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Article

Planetary Health and Anthropocene Discourse: The Role of Muslim Religious Leaders

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Abstract: The Anthropocene epoch marks a critical phase in the history of humanity, where anthropogenic activities have significantly impacted our planet. Along the unprecedented ecological crises, the Anthropocene worldview has raised existential questions with a cultural and ethical discourse that recognises intrinsic value and calls for more responsible sustainable living. To address these challenges collectively, a broader perspective is required, guided by a unified sense of purpose towards personal and planetary health. In this context, the role of religious leaders in shaping the social and environmental worldviews of their followers cannot be underestimated. Religious teachings provide a moral framework for promoting climate action, global ethics, Indigenous people, peace, and justice, and many other aspects of planetary health. By assessing the global ecological crises through the lens of Islam; Religion of Nature, or *Din al-Fitra*, and its environmental teachings across all realms, we can gain insights into humanity's connection to the fabric of creation and its interaction with this world. These value-leden principles are integrated with accountability; thus, the role of Muslim religious leaders considering the planetary-scale threats warrant further elucidation; recognizing that many other faiths and faith leaders can similarly contribute together for common good.

Keywords: planetary health; muslim religious leaders; islam; anthropocene; ecological crises

Introduction

The Anthropocene refers to a new geological epoch that addresses the scale and impact of human activity on Earth; to the extent that the planet is being altered due to human activities rather than natural causes [1]. This proposed geological epoch has a number of implications with ethical considerations on how the planetary condition will pose challenges to human life on Earth. The

Anthropocene discourse evokes a powerful message pertaining to the collective human actions and their repercussions in the course of history [1]. From a scientific discourse, the consequences of anthropogenic activities on human health and well-being are evident from the increased burden of noncommunicable diseases, emerging and reemerging infectious diseases, and poorer mental health [2]. This along with exposure to extreme weather events such as heatwaves, wildfires, earthquakes, and hurricanes to food security threats, climate refugees, and unsustainability of the human societies driven by rapid biodiversity loss and climate change crisis, all of which are posing a serious threat to the global public health [2]. The final report of The Rockefeller Foundation- Lancet commission on Planetary Health, introduced the term “planetary health” in the medical lexicon in 2015. This initiative was developed to address the escalating threats posed by the deteriorating natural systems and their impact on human civilization on which it depends [2]. Planetary Health Alliance defines Planetary Health field as *‘a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analyzing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth’* [3]. While the concept of planetary health may seem relatively new, its ideas and principles are deeply rooted in ancestral origins, including Indigenous knowledge, that recognize the complex ecological interdependence and the need to maintain balance and harmony with nature [4].

In this paper, we contend that a healthy transition from the Anthropocene should not be restricted to academic discussion, but also include a social movement that embraces spirituality and socio-cultural perspectives including those of traditional practices, Indigenous people, and faith-based leaders [4]. Throughout history, many religious discourses had contributed to a spiritual awakening, reflected on human-nature relationship that led to sustainable environmental actions [1]. By promoting common themes presented in world religions of stewardship, respect for life, ethical consumption, interconnectedness, compassion and social justice [5], discourses related to spiritual well-being that recognise the human *‘inner’* being and intentional actions can be beneficial in guiding the conversation in the Anthropocene landscape. Within these assertions, the spiritual roots of the Anthropocene sparked more emphasis on faith-based traditions founded in Islamic religious teachings within the notion of *‘planet health’*.

This article seeks to highlight the role of Muslim religious leaders in providing necessary insights and future possibilities for global multidisciplinary inter-religious conversations in the age of growing ecological and spiritual crises. In order to set the stage for addressing these considerations from a historical and religious discourse, the focus of this perspective article, therefore is four fold. First, to consider the theoretical delineation of the Anthropocene and related planetary crises. Second, to probe the ecological and spiritual repercussions of the Anthropocene within a socio-cultural context. Third, to engage planetary health discipline through the lens of Islamic sciences. Fourth, to unfold the role of Muslim religious leaders in the era of the Anthropocene.

1. The implications of the Anthropocene and Anthropocentrism

The Anthropocene marking is a subject of much discussion and critique among various academics, poets, philosophers, politicians, and activists due to its highly ethical implications [6]. Rothe’s article highlight several discourses that have emerged regarding the Anthropocene epoch, including *eco-catastrophism*, *eco-modernism*, and *planetary realism*, [6]. Eco-catastrophism seeks to slow down human history on Earth by imposing *‘planetary boundaries’* that illustrates the scenario of going above the 2 degree celsius threshold. In this, eco-catastrophism calls for immediate international action needed to mitigate a dangerous shift in the Earth system -new global forms of *‘Earth system stewardship’*. In contrast, Eco-modernism accepts human action on Earth and seeks to accelerate it, promoting the use of technology *‘techno-environmentalism’*, including climate geoengineering, nuclear power, big data, and genetic engineering, that is claimed to be intelligently used to *‘create a planet that is better for both its human and non-human inhabitants’* [6]. *Planetary realism*, on the other hand, acknowledges the Anthropocene and seeks to use it profoundly as an opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of the human earth boundedness and work toward new approaches of understanding and cooperating with the planet Earth [6]. In this sense, it is thought that both natural and human systems are resilient, making it possible and legitimate to conduct technological experimentations on

