it hard to assess the environmental 'footprint' of their everyday actions, such as consuming food or driving cars because of a lack of information. Perhaps one day products will be labelled with information about their environmental consequences; just as packaged food now carries nutritional information.
4. In any case, as a result of climate change the interconnectedness of different parts of the world, from the forest to the desert, is

becoming obvious in very tangible ways. The Gulf countries may soon be affected by rising sea levels; desertification is an acute concern in North Africa and the Sahel.

5. Apart from rainforests, Muslims should be concerned with temperate forests, and with keeping some minimal forestation in areas at risk of total desertification. It was noted that NGOs like Tree Aid are already doing important work in this area.
6. It was pointed out that religions affect the world, not merely through their teachings, but also through the economic and environmental behaviour of religious institutions with regard to their stewardship of the enormous resources that pass through their hands. Some 5 per cent of the world's commercial forests belong to such institutions; America's United Methodist Church uses more paper than the whole of Sweden.
7. A purely utilitarian calculation of harm and benefit, of the kind favoured by modern secular economics, is at perpetual risk of delivering bad environmental results. Here Islamic ethics can help, with the important principles of *la darar wa la dirar* and *dar' al mafasid muqaddam 'ala jalb al-masalih* ("Do not inflict injury or exchange injuries" and "the averting of detriments takes precedence over the acquisition of benefits"). This suggests to us that even if there is a slight, but hard-to-assess, risk that a certain course of action may have injurious results, we should refrain from it. At the same time, if we must ask investors to forego benefiting from developments that may involve environmental risks, they could be compensated in accordance with the principle *al-ghunm bi 'l-ghurm* ("The benefit of a thing is in return for the liability attaching to it", and its converse, "Liability for a thing is an obligation accompanying the benefit thereof").
8. One important application of the *precautionary principle* is in protecting biodiversity. It may be hard to assess the precise value to mankind of a certain stretch of rainforest, because it may well

contain plants and animals whose potential benefits have not yet been discovered; this is a powerful argument in favour of restraint.

9. Also relevant to the question of biodiversity is the Muslim belief that all creatures, however large or tiny, have a calling to praise God. From this point of view, it hardly matters if, say, a species of organism is so small that we cannot see its function; it has its part to play in creation's perpetual hymn of praise.
10. Consideration was given to instances in the Islamic world of model forms of development that seem to exemplify solutions to global problems, whether in urban planning or energy. In some of the Gulf States, especially Abu Dhabi, there is increased interest in looking jointly at the problems of energy and water, in other words using renewable energy, including solar energy, to power desalination in order to manage the water problem.
11. Rainwater harvesting has proven a durable practice in much of the Islamic world, and related technologies need to be conserved, studied, documented, exchanged and applied. If mosques, for example, were equipped with recycling units, able to process 'grey water' - used for ablutions - this would send a very powerful signal. However investment in imaginative recycling and renewable projects will often require input from governments or international institutions; it is unlikely to be viable on a purely short-term utilitarian calculation.
12. In many Muslim countries, especially where the state functions poorly or lacks legitimacy, everyday social welfare is handled by formal or informal non-state networks which help to cushion the poor from the harshest effects of urbanisation and modernisation. As yet these networks do not emphasise an environmental dimension, and this is something that should be added.
13. Islam could make a great contribution to the refinement of new understandings of human and economic development: concepts



that need not calculate well-being in merely financial terms. In Islamic discourse many of the words that might be used to describe the use of a piece of land have a rich mixture of resonances and connotations. One such word is *islah* - meaning repair, restoration, rehabilitation. Other words include *imarah* - which covers development but is much richer – and *ihya* - reviving.

14. The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies should encourage universities, organizations, and institutions, to conduct research into traditional conservation practices, resource management systems, and technologies in the Islamic world, such as the *hima* (protected areas), *waqf* (charitable endowment), *falaj*, *qanat*, and other rainwater harvesting methods. There should be collaboration, where necessary, in building the capacities of local communities and other stakeholders to strengthen, improve and where necessary restore and revive such practices.
15. There is a need for a critical examination of Islamic banking in order to address any concerns about the extent to which it truly accords with Islamic values, especially with regard to environmental and social concerns. Also, the potential environmental roles of *zakah* and charitable endowments (*awqaj*) should be examined.

### **Group Three: Culture and the Environment**

1. The teachings of Islam emphasise a holistic approach to our understanding of mankind and the created world of which it is an integral part. Such teachings have provided for centuries the basis for the relations between Muslim societies and their natural environments.
2. Following the Industrial Revolution and the onset of globalisation and modernization, this emphasis on the holistic approach has often been forgotten by Muslim societies. There has often been a disconnect between religious knowledge and the formulation of environmental policies.

3. Central to any Muslim community, in the past as at the present time, is the firm commitment to the pursuit of social justice. On this basis, there is a recognition that man has a responsibility to manage the natural environment in conformity with Islamic teaching and in ways which serve the long-term welfare of the community and succeeding generations.
4. There should be attention given to the priority areas of action within the community. Emphasis should be placed on initiating projects at the grass-roots level rather than looking to governments to initiate activities.
5. For such grass-roots action to be effective requires above all giving attention to the role of education in strengthening awareness of the relevance of the Islamic tradition to the present and future needs of the entire community.
6. There are a variety of ways of achieving such awareness, including the following:
  - i. Consideration should be given to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies serving as the net-working focal point for co-operative action by those institutions involved in researching and implementing environmental policies in the Muslim world.
  - ii. The Islamic concept of 'social justice' flourishes at the community level. This should provide the basis for ensuring food security for all in ways which are locally acceptable. As civic society would be helpful in this regard support should be given for the creation of a post at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies to develop a network of links with NGO's.
  - iii. Given the interest of HRH The Prince of Wales in architecture, consideration should be given to undertaking 'eco-friendly' buildings in Muslim societies maintaining the harmony between the built and the natural environment.
  - iv. Consideration should be given to establishing an international iconic project to provide awards which encourage and raise

awareness of Islam and the Environment.

- v. There is a need to scrutinise grants made to Muslim societies by Islamic financial institutions to assess whether the importance of environmental issues was properly recognised.
- vi. It was proposed that a periodic publication by the World Bank, similar to the current IFC publication on doing business in individual countries, could be issued to monitor attention given to sustainable environmental management by individual countries.
- vii. There should be full recognition of the pivotal role of women in advancing the welfare of Muslim communities. For this reason alone, there should be equitable participation of women in conferences, in the preparation of educational materials, publications and leadership programmes, aimed at inculcating a better awareness of Islamic teaching about environmental Issues.
- viii. Consideration should be given to suitable publicity for successful environmental policies in Muslim communities. These could include complementary ways of supporting international celebrations such as the UN's 'Environment Day' or emulating the practice of the International Baccalaureate in requiring each student to be involved in community projects.
- ix. Research posts at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, and at other relevant institutions, should be established to analyse and design effective environmental programmes which could form the basis for collaboration and joint implementation with like-minded institutions.
- x. Support should be given to concerted inter-faith dialogue on man's relationship with his environment.
- xi. There is no authoritative encyclopaedic publication on 'Islam and the Environment'. The importance of publications should be recognised and consideration given to providing support for the preparation of a primer on currently available books and articles, and possibly the publication of a major journal dedicated to 'Islam and the Environment'.
- xii. There should be clear recognition of the importance of the

arts as avenues for environmental communication, interpretation and education, and the need to make creative use of them.

- xiii. Consideration should be given to a greater involvement and funding support by the private sector in relevant projects, education activities and publications. Attention should also be given to the participation of stakeholders, including local communities and resource users, in all such activities.

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