

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND WELFARE AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF CIVILIZATIONAL ISLAM

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Introduction: The Modern Route to Ecological Wisdom

Modern man learns the wisdom of ecological equilibrium and environmental health the bitter way. It is also the expensive way. Not until he has seen with his own eyes the bitter fruits of his scientific and technological culture and of his extravagant life style does he come to realize how important ecological equilibrium and environmental health are to the survival of humankind on earth. The names of these bitter fruits are environmental pollution and ecological disasters. The modern industrialized West became the first sector of humanity in history to taste these bitter fruits, just as it was the first to have planted the "forbidden tree of secular knowledge"¹ that had borne these fruits. It was most unfortunate for humanity that the rest of the world, including Muslim societies, had uncritically followed the footsteps of the West in planting and cultivating the same tree and reaping its fruits.

¹ Without doubt, modern science is the most well-known and also the most important branch of this tree if we judge it in terms of its impact on human beliefs and material progress in the last two centuries. Lest there is a misunderstanding of the "forbidden tree of secular knowledge" that I have in mind, I wish to emphasize that the underlying criticism is not directed at knowledge as such but rather at knowledge as conceptualized, interpreted, and applied in modern Western civilization. It is possible as classical Islamic civilization had shown, to plant another kind of tree of knowledge with a different kind of fruit that would at once bring about scientific and material progress and preserve environmental health and ecological balance. This alternative tree of knowledge also has many branches, one of which is science, another technology. While in a number of respects these two branches of the 'Islamic' tree of knowledge resemble the modern branches of the same name, they are strikingly different in other respects. For a general study of the similarities and differences between Islamic science and modern science see my *Tawhid and Science: Essays in History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Penang-Kuala Lumpur: Science University of Malaysia & Nurin Enterprise, 1991).

Given the origin and magnitude of the environmental and ecological crisis that has engulfed the modern West, it is completely understandable why it is also in that part of the globe that the first organized protests against environmental destruction have made their appearance. Although the roots of the modern environmental movement could be traced to the late 19th century, efforts to conserve natural resources, preserve "wilderness," and control pollution, that movement did not become a force until in the 1960s. Environmentalism is, in fact, a post World War II phenomenon. Referring to the American experience in particular, environmental historians cited three major postwar developments that explain the rise of this phenomenon: the willingness of newly affluent Americans to insist on environmental quality and to reject the argument that "pollution is the price of economic progress," the increased destructiveness of modern industry, and the popularization of ecological ideas.²

The dawn of environmental and ecological consciousness in the modern West came in the late 19th century in the wake of vivid images of polluted rivers, lakes and seas with dead fishes floating in them, of polluted air resulting in hazardous smog and acidic rainfalls, intermittent massive soil erosion, landslides, and flooding largely as a result of large scale deforestations, and other forms of environmental disasters. Pollution became an increasingly popular issue in the first half of the 20th century, especially among urban dwellers who craved for a healthier urban environment. Ecological ideas, however, did not gain currency in the West until decades after World War II. Having to endure the horrible threat of pollution and other environmental hazards to human health, both the individual and public, before being able to see the light of ecological wisdom, is what we mean by modern man acquiring this wisdom the "bitter way."

The economic cost of cleaning and "repairing" the environment proves to be extremely high, and in many cases the damage done to the environment is so severe that it is beyond repair. Added to

² See Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties" *The Journal of American History*, vol. 90, no. 2 (September 2003), p. 525