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How do we Communicate Environmental Ethics? Reflections on Environmental Education from a Kuwaiti Perspective

Khadija al-Naki

This paper arises from a PhD research project originally designed to search for innovative ways to stimulate environmental education (EE) in Kuwaiti middle schools. The research has shown that Islam shares similar fundamental principles to those underpinning 'ecocentric' perspectives emerging in the West and increasingly thought necessary for achieving a sustainable society. The research has also shown that it is possible to learn and select from concepts and teaching techniques derived in the West in a way that could help put in place an Islamic environmental ethic appropriate to an Islamic educational context. The paper is limited to presenting some of the arguments that were set out to link Islamic teachings to concepts of Western environmentalism, especially ecocentric ideologies (particularly those associated with Deep Ecology and Gaianism). It also tries to point out the differences and distinctions between an Islamic perspective and certain Western environmental ethics within an educational context. The paper provides a number of interesting perspectives to readers from outside an Islamic context, and also some useful insights into some of the challenges that arise in undergoing cross-cultural research and communication.

Keywords: Islam, environmental education, sustainability, Kuwait

Introduction

In any school system around the world working to include meaningful environmental education (EE), there is a curriculum problem to be resolved. Where does EE 'fit'? How does the curriculum 'carry' EE? The research that provides the basis for this paper was concerned in part with the relationship between some prominent 'Western' environmental thinking and the particular needs of Kuwaiti middle schools, where Islam is one of the defining contextual features.

In undertaking environmental education research in a Kuwaiti context, but under the supervision of a Western university, it was perhaps inevitable that what resulted was deep reflection about the value system and philosophical basis of both contexts and how they intersect. This paper outlines some interesting parallels between aspects of Western environmental thought and the teachings of Islam. It raises a number of issues arising from such thinking, and perhaps the need for more dialogue across cultures of learning. Whilst Islamic education systems may look to the West for inspiration in terms of teaching strategies to open up environmental thinking, Western environmental educators may well benefit from a realisation of how closely some current thinking aligns to Islamic doctrine (and possibly other religions too, though this is beyond the scope of the present paper).

There seems to be a mounting call from many environmentalists in the Western world for profound change in human attitudes and actions based on a new, ecologically oriented value system. A number of high level calls (IUCN *et al.*, 1991; UNESCO-UNEP, 1983) have also dissociated themselves from materialist, modern Western perspectives which see humans as an outside force separate from the environment and destined to dominate and conquer nature. In the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the Earth was provided by God for people to use in order to provide for their needs and wants. Bowen (1994: 113), for example, summarises a modern Western materialistic vision of nature in stating that 'we are estranged from reality and inclined to treat as valueless everything that we have not made ourselves'.

On the other hand, radical environmentalism recognises that the problems facing humanity today (Capra, 1996; O'Riordan, 1981; Orr, 1992) reflect the inadequacy of the structures of modernism. It demands that a new ethic, embracing all the earth's constituents, is required for human societies to live in harmony with the natural world. For example, Elliot and Gare (1983: x) define an environmental ethic as being: 'an ethic, which allows that future generations, non-human animals and non-sentient nature are all morally considered'.

In the same vein, Holdgate (1990) considers that the basis of human actions must be a shared ethic, and that it must be based on a code of values that reflects a deep sensitivity to the ecological interdependence of the planet, and a respect for life in all its forms. Khan (1995: 43) identifies some elements of environmental ethics as including

- appreciation that humanity is not above and apart from the rest of nature, exempt from its dynamics and constraints;
- recognition that there is intrinsic value in the conservation of all naturally occurring life separate from any instrumental value that it may have for humans;
- given that all living involves some use of other living beings, acceptance of an ethos of 'treading lightly' in all respects.

Such an ethical position, calling for more enlightened attitudes towards nature, is being promoted by various forms of 'ecocentric' environmentalism in Western culture, which is now recognised as counter to the Judeo-Christian tradition and an important strand of the environment/ecology movement.

My contention is that the essence of such sentiments appears to be strongly reflected in Islamic theology. They seem to parallel the fundamental Islamic principles of humankind's relationship to nature. In Islam, there exist moral and ethical constraints on humankind in dealings with nature and with other fellow humans. The specific conception (Abdalati, 1998; Chapra, 1992) of the aim of people's life on earth implies the conception of a 'divine outlook of the universe'. The scheme of life is considered as a spiritual vision of reality. It leads humans towards consciousness of ethical responsibility in their daily conduct. Islam addresses the needs of modern society, yet it engenders in its believers a sense of interacting with the earth with the mood of care, emphasising a stewardship ethic towards the rest of God's creation. It therefore advocates the rational use of natural resources. Badawi (1979: 112) stresses the Islamic perspective on the role of ethics on man's life, stating that 'modernity without moral guidance, religious

ethics and the belief in Allah and the destiny of Man, can bring more unhappiness and cause more disorder and misery’.

