

The role of religion in preserving the environment

Sheikh Ali Gomaa, www.abc.net.au 10 December 2009



The gathering of thousands of individuals representing the myriad religions of the world for the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne this year is a testament to the power that religion has to bring people together, to unite them in a search for truth, and to inspire them to work towards the betterment of this world.

This year the Parliament is focusing on issues of the environment through some of its subthemes, and I would like to add my voice to what I consider to be one of the most important conversations that we can have today.

Islam has a rich spiritual tradition of personal development, but it is also a religion that places a great amount of emphasis on what we do in the world and how we treat those who surround us, whether they be other human beings, members of the plant or animal kingdoms, or more ephemeral beings such as the angels.

Our mindfulness of God must not be reserved for times of prayer and spiritual devotion alone, it must colour all of our actions. This mindfulness of God can manifest itself in many ways, such as feeding the poor and hungry, struggling against injustices, and working to establish peace.

In our day we are struggling with a number of issues related to the environment such as climate change, the pollution of the air, oceans, seas, and waterways, and the challenges of feeding a growing global population.

While many of these issues are relatively new so that our forebears did not address them explicitly, our religious traditions do offer us worldviews and principles that aid us in finding solutions to our contemporary problems.

For example, the Qur'an states "Do not sow corruption in the earth after it has been set in order: this is better for you, if you are believers" [7:85]; and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "Those who plant a tree and patiently tend to it until it bears fruit will have the reward of giving charity for everything that it produces."

Similar principles can be found in all religions. I mention here one of the basic guiding principles that forms an Islamic vision of humanity's relationship with the environment, which is our role as God's deputies on earth.

Islam considers human beings to be vice gerents or deputies of God on earth. Our mission as God's deputies means that we are charged with the responsibility to care for and maintain the world.

On the other hand, the fact that God has placed the world at our disposal means that we may benefit from what it has to offer us. In both cases, we must collaborate with our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Believers consider themselves to be servants of God, created by Him like the rest of creation, whether they be animals, plants, or inanimate objects. God has entrusted humanity with the world, but they are not meant to appropriate it for their own purposes to the exclusion of others, or to abuse their control over it, because it is a shared right that God has established for all living beings and we do not have the authority to deprive even animals of their rights.

Human beings are responsible for this trust that they carry; they have an obligation to do their utmost and to carry out their work with excellence in order to properly fulfil their mission, and they will be held accountable if they cause corruption or harm.

One of the key characteristics of humankind s role as deputies in the world is balance. We must find a balance between benefiting from the blessings that the world has to offer us, and preserving the order that God has established.

We must find a balance between securing our own needs while not depriving others of theirs, whether those others reside in different parts of the world, such as less powerful nations, or in different times, such as our children and grandchildren.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: All of creation are God's dependents, and the most beloved of God's servants to Him are those that are the most beneficial to His dependents.

If we take seriously our role as God s deputies on earth, not just by benefiting from the environment, but by preserving it and ensuring that other communities and generations will have the same possibilities to drink clean water, breath fresh air, and live in a world that is in harmony with itself and with ourselves, we may hope to be among those who are beloved to God due to their care for His creation.

It is my prayer that we may be united in combating the environmental crises with which we are now faced, and that we may look to our rich religious traditions for inspiration, support, and resolve.