

## Building a Theological Insight on Anthropocene: An Islamic Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*The geographical/stratigraphic interpretation of the notion of Anthropocene considers it a new addition to the geological timeframe. The Anthropocene defines Earth's most recent geologic period as human activities significantly influencing Earth's crust and non-stop production of inorganic waste. The response to environmental threats is part of one's learnt ethical code, i.e., culture, and religion. This paper aims at how Muslim theology could reminisce on current anthropocentric crises. It inquires questions such as the role of religion, Muslim countries could play to reduce ecological change and shed some light on anthroposensibilities from a scriptural point of view. The primary sources for this paper are the Holy Qur'ān, the sacred book for all Muslims, and the declaration of the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium held in Istanbul in 2015. The International Islamic Climate Change Symposium was a follow-up and guided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (UNEP, 2005), along the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. In this paper, we aim to reevaluate the essential issues which will be helpful for informed discussions and future debates in Anthropocene Muslim studies and eco-theology.*

### Keywords

Anthropocene, Islam, Eco-Theology, Religion, Anthropocentric life, Climate Change, Kalam

### INTRODUCTION

Human life in the world can be seen as a quest: that begins with hunting for food and shelter and gradually moves for higher goods, as a pursuit for meaning, a quest for knowledge and wisdom, a search for understanding what is happening around him. The most significant inquiries man indulges in this short life span were about fundamental puzzles of life; religion, belief, and God depending on his quest. Nevertheless, the answers to these "fundamental puzzles" have permanently evolved. For the quintessential example, monotheistic religions give settled answers to the question of the existence of God and the faith that binds man to nature. However, one could notice that these answers differed with the nature of the relationship and with the content of expectations from God. Moreover, these thematic answers are also time and space-bound within a specific historical and cultural bound.

These thematic answers are assisted with evolving terms for a better understanding. Crutzen who coined the term Anthropocene as a "scientific hypothesis" (Crutzen, 2002);(Leinfelder, 2013);(Ellis, n.d.) perhaps envisioned it as a new marker in understanding the fundamental puzzles of life, or at least a new way of looking at God, Planet, and on human interaction with both. He states, "A daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behavior at all scales and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects to 'optimize' climate. However, we are still mainly treading on terra incognita at this stage" (Crutzen, 2002).

Since it is yet an unexplored space, Anthropocene as a realm, has its unique interaction with theologies. Clingerman suggests that as a new epoch, anthropocene is critical for our

species to readjust their position in a schema of creation. (Clingerman, n.d.) on the other hand Hulme states "understanding the anthropocene from a geological or sociological point of view is insufficient since most of the human population also have beliefs. These beliefs, institutions, and rituals could not be undermined for thorough understanding. In a recent paper, he addressed this problem and noted that the so-called "western enlightenment" and its modern education system reshaped societies not to give natural phenomena any religious or communal meaning but to reduce it to empirical causes (Hulme, 2017). He further states that "ignoring the role and significance of religious narratives in response to climatic misdemeanors is perhaps a clear sign of denial and negligence."

### RELIGION AND ANTHROPOCENE

In the early human societies before the Industrial Revolution, a drought, storm or earthquake was considered a sign, perhaps more of punishment from god(s). However, with the advancement of science, we came to know that many of these disasters have man-made causes behind them. We, the humans, are influencing and destroying the planet. One may ask, what is a connection between religion and Anthropocene? While global industries generate immense profit by exploiting workers of developing nations on one end, oppressing regimes, controlling markets and manipulating facts for vested interests of influential people on the other end. Consequently, they, hand in hand, are destroying the planet. what could be the possible role of religion in it considering a drastic change from the industrial revolution to the present day (trans-human age). The religion, Hulme notes, shapes collective and individual ethical and social behavior, guiding through does and don'ts, suggesting what is best for a believer to do and commands to abide by.

With their long-survived narratives, religious traditions have given communities moral and rational reasons to live through life and respond to the environment. Such faith traditions, Hulme recalls, have “thick” and strong narrative accounts to convince and command humans (Hulme, 2017). On the other hand, the western secular “moral reasoning” has very thin and weak moral reasoning since these so-called calls for climate preservation have no strong roots in culture or history.