In this paper, concepts concerning relationships of God, people and nature in the Islamic tradition are compared with key environmental concepts in Western culture. It offers a brief narrative on Western ecocentric environmentalism, and on fundamental concepts in Islamic teaching. It deals with some shared concepts such as the existence and activity of humans on earth, conceptions of history, and the emergent concept of ‘sustainability’. The paper discusses the place of education for sustainability (EFS) from a perspective of the learner’s educational context in Kuwait. Questions for further deliberation are left hanging, to do with the fundamental nature of education and specifically what it is for. For example, there is a major tension between teaching a particular set of rules and behaviours (which might be expected in religious *teaching*) and the goals of a secular, more open environmental *education*. It is unresolved as to whether Islamic teachings can provide the vehicle to carry environmental education in a country such as Kuwait. But a working hypothesis which emerged in the original research was that Islam may well be able to carry environmental thinking into the school curriculum.

Examples of Western Environmental Thought in Relation to Islam

The emergence of ecocentric ideologies guides the thinking of many deep ecologists in the Western world and reflects the awareness that ‘something is wrong’ concerning the human treatment of the biosphere. Human domination and destruction of nature constitutes the deep ecologist’s central concern.

‘Eco-philosophy’ denotes the interconnectedness of all things and the place of human beings within the network. It advocates the enhancement of harmony with one another, other beings and the planet. The central concern of this philosophy is therefore in its ethical position – it maintains that all things in the cosmos have moral significance.

A holistic philosophy guides deep ecologists so that they do not rely totally on ecological science (Orr, 1994; Sterling, 1993). They also value emotional knowledge and spiritual notions, which they call ‘eco-wisdom’. Their ultimate goal is for humans to contemplate nature. Its interconnected view of life is the ‘new paradigm’ emerging to replace the more mechanistic former worldview. Capra (1996: 9, 11) indicates that ‘the shift of paradigms requires not only an expansion of our perceptions and ways of thinking, but also of our values . . . when this deep ecological perception becomes part of our daily awareness, a radically new system of ethics emerges’.

In essence, Islam also stresses the cultivation of the individual’s soul as a basis for the sustenance of the human community. The notion that humans are intimately a part of the natural environment fosters the deep ecologists’ claim that the universe is made of one basic spiritual and material entity symbolised as ‘God’ or nature (Pepper, 1996), which certainly implies ‘monism’. This core belief of deep ecology seems to fit closely to the basic spiritual approaches in Islam, the Islamic monotheistic conception. No doubt similar claims can be made for Christian thought, but in a society (such as exists in much of the UK) which no longer exhibits widespread religious knowledge (or observance) it seems that deep

ecology may be a substitute framework. In an Islamic society, in which Islamic teaching is of great significance in schools, it may be that environmental analysis of Islamic teachings may be very useful if environmental education were to be considered important enough to introduce.

Ecocentric environmentalism considers that the future of humankind demands a new ecological and environmental conception, a 'new-world ethic' as a guide towards a sense of oneness with the rest of nature. It perceives the natural world (Milbrath, 1996; Robottom & Hart, 1993) to be vested with the same values as the human world, leading to notions of stewardship. It regards reality holistically in terms of complex weblike relationships, which are interdependent with the systems of which they are part. It is a worldview that reintegrates mind-body, and fact-value dichotomies. A specific example of ecocentric thinking is based on the 'Gaia hypothesis', which, though distinctive and controversial, has resonance with an Islamic view of earth and nature.

The Gaia hypothesis concerns the concept of Mother Earth, or Gaia, as she was called by ancient Greeks. Lovelock (1988) defines Gaia as the largest 'creature' on earth. She is a complex entity involving the earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil – the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet. The thesis is that the earth itself is a coherent system of life, self-regulating, self-changing, a sort of immense organism. And since the earth is alive, it can also become sick. The health of the earth is most threatened by major changes in natural systems. In order to maintain the health of Gaia the theory advocates reduction of growth, pollution and waste.