the entire planet. However, this discourse also places a strong focus on Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems with its historical construct on interaction with nature. Nonetheless, it ought to still embrace the corresponding planetary experimentation as a geo-political project [6].

One factor that may explain the emergence of these multiple discourses is anthropocentrism, which refers to the seemingly unavoidable truth that people can only view the world through human lenses; sometimes lacking inherent values as discussed above about the entire planetary experimentation projects [1]. This perspective is often reflected in the techno-centric models that dominate modern society. However, being aware of these anthropocentric assumptions can provide new insights for building a positive shared future.

2. The intersection between Religion, Science and Ecology

In the words of Albert Einstein, “*Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind*”. This controversial statement underscores the importance of integrating the dimensions of science and religion for a holistic perspective [7]. This theme is also emphasized by Thomas Berry, who stresses the need to understand the relationship between the world’s religions and the natural world, in the context of the whole planet, and its integrity [8]. In the late 1960s, Nasr argued that the ecological catastrophe is linked to a spiritual crisis, as humanity’s loss of connection to the metaphysical has led to the destruction of the natural world seen today [1,9]. Similarly, Khalid poists that desacralizing the natural world has consequences for our spiritual state and our connection to God [10]. Ozdemir contends that humanity’s alienation from nature is due to a loss of awareness of the divine quality of the environment and modern worldview that has rendered all philosophical claims and speculation useless [11]. This has led to a purely utilitarian view of nature, justifying its exploitation, the animals it nurtures, and its resources as well [11].

However, the ecological crises have promoted a shift towards viewing religion from a new perspective, an ecological perspective in which everything is interconnected as an organic whole [11]. This perspective blurs the lines between the idea that nature is placed within set boundaries [1]; a concept that resonates with Quranic principles of *tawhid* (the interconnectedness of creation towards one God ‘*Allah*’ [9]. However, anthropocentrism, like other centric viewpoints, has created a stark division on how people perceive nature or the role that it plays in human affairs and the status quo [1]. Although presented in a basic way, these points of view can potentially offer some clarification when discussing the Anthropocene with respect to the existential idea of the human relationship with his natural environment [1]. Faith-based traditions and religious scholars have the potential to infuse a spiritual and ethical dimension and participate in transformative social change [12]. For instance, the Laudato Si’ encyclical highlights the unique role humans play as stewards or ‘*khalifa*’ in the universe, as revealed in both the Bible and the Qur’an [13]. Similarly, Christian theologian Norman Wirzba argues that viewing people from the standpoint of soil highlights the interdependence of the humans and the planet, the holy Quran similarly states that humans are made of soil [14]. This viewpoint underscores the importance of recognizing that our health is closely tied to the health of the entire ecosystems on a micro and macro level [4,15]. Given that everything we consume depends on the soil and the nutrients it contains, it would be a more accurate exemplification of ourselves as embodied and embedded beings to view soil as a complex body containing billions of organisms and foundational microbes (including the microbiome) that daily enable the cycles of life inside every living species [4,14,15].

These principles are strongly aligned with the concept of planetary health, which implies that human health *is* planetary health [15]. Moreover, considering soil in relation to humans opens up the potential for rich interreligious dialogue, as the earth serves as a metaphor for the unity of creation [14]. Overall, integrating scientific and religious perspectives can help clarify the human relationship with the natural environment in the context of the Anthropocene.

3. Islamic science and Planetary Health

Sayyed Hossein Nasr is widely recognized as the first Muslim scholar to address the pressing ecological and spiritual concerns dating back to the late 1960s and to explore the potential role of

religions in addressing these challenges [9]. Other scholars, such as Ziauddin Sardar and S.Parves Manzoor, also approached the environmental crisis from an 'Islamic science' perspective during the 1970s and 1980s [16]. Overtime, publications in the theoretical area of *Islamic eco-theology* have gradually but steadily increased, and aspects of Muslim environmentalism have been encountered in the real world [17]. Numerous publications and program documents have highlighted Muslim environmental activists who base their activism on religious teachings and conviction [16–18]. In this sense, the existence of a philosophical doctrine serves as a moral compass for people, including those seeking science [1]. As part of the same fabric of creation, humanity is entrusted to conserve nature and everything that it nurtures [19].