Religious traditions influence the existential understandings of believers, the genesis, and eschatologies, creating a holistic view of life. It enhances intrapersonal trust and strengthen communities, values social assets, and embrace life as its whole as a blessing. Religious narratives positively contribute to the anthropocene; they show concern and commitment to mighty (divine) powers and human beings. It marks places as sacred sanctuaries, defends the schema of arguments on divine existence and intense attention to personal responsibility and accountability. However, religious discourses do not like to indulge in detailed facts and figures of climatic changes; they prefer to enhance an effective communal awareness with the art of storytelling (Hulme, 2017). Even today, such faith leaders and community elders mark on the power of storytelling that unites both aspects of human person—the physical outer world and the inner spiritual world—such a narrative that satisfies both needs can create an aware audience, adequate response face challenges of climate change.

Does religion have implications on environmental issues and anthropocene? We shall tackle such queries by involving in two ways; first, religion can be seen as an integral part of collective human history. Likewise, Islam is a lived human experience as the third major world religion. It also created a new sense of meaning and immensely contributed to the epoch of human civilization. One may come with two possible narratives to the problem at hand. First, to look at the world from the theocentric perspective and say it is all theocene and humans are a minuscule part of it with no will or volition of their own. Adam, in the story of creation, eating the forbidden fruit is the first act of Anthropocene in God's divine plan. Perhaps a breaking point in a theocentric deep time. The new age as coined to be anthropocene is founding itself on God's nature. It is becoming more complex to comprehend man and his non-human other. The environment being another is not a soulless stranger but is his own refection. As is articulated by Forrest Clingerman, it is more challenging to demark the impact of Anthropocene “because it encompasses historical states and environmental systems that coalesce within competing interpretations of human and natural history. It represents a constellation of facts, competing values, understandings of the past, and speculations about the future. Most importantly, it forces us to ask whether there can be a “good” Anthropocene—a world of supposed benign environmental management—or whether we are condemned to a dystopic, “bad” Anthropocene”(Clingerman et al., 2017).

## ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION (OIC) AND ANTHROPOCENE

Islam counts amongst its faithful more than 1.6 billion people. Many of them, perhaps the majority, are in Asian and African countries that are under severe threat to climate change. Kaminski, a senior research associate at Qatar National Research Priority Research Program (NPRP), claimed that “Within all sects of Islam, Humans are inextricable from nature”. He expounds on the leading carbon emission members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). He elaborates on crucial role players such as Iran Saudi Arabia on their policies regarding environmental stewardship (Kaminski, 2019). Likewise, other member states such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Egypt are taking severe measures on the state level to reduce carbon emissions and putting efforts in embracing the global environmental discourse. The OIC (formerly Organization of the Islamic Conference), member states, as Kaminski notes, are unique in their make, with diverse colonial experiences, historical traumas, and a range widely different in their governing system. More than fifty states have religious discourses spreading from theocratic monarchies to secular democracies. However, the applicability of such measures would be fruitless if the general public could not relate to these measures in their religious and cultural perspectives (Kaminski, 2019). The majority of their Muslim public would benefit from a theological schema that could unite them for better climate restoration.

The statistical reality is that the rational, logical, capitalist, consumerist, industrial, and “enlightened” West is the main cause of climate change. Western first-world nations emit significantly more carbon dioxide, thus draining wells and destroying gardens, farms, forests, and coral reefs. Their profit-driven, extractive, and exploitative multinational corporations displace millions of individuals who are without secure access to water or food (Yugar et al., 2017). Likewise, the report published by the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) focuses on the climate changes and the role of terrorist organizations in the Sahara and Savannahs of Africa. The intensely populated Muslim communities suffer through multiple layers of natural and human atrocities. The recorded variability of climate change in sub-Saharan Africa is reaching alarming numbers. It is briefed that precipitations immensely declined due to significant changes in sea surface temperatures in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Due to this sea surface temperature increase over the last decades, the overall temperature increased in the affected regions, resulting in warmer days and nights. The lack of basic human needs, such as education, health and food, gave fuel to crime, poverty and religious conflicts (Santabarbara, 2020). A life below poverty line, with diseases and poor life conditions, it is not a priority to prevent environment. As Koehrsen, who holds a chair at Centre for Religion, Economy and Politics, reported, “While less than 1% of the Muslim interviewees living in Nigeria and Pakistan regarded environmental pollution as the most pressing problem, this number rises to 22% for Muslim respondents in Uzbekistan, 17% in Russia, and 16% in India. Moreover, comparing different types of environmental pollution, Muslim interviewees tend to attribute higher importance to the pollution of rivers, lakes,