It is seen by its advocates (Burrows *et al.*, 1991; Lovelock, 1987) as a holistic ecocentric concept that contrasts with more anthropocentric perspectives. It is seen to be able to underpin the kind of spiritual change that they feel is necessary if humanity is to ensure its ecological survival. The significant implication of this theory is that survival of human species is not necessary to the survival of the planet. Any species that adversely affects its environment may be doomed, but life goes on.

Gaia subsists on the changes and relationships (Clark, 1983) of species and ecosystems. Her stability is not that of unchanging emptiness. Thus, different elements play their part, and can depart, and we have no guarantee that the human species has any different sort of lease. We may perish and perhaps too even Gaia may die. What matters is the maintenance of Gaia and her constituent ecosystems, not the preservation at all costs of any single line (even our own). Thus, Clark envisages that 'if we are lucky we may yet have time to slow down our destruction of our kin, and rediscover that we share a commonwealth. If we are not, Gaia's ancient defences against usurping elements may yet prove strong' (Clark, 1983: 196).

The message may be that, since Gaia is liable to be sick (Dobson, 1992), she deserves protection. On the other hand, the Gaia hypothesis leads to the assumption that humanity might be signing its own 'suicide note' by subjecting nature to the violence of exploitation and pollution. Lovelock (1994) considers that in Gaia, humans are just one species, neither the owner nor the steward of nature. Yet, he holds that the future of humankind largely depends on maintaining the 'right' relationship with Gaia, and that living with Gaia is not so different from a human

relationship. It is an affair of the heart as well as the head. For such a relationship to succeed it has to be conducted lovingly, and must be renewed on a daily basis.

To this effect, it could be argued that the hypothesis does not specify on which basis the Gaianists have allowed themselves to define the 'right' relationship on behalf of the human race, and how this relationship is to be conducted daily by any individual. In an Islamic belief system, in contrast, human deeds are weighed on the basis of their effects on the prosperity of God's creation, and Man is reminded of the 'right path' through his God-minded conscious and daily religious practices prescribed by the divine law.

Islam (Mutahheri, 1991) promotes the belief that worship leaves a definite mark on people's habits and manners, and for that purpose people must perform acts of worship regularly. Obedience to Allah is not against freedom (Qara'ati, 1993), but it is a means of consequently preventing him from going 'astray'. The divine law has indicated to people the 'right' and the 'wrong' with respect to the course of action they should take so as they might strive to attain salvation; the choice is left to them (al-Attas, 1979). In spite of being free, the human role on earth is to act as *vicegerent*¹ of God towards all creation. This is considered a sacred mission for people to fulfil.

In line with Islamic belief, ecocentric environmentalists also appear to believe that through freedom of will people have the potential of wrongdoing. For example, Sahtouris (1989) (a Gaianist) writes

human beings, unlike other animals have freedom of choice and self-consciousness. This brings with it the possibility of destructive as well as beneficial behaviour. Only in the present age do we have anything like Gaian knowledge about human affairs and our planet (cited in Burrows *et al.*, 1991: 225–6)

It could be argued that in much of the 'Western' ecocentric thought referenced so far there is no explanation provided as to how and why humans have gained such freedom apart from all other creatures. Religious teaching helps to fill this gap, so that in Islamic philosophy, for example, the question is provided with a solid answer and a comprehensive perspective. God has given people (Behishti & Bahanar, 1993; Mutahheri, 1991) a mind together with freedom of will. On account of his choice and conduct he defines his destiny. Freedom of choice, based on knowledge and intelligence, places on humans the added responsibility (Masri, 1992) of caring for the rest of God's creation and for those very resources of nature which help all kinds of life on earth to stay alive and thrive.

Thus, the special significance of Gaian philosophy is the displacement of humans from their assumed position at the centre of creation. It reaffirms the myth of the great Mother as part of most early religions, and tries to show that God and Gaia, and theology and science, are not separate but a single way of thought. Its followers stress its spiritual dimension and advocate Gaia to be a new way to view the earth, ourselves and our relationships with living things. Other deep ecologists align to this idea, such as Capra (1996: 211) who has expressed his personal belief, stating that 'for many people, including myself, it is philosophically and spiritually more satisfying to assume that the cosmos as a whole is alive, rather than thinking of life on Earth existing within a lifeless universe'.

Islam also looks at all creation, and not only the earth, as having spiritual life. Therefore, the concept of earth as a living organism is not confined to Greek theology, nor to the modern concept of the Gaia hypothesis. Numerous verses in the Qur'an designate to heaven and earth distinctive features of life, that of awareness, obedience, freedom of choice (at some stage), and ultimately that the earth will stand witness on the judgement day. Having introduced the possibility of comparing Islamic principles with current deep ecological thinking arising largely through Western sources, the following section takes us more deeply into Islam itself.

