

ECOLOGY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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The below article was published in EarthLight magazine about the Islamic attitude towards nature and the environment. It will also be published in a book called "The Best of EarthLight: Ecology and Spiritual Living"

Al Ghazali, the most renowned Muslim scholar, philosopher, writer and teacher, lived from year 1058 to 1111 c.e. during the Muslim era in Spain and Portugal, said, "I can excel in rational knowledge (law, theology, philosophy and science) while remaining egotistical, self centered and arrogant. People can become masters in worldly knowledge with their inner self still impure."

Moses Maimonides, the most renowned Jewish scholar, philosopher, writer and teacher was greatly influenced by the writings of Al Ghazali. He lived from 1135 to 1204 c.e., born in Cordoba during the Muslim era in Spain said, "You cannot achieve excellence in thoughts, word and deeds without the purification of the heart with divine knowledge."

These two great people lived to influence multitudes of people from generations to generations. Their works are still held in high esteem. Even today, these two philosophers and thinkers are read and quoted for their wisdom. From all their writings it is evident that they, not only respected and enhanced human rights, by explaining the law, they also were firm believers in extending kindness and compassion to the animals. Both compared humans being as a refined species of the animal kingdom.

The difference between human being and animal life is the intellect. The intellectual power to decipher, analyze and compare, the intellectual power to judge, rationalize and act according to the dictates of the one's conscience.

The heart of the conscience been maintained by the criteria of what is Right and what is Wrong, as contained in our respective Holy Scriptures. In this case, I shall refer to the Quran, the Muslim Holy Book and the Hadith, a collection of sayings and practices of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) who lived from year 570 to 632 c.e..

Since the central idea of this essay is to explain Our sacred Relationship towards the Animals from Islamic perspective it is necessary to give examples from the life of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), the guiding light to nearly 20% of the world population. The following are the examples relating to animals that are mentioned in the Quran and Hadith.

1) Life is created sacred. Do not kill anyone, except by way of Law and Justice. (Quran 6:151). Here the scholars are unanimous in interpreting life as human life only. No human should be killed except when due process is exhausted through the democratic institutions of Law and Justice. However, Islamic jurisprudence called the Sharia (Islamic laws drawn from the Quran) says that animals are also considered God's creation, they also possess life. Do not kill any animal for fun, thrill or sport, except to sustain human life. This means cruelty that result from hunting for thrills and fun are not allowed. Hunting is permitted only under strict rules of survival. The hunted animal should not be subjected to any pain or torture. The animal should be immediately put to rest by dismembering its jugular vein. This act immediately puts a stop to the flow of blood to the brain, the central command where all pain is registered. Another Hadith of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) is, to razor sharpen the tool that you use to put away an animal, since a blunt knife or tool is more likely to give more pain during the process of euthanasia.

2) Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) loved cats. It was normal for the cat to purr and come close to Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). He always made sure that there was food and water for the cat. He also petted and loved his cat. This cat was one day taking a siesta next to Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and it cuddled next to Prophet's body in such a way that it was sleeping on a part of his gown. The Prophet woke up, by the call of prayer from the mosque and saw the cat in deep slumber on his gown. In order not to disturb the cat's sleep, Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) cut off that part of the gown with scissors on which the cat rested. He then went to pray in the mosque. This act of kindness became a hallmark for billions of Muslims around the world and is quoted frequently when instituting love and kindness for animals.

3) When news reached Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) that a stray cat had died because a person, intentionally, kept the cat locked in a room, to avoid frequenting his abode for search of food. Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) admonished the man

severely and asked him to atone for his sins. This man, he added, will receive punishment, not only in this life but also in the Hereafter for the cruelty administered to the stray cat.

4) A woman of ill repute quenched her thirst one hot afternoon and was ready to leave the well. On came a thirsty dog sticking out his tongue for want of water looking at her in a state of desperation. She was overwhelmed with kindness and sympathy for the dog. She immediately got in the well and with the water satisfied the dog's thirst. When Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) heard this he said, "Allah forgave her sins and admitted her to Paradise for that one act of kindness towards the animal." He further said, "There is compensation for every act of kindness to any animal."

5) The Muslim defense army was diverted and made to travel a different route at the times of the attack from the Crusaders so as not to trample the ant hill, next to trees that also contained beehives. The needless intrusion, noise and commotion were considered cruel and not in line with the sacred relationship that humans enjoy with the animals and insects as part of Allah's creation.

6) Horses and camels were always used in war, and as transport. Laws were made never to overload a camel on caravan routes, to stop for food and drinks at regular intervals and to see that the animals are well rested and fed. Any sick animal was taken out of service and treated for its sickness.

Recorded history says, Caliph Omar bin Khattab, third Caliph after Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) passed away, when he traveled to Jerusalem, he did not double piggy back on the camel with his companion. They both shared the camel alternatively so as not to overload the camel with the weight of two individuals.

In India, when Muslim Moguls ruled, pigeons, peacocks, ducks and all other animals were a part and parcel of nature's beauty in the spacious royal gardens. The rose bushes and other nectar plants were cultivated in the Mogul gardens so as to maintain and cherish the special relationships and life cycles of other animals, especially the bees. They collected the nectar from various flowers and had a beehive in the royal palaces. The animal and human remains were recycled in such a way so as to maintain the delicate life cycles, honoring the sanctity of life and environmental concerns.

It is for this reason that the Quran says, "We (the people) are the Custodians or Vicegerent of Allah on Earth. We will be questioned on the Day of Judgment which is sure to come, whether we held the Criteria of Right and Wrong on the Earth which Allah bestowed on us, with all the gifts of life."

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