and oceans than to global warming. Only in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Jordan did Muslims prioritize global warming over other environmental challenges.” (Koehrsen, 2021).

### THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF TEXT OF ISLAMIC CLIMATE CHANGE SYMPOSIUM

The declaration of Islamic Climate Change Symposium clarifies its concerns with climate change, global warming, eradication of species due to immense deforestation and contamination of freshwater resources. It also affirms that the God Almighty has clearly stated 'that no corruption falls onto man but is not earned by himself ..', (chp 30:41) In its main text it recalls the essential terms in this regard are oneness of God (tawhid), the signs of God in nature and human beings (āyah), human being as viceregent of Almighty God (khilāfah), trusteeship (amānah), compassion (rahmah/marhama), the natural balance of things (mīzān) and the permanent awareness of God's presence (taqwa).

Tawhid, or unity of being, boldly emphasizes that “there is no God but God”. Such a statement on professing Islam and later on chanting in Muslim daily prayers also implies that no mortal human is ought to play God with His creation or transgress the ordained borders of divine realm. Tawhid emphasizes a character in a believer that evolves out of humility, modesty and piety. If developed and practiced from educational institutions to the political arena, these character traits can change the mindset of coming generations for a better future with a nourishing, cherishing planet.

God sanctifies nature within the holy Qur'ān as āyah, a "sign" and "proof" of divine unity. The āyah, or "verse" of the holy Qur'ān, is also an indicator, a sign that directs towards the universe and divine creations (chp 42:29, 36:33, 26:139,154).

“Behold! In the creation of the heavens and earth; in the alternation of night and day; in the ships that sail the seas with goods for people; in the water which God sends down from the sky to give life to the earth when it has been barren, scattering all kinds of creatures over it; in the changing of the winds and clouds that run their appointed courses between the sky and earth: there are signs (āyah) in all these for those who use their reasons” (chp 2:164).

We can extrapolate from these above-mentioned verses that planets, moon, sun, trees and animals are all divine creation and signify the divine presence of God. In the univocal divine plan, as it states in Quran, (chp 2:30) human being is the custodian of the planet. This custodianship comes at the price of being responsible for one's actions against his kin and the environment.

Religion and spirituality strongly emphasize the reality of death (memento mori) and human mortality. A mortal human being may have insatiable desires to gain all the wealth and resources in the world, and even if he acquires those like Pharos, he is still a mortal being prone to weakening and diseases. All life is divine since the divine word of God creates it.

The word amānah, as referred in Quran, is the environment and life were entrusted to man when man was assigned as vice sergeant of God on Earth. Moreover, this trusteeship comes with responsibility and accountability of our actions. It is up to us how we use this life and all its bounties, for us, as Muslim scholars asserted, are the only

free agents in the universe. They also emphasized that nature is the archetype language that God uses with a man (āyah) to motivate him to explore and inquire about his purpose and find the Divine wisdom in existence.

The triad of Theos, Anthropos and Natura must abide by the same moral principles of cosmic balance. This cosmic balance is now disturbed with the new age of Anthropocene. The ethical paradigm must be deontological to be implemented, so the balance must be acquired (mīzān).

According to the Holy Qur'ān, environmental conservation is a religious duty as well as a social obligation and not an optional matter. The exploitation of a particular natural resource is directly related to the accountability and maintenance of the resource. The declaration also affirms that God's every creation has an intrinsic value. One must keep in mind that this value is not for exploiting it for commercial purposes or vested interests; it is intrinsic. (chp 32:7, 44:38). The ecological equilibrium and the natural balance must be acquired by not exceeding the limits assigned to man. The insatiable pursuit of so-called economic growth and consumption has brought us to the verge of collapse. (chp 55: 7-10).

