

Cultivating recognition in the quest for environmental justice

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This is a two-part excerpt from a khutbah delivered at Claremont Main Road Mosque, on August 21.

IT is an incontrovertible fact that global warming, environmental pollution and ecological imbalances all over the world are now drastically affecting quality of life.

Climate change is threatening to destroy the material basis necessary for human existence. We see the impact of climate change in rising temperatures, melting ice caps and rising sea levels.

Humans are being affected by an increase in diseases related to air pollution, dwindling food resources and fast exhausting sea resources.

This issue now confronts us as Muslims as a matter of urgency. We have to persuade ourselves of the need for an appropriate response. Our response, I believe, should be based on a proper recognition of the extent of the crisis.

I do not think that recognition of the depth of this crisis will come easily. We don't have it currently and it will not come easily to us as individuals, communities and nations.

Unlike incurable diseases like cancer, HIV/ Aids and certain strains of TB, the imminence of death by environmental pollution and climate change is not apparent. This lulls us into a kind complacency.

We need courageous leadership to have us confront climate change and its impact. The question is: who is giving leadership on this matter?

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) declared: 'Wisdom is the lost property of the believers, where believers find such wisdom, they are most deserving of it.'

In this light, recently, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Pope Francis, released an important papal encyclical – correspondence to bishops and priests – concerning the most urgent issues for religious, civic, social, economic and political action.

The pope's moral stance is based on the fact that the devastating climate change over the last 100 years is the result of human activity, and that humans are now called upon to display the moral responsibility to adopt behaviour that will avoid untold destruction and misery.

What is remarkable about the pope's view is that he suggests that ecological problems are not just environmental problems.

He also pays attention to the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable and poor in the world. He calls attention to the devastating consequences of industrialisation, pollution and waste. He is severe in his criticism of the role of unbridled capitalism in the destruction of Earth.

How has the urgency around climate change been taken up by Muslim communities around the world?

It seems as if this is not a priority among Muslims, mired as they are, for example, in the Middle East, in conflicts and wars of destruction, which is the consequence of devastation visited on them by US and Zionist empire.

It is the consequence, too, of governments and power brokers in Muslim majority societies who

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fail to embrace science, technology and education as a means of developing ethical, political and economic institutions and practices to respond to the challenges posed by climate change.

In other words, we have not seen emerging in the Muslim world a galvanising approach in response to climate change. It is just not regarded as the main ethical challenge of our times.

Our ethical compass, or qibla, is profoundly out of alignment with this challenge over human survival.

In this light, in August 2015, an important initiative convened by Islamic Relief brought together a range of Muslim civic actors and leaders in Istanbul, Turkey.

Islamic Relief coordinated the initiative because they provide relief efforts in many areas of the world affected by severe rains, drought and other changed climatic conditions tied to climate change.

This initiative produced the first, wide-ranging Muslim response to climate change, the so-called Istanbul Declaration on

Climate Change, which declares: 'We are in danger of ending life as we know it on our planet... This current rate of climate change cannot be sustained, and the earth's fine equilibrium (mizan) may be lost soon...'

'What will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy... We particularly call on the well-off nations and oil producing states to lead the way in phasing out their greenhouse emissions as early as possible and no later than the middle of the century.'

The Istanbul declaration calls for a coherent response from the Muslim world to address climate change, and has begun to obtain support from Muslim leaders all over the world.

As Muslims, we are not prepared to radically adapt our lifestyles and economic platforms to mitigate and address the dunya's sustainability.

The initiative tries to intervene in the complacency in the Muslim world.

My suggestion is that there is a failure to recognise the impending ecological disaster that has been coursing its way into the very fabric of our lives, affecting how we now live and die, the quality of our existence, the scarcity of resources for human survival, where droughts and floods affect our livelihoods, causing famine, forced human migration and wars.

The question then becomes: what then should the Quranic or Islamic response be in the face of such denial?

I believe confronting this crisis requires that we have to come to terms with our (mis)recognition and, simultaneously, develop new

terms for actively working across a number of areas as part of our response.

Proper recognition (ma'rifa) of the depth, nature and urgency of climate change is paramount. This will shock us out of our complacency.

Proper recognition based on awareness and knowledge should be followed by redemptive or corrective practices. We have to embark on strategies to adopt the type of behaviour that will mitigate the worst consequences of climate change.

On-going literacy, information sharing and education are important. So too are the productive use of our Allah-given human ingenuity, via scientific research, to find creative solutions, alternative energy sources and cost-saving, clean air technologies.

Becoming productive in areas of research into new science and technology able to mitigate environmental challenges is now a fard kifayah (community obligation).

It is clear that once we are able to recognise the depth and extent of the crisis, we have to get busy to address this crisis on multiple fronts.

We have to consider how we establish productive practices (amal-al-salihah), how we engage in Allah's call for us to be His human agents for good on this earth.

In part two, Professor Fataar explores how we should cultivate the ability to recognise the impact of our behaviour on the environment.

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