Holy Quranic principles place a strong emphasis on having God consciousness (*tawhid*) and living in obedience and surrender to God (*taqwa*), while being aware of the spiritual component of God glorification (*tasbih*) that is invisible to the human senses and mind [20]. Ozdemir further emphasises that the Quran refers to the diversification of communities, similar to human populations; therefore, all species on earth are considered established communities (*ummah*) and have their own languages, communication capacity and the right to exist peacefully [11]. Creation itself of the whole world small and large, bringing us insights into the beauty and power of its maker. These Quranic principles emphasize a profound attitude of respect and preservation of biodiverse species and all forms of life, with the moral obligation towards one God 'Allah' [1]. The translation of these principles and ideas grounded in ecological ethics that are spiritually more profound is well documented in the writings of many Muslim scholars who addressed environmental challenges [9–11,16–23] and also in the *Islamic Declaration on Sustainable Development* [5], the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) [24], and a *Muslim Declaration on Nature* [25] of the Muslim World League [16], to mention just a few.

Although human's relationship to the rest of creation has been addressed throughout Islamic science, the academic field known as Islam *and* planetary health is a fairly modern construct [26]. However, the discussion of Islam from a planetary health perspective can demonstrate a holistic ecology by recognising the human-ecological-spiritual interactions as inter-relational in a unified system—a single creation—[1]. These synergies aspire to infuse a spiritual, and hence ethical, engagement with earth and the biodiverse species inhabiting it, as well as the way we interact with the rest of creation. As such, insights from Islamic teachings coupled within a planetary health paradigm, can illuminate a component of spiritual accountability, essential to counteract the status quo in contemporary societies.

4. Role of Muslim Religious Leaders

The Anthropocene represents a threat that is not only irreversible, but also '*seemingly*' absolute in time and space [1]. This entails that Islam, in a contemporary setting, is employed in the production of new meaning-making that conforms to prevailing power structures of the status quo, and notions of individualism and identity through consumption and materialism [1]. The science of Islam offers extensive insights into the mitigation of environmental crises and the maintenance of a sustainable environment [25]. As movements for ecological justice and the decolonization of health gain momentum, it becomes increasingly crucial to examine and consider various holistic viewpoints, such as those that are grounded in Islamic teachings [26]. Islamic doctrine strictly prohibits the exploitation and destruction of natural resources, while stressing the critical role of humanity as the stewards of the planet Earth, with an ethical, moral, and social responsibility to safeguard and restore the environment [25,26].

4.1. Integrating a pro-planetary positive mindset with reflection on action

In the context of the Anthropocene and planetary health discourse, the corruption perpetuated by humanity on earth is a direct cause of environmental damage, and there is a need to integrate a pro-planetary mindset [4,15]. The Islamic principles, which have been present since the 7th century, emphasize the role of a Muslim as a trustee or a '*Khalifa*' with the responsibility of seeking, attainment, and cultivating knowledge in all aspects of life to make the world a better place [1]. About 750 verses in the holy book of Quran highlight the creation of the natural world, the laws that govern it, and its

impact on human well-being and the sustainability of the environment [19,27]. Pope Francis proclaimed that non-Muslims can even learn from the Quran, as it is a book of many levels and great depths [28].

The Quran mentions the word “Earth” 485 times and the many references of creation and humanity as part of a balanced whole, does indeed affirm that Islam is the religion of nature, or *Din al-Fitra*. The primordial ‘*fitrah*’ covenant, is the enactment from God that affirms the potential inherent goodness in all humankind. The action for muslims through the understanding of the Quran and the life of the prophet Muhammed can be drawn from the philosophical context of the Shariah (rules of right action). Thus, Muslim religious leaders can also provide a detailed interpretation of how nature functions and advocate the sustainable and ethical use of natural resources [26,29].

Furehaug emphasizes that ecological decline also serves as a wake-up call, offering ‘signs’ to pause and rethink by bringing focus to ideas of free will, responsibility, and accountability for human actions and more opportunities for human agency [1,6]. ‘*Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by (reason of) what the hands of people have earned so that He may let them taste part of (the consequence of) what they have done so that perhaps they will return (to righteousness)*’ (Quran translation 30:41) [10]. Even more intriguing the corruption of the earth will manifest itself in a number of ways, including soil erosion, ocean acidification, the destruction of food systems, wildlife extinction, and climate change [1]. These are also “*signs*” to contemplate and reflect in order to find the way back (to righteousness), as explained by Furehaug [1]. These Islamic perspectives are important reminders of their moral precepts about the natural systems of the Earth and the resources therein [1,9,10]. Hamza Yusuf elaborates that in modern era of technological distractability aspect of mindfulness and reflection with awe and admiration on the beauty of the natural world became critically important as humankind ‘*engineer’s mindset*’ seem to fit everything in a linear mechanistic fashion [29].