This new role is related to the entrusting of this system created by divine power to man, who is now defined as a viceregent (khalīfah). Perhaps another vital aspect in Anthropocene is developing an insightful consciousness of nature and its beauty with intellect and devotion. Islam invites its believers to maintain such a high moral character (Clingerman et al., 2017). This “anthropocentric” role is to respond to every crime committed against the trust that man has, to every move to discredit him, to every action that touches the dignity of those who live on it. On the other hand, it obliges the innate, fundamental rights (protection of life, property, mind, religion, chastity, etcetera) to be provided for everyone and build a sustainable life by transforming the world into a place worth living. Washington and others addressed the issue of anthropocentrism from a critical outlook. It states that, ‘Human chauvinism is one aspect of anthropocentrism, not a new definition. One can either accept that other species and life processes have moral value (ecocentrism) or not (anthropocentrism)’ (Kopnina et al., 2018). Human beings as viceregents do not have univocal dominance over the planet but live in accordance with the divine law of nature. The taqwa, in this regard, is the ultimate cognition of one's mortality and God's omnipotence; to not disturb any food chain but to enhance the skills humankind is bestowed with (chp 17:70). Therefore, anthropocentrism could be restorative only if it keeps the sustenance of the environment and other species for its sake, not for the interest of greed.

Religion, in the Qur'ānic sense, is the mutual ethical ground in Abrahamic lineage, and called the people of the book (Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Muslims) to agree on the fundamental similarities that may unite us for a common cause: "Say, O People of the Book! Come to the basic principle common to us .." (chp 3:64) is a call to join the central virtues common among the religions. It reaches the people of the book(s) to mediate with each other on a mutual moral ground to dialogue with a reflective attitude towards the humanitarian crisis we face today. The theological quests

are of lesser value when human survival and planetary existence are precarious.

As one scrolls through gospels (holy scriptures), a lay reader realizes that man does not belong to this Earth and is part of a divine realm. Consequently, it creates a dualistic understanding of reality. By this, we mean Earth as a planet where the man was 'descended to from heavens, as some punishment (*Peccatum originale*). How could one with such foreknowledge love the planet or be kind to its other inhabitants? The false sense of the Earth as a prison and believing himself as part of non-earth (belonging to paradise or heaven) is questionable! Likewise, the dual concept of human nature as flesh (sinful body), being of the earthy realm and his soul as a divine (eternal) spark, created similar effects on practicing believers, i.e., celibacy, and inducing pain and above all environmental destruction.

Islam is clearly demonstrating about the origin of its moral principles and their serving purpose. As the Holy Qur'ān says, it is God, all good and the source of all kindness and goodness (chp 6:12). God takes it as a principle to treat his creatures with compassion, mercy and justice. He is the one who reduces the feeling of distrust and fear (*sakīna*), blesses the believers, and places them under a protective umbrella of conscious piety (*taqwa*) (chp 38:26).

Man controls the rhythm of life through the universal divine values that he connects with his heart and mind. With the fading of these high moral values, whatever happens to a lifeless body is the same to a civilization. Therefore, the Holy Qur'ān calls them for accountability of their deeds (chp 2:214). Furthermore, it warns against this alienation and depreciation experienced by humanity by ignoring the values that shape history. Values should be seen as the first line of defense against this loss of human dignity. The attachment of values to God by transcending the temporary historical conditions of human beings is the fulcrum that keeps alive the feeling that there is always hope for those who seek a way out. This divine source is for people; It always recommends the best, most accurate and most beneficial and develops protective parameters (*hudūdullāh*) so that the temporary interests of the people do not damage these permanent values (chp 2:187).

In the Holy Qur'ān, God declares mankind as His appointed vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on Earth. For which, believers (Muslims), on a very subconscious level, perceived it as if they are now in control and can manipulate the Earth's resources if they will. Since they could not relate themselves as a part of it, from the theological perspective, the early period Mutazilites classify existence into two major categories: the eternal creator and its creation. This meta-category of creation contains whatever is other than transcendental God. On behalf of such a division, Mutazilites scholars claimed that the only difference between human beings and the rest is that man is bestowed by reasoning faculty (*aql*) that necessitates him to act according to divine law.

One may ponder God's role in the anthropocentric age and why God is not intervening in man-made disasters. To answer this question, we must understand the way God is perceived in the doctrine and doxographic works of the formative period of Islamic thought. The theological literature is full of interesting remarks on divine ontology. For instance, the God,

it is argued, must not intervene in worldly affairs since it would be against the concept of free will. God, after bestowing man with the agency to act, his volition can only be pursued but his action cannot be restricted. Initiating an understanding from this point, the first act of volition was from Adam in paradise.

If not far stretched, the physical laws are, for a firm believer, designed by God, (*sunnatullah*). These laws could be understood as the rules of a particular system. The nature of beings is good and well coded by Almighty designer. Accordingly, good or evil does not arise from the nature of a being but its use. On the contrary, the evil resulting from the misuse of things, exploitation of resources, manipulation of work power is attributed to man: "What is good is from God, and your share of evil is on you" (chp 4:79). The existence of evil is proof of human free will, not the absence of God. In this case, we must conclude that the primary term to discuss the matter is freedom, not good or evil. Here, too, the question may be asked: Why did God not create a world of people who, by their free will, choose all good and do good (thus leaving no room for evil)? This question demands a situation that conflicts with God's will to create human beings with free will. When we find that evil is a consequence of the use of human freedom. Outside of the cosmic system in which God's will functions absolutely, an area where the will of God and the will of man cannot be confronted emerges. This is the living Anthropocene space formed by man's free choice and left to him. This life is from God's plans and will; however, it also constitutes what a man does. In other words, God plans a life in which goodwill prevails here and wants it to be so. Theological schools would agree that God wishes the best of his creation and that He is just to them. It means relying on verses mentioned earlier that cause severe droughts, diseases, or other atrocities that fall unto man are from their environment, climate, and socio-economic systems. God is not part of it.

Anthropocene is gradually making its due place in sciences and humanities. It is much larger than the geological strata, climate change, or existential human condition. It is not essential what attributes a deity possesses, or is it absolute monotheism or panentheism. It is the earth with all its inhabitants at stake in any case. However, that was for a recoverable level because they did not have the modern technology to work faster and drastically impact. Likewise, Muslim societies are exposed to all the side effects of the crisis that came with "western modernity". The unrest and the searches triggered by this state have turned the Islamic society into unstable structures oscillating between fear and hope. As a result, Muslim communities could be seen in reports are devastated for multiple reasons, Islam in this matter, is the only common identity icon between them. The problem lies in far deep in human attitude towards his kin, life and the environment.

The Muslim leadership can contribute to global discourse as manifested in the Islamic declaration of climate change to reduce the vulnerability of these regions. Muslims have a mandate and responsibility to channel Islam's spiritual and moral force towards the aspiration to build a sustainable human civilization and a low-emission climate-resilient future. There is adequate data to prove the overwhelming human interference with natural resources and enough



evidence on how humans are now altering atmospheric, geologic, biospheric and other earth systems.

In either way, protecting the environment is above and beyond the personal interpretation of theology, law or place of sharia in governing apparatus. It is important to be cautiously optimistic yet practical enough when addressing such a large-scale issue with many interconnecting parts and intangibles. OIC member states absolutely must live up to their end of the climate pact (Kaminski, 2019). The the Holy Qur'ān sees the world as a whole field of possibilities, realizing/existing ourselves by making the possible thing actual; giving life to life makes it. Evolving the world, which is shown as a field of possibilities, ensures justice and freedom for all; It feels like a utopia to create a world in which people's grudge, anger, and resentment are removed and dwellings rivers flow beneath them. As will be remembered, these are the Qur'ānic definitions of heaven. This is what the Qur'ān says; it wants to say this: the purpose of human existence is to establish a world similar to what is defined as paradise.

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