Religious environmental conscience through the teachings of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH), emphasize the need to conserve resources by mended his own clothes and repaired his shoes, and this resonates with the modern campaign ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle’ [21]. Prophet Muhammed also encouraged the planting of trees (to ‘hold onto the sapling in your hand’), even ‘if the last day was established’. The *hadith* emphasis humanity’s responsibility to preserve the natural environment no matter what condition prevails with a seemingly simple action ‘planting a sapling’ yet the weight attached to the action is of great spiritual and ecological significance [29]. The prophet Mohammed sayings and positive actions give hope no matter what condition an individual is in, or the condition of the natural environment. The prophet also considered the act of planting trees or sowing seeds as a charitable gift with an moral, ecological and spiritual orientation, displayed inwardly and outwardly “if one plants a tree or sows seeds, if then a bird, a person, or an animal later eats from them, this action is regarded as a charitable gift (*sadaqa*) for him” [19,26]. Therefore, every good action is considered of great spiritual significance ‘*Actions are based upon intentions*’, as stated by the prophet [29]. These examples of the common good shift the human consciousness in the mind to re-centering of consciousness in the spiritual heart [30,31]. Furthermore, the Quran is believed by Muslims to be an all-time eco-educational programme of life and living marked by moderation, concern for equity, and free of waste [26].

4.2. Promoting a holistic planetary health approach

The Anthropocene assumptions with a *single future planetary-scale crisis*, emphasize the need for urgent collective action [2,3,6]. Humans communities worldwide are diverse and complex, yet with common themes that honour environmental protection, including religious beliefs, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism. Despite the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds of Muslims, their shared sense of purpose can be harnessed to address the Anthropocene era through collective global and local initiatives with other cultures and religions [29,31]. The promotion of proactive actions among the 2 billion Muslims worldwide by engaging Muslim religious leaders in the Anthropocene discourse is essential given their social, ethical and scientific responsibility [26,29]. This goal involves phasing out greenhouse gas emissions, investing in net-zero carbon solutions, conserving natural biodiversity and prohibiting the exploitation of

species [25], which will certainly reinforce the sacred holy book message of ‘planetary health’ [26]. The Islamic holistic worldview and everything in it, embedded in the Quran storytelling style, can inspire further learning and motivate actions among concerned Muslims [28]. Islamic environmental ethics and obligations that are non-anthropocentric must be integrated both theoretically and practically within existing educational curriculums [29,32]. Muslim thought leaders have a tremendous responsibility to disseminate knowledge amongst key Muslim stakeholders overall, such as Imams, local mosque committees as well as traditional Islamic scholars within these communities [29,31,33]. Organizing eco-Islamic conferences with an environmental vision and promoting good environmental practices can further bring the planetary health notion into practice[24]. Islamic leaders and scholars worldwide can engage with all faith-based communities to promote intrinsic values and meaningful inter-religious dialogues aimed at addressing ecological and spiritual crisis [9,31,33]. Religious leaders can leverage Islamic perspective and teachings to address planetary health challenges that are equally pressing for all societies [26,29]. Islamic gatherings, public lectures, Friday congregational prayers (*Jumu'ah*), and religious observances such as ‘Arba’een’ can serve as effective platform to infuse spiritual consciousness towards planet health, as Islam is inseparable from the natural world and environmental care is an integral part of its faith [19]. The Islamic faith-based traditions provide a significant opportunity to encourage environmental action and accountability. Islamic leaders and scholars have historically played a vital role in advocating for sustainable Islamic core principles, and their importance cannot be overstated [20,33]. Thus, Islam’s message can provide a strong foundation for promoting active sustainable values while acknowledging the role of human agency in the contemporary ecological and spiritual crises.

5. Conclusion

A holistic approach through planetary health lens seeks to draw on the entire web of planetary creation; as a social movement grounded in a spiritual, ethical and rational framework. This centric viewpoint focused on the interconnectedness of the wider universe as a whole, the well-being of animals, plants, and their habitats, and the lifeforms in general, not just the interest of human kind from an anthropocentrism lens. In addition, integrating social sciences and value-laden religion viewpoints allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of Muslim environmental thought and practice in the Anthropocene era. These thought-processes, which are more expansive than the prevalent but constrained discourse on pressing issues like climate change and environmental degradation, seek to inspire a spiritual awakening, inter-religious dialogue and, as a result, ethical engagement with the earth, the species that inhabit it, and the rest of creation in the web of life. This extends to, the overarching message about the place Islam as a religion (with its ethical and normative formulations) takes in light of the current ecological and spiritual issues, and consequently the part Muslim religious leaders ought to undertake.

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