Islamic Thought and its Relation to Environmental Thinking

Being based on unity, Islam realises the profound oneness of all existence. Therefore, Muslims believe that Islam relates to all spheres of human life. Islam enjoins individual spiritual and moral standards, and so ethics and morality are integral parts of Islamic teachings. In this way, Islam invokes moral principles over statutory laws. The Islamic concept maintains that religion is not only a spiritual and intellectual necessity but also a social and universal need.

Islam looks at humankind as forming a unity whose spiritual aspirations cannot be separated from bodily desires, and whose spiritual needs cannot be divorced from material needs. Moreover, Islam furnishes people with a guidebook that will guide them through their entire journey on earth, into the world of eternity (Qutb, 1982), and Islamic law or *Shari'ah* is the latest such updated manual.

Islam regards thinking as part of worship (Abdalati, 1998; Brohi, 1979). It invites people to reflect upon signs in nature and on the vast diversity of God's creation, bidding them to observe the phenomena of nature, the alteration of day and night, the properties of earth, air, fire and water, the mysteries of birth and death, growth and decay and the like. Mutahheri (1993: 63) quotes Avicenna – the outstanding Islamic philosopher – saying in his book *Isharat*:

To the gnostics, worship is an exercise of the faculties of thinking and imagination with a view to divert them from material things to divine conceptions. With constant practice these faculties get in harmony with the real human instinct of devotion to Allah, and they do not resist when the inner soul of man wants to attain illumination.

Apparently, then, Islamic interest in human curiosity and understanding has its resonance with certain streams of Western ecocentric thought. In Lovelock's (1988: 204, 217) expression, 'the life of a scientist who is natural philosopher can be deeply religious . . . Being curious and getting to know the natural world leads to a loving relationship with it. It can be so deep that it cannot be articulated, but it is nonetheless good science'.

The Islamic conviction (al-Sadr, 1991; Mutahheri, 1991) is that while science enables people to know the world, it is unable to solve their problems unless and until it runs parallel to 'the course of guidance'. Otherwise, it only adds to problems and aggravates them. Through faith, the outcome of self-consciousness, people become aware of their reality. To what extent does this Islamic 'take' on science run closely parallel to the advocacy of James Lovelock? Can Gaia (and

possibly other forms of deep ecology) be understood in any other way than as a belief system? Before returning to such questions, there now follows a brief account of the Islamic belief system.

The Qur'an: The message of Islam

The Qur'an is the immutable source of the fundamental tenets of Islam, of its principles, ethics and culture. It is also the perennial foundation for Islamic systems of legislation and of social and economic organisation (Abdalati, 1998; El-Sayed, 1993). It defines the role of people on earth and the aim of their existence (Mutahheri, 1991).

The Qur'an can be construed (Brohi, 1988), therefore, as a sort of instrument of instructions which has been issued to humans in their capacity as 'vicegerent' or representative on earth. It is intended to enable people to conduct life's operations in such a manner that they are able to obtain success in this world. It bears all the teachings necessary for people to know who they are and where they are going. In an Islamic society, the Qur'an inevitably provides the context and framework in which educational processes take place.

The *Shari'ah*: Islamic law

People, having been given the faculty to discriminate between right and wrong and the freedom to choose either, not left alone to grope with instinct and desire. Therefore, for Muslims the *Shari'ah* is the divine guidance that can lead towards human welfare on earth (and towards salvation and eternal happiness in the hereafter). It enables people to integrate this life into a spiritual centre. Thus, for example, Mawdudi (1988: 10) defines the *Shari'ah* as 'the Qur'anic terminology of the sound and equitable principles of individual morality and of collective conduct'. The *Shari'ah* (Qutb, 1982), therefore, addresses all human activities, whether political, economic, social, intellectual or spiritual.

The 'Covenant' and the 'Trust'

Muslims believe that there is an implied covenant between the Creator and all forms of creation, to follow God's law (Mutahheri, 1991; Nasr, 1994), which is binding accordingly on each individual (Ali, 1991: 395). A prominent element of the covenant is the notion of *Ammana*, the 'Trust'. In the Islamic system (Abdalati, 1998; Behishti & Bahonar, 1993; Chapra, 1992), even though property is allowed to be privately owned, it is nevertheless considered to be as 'trust' from God. Humans are merely the 'trustees' in the vast domain of creation. Being God's 'representative' on earth enjoys the right of ownership only on these terms and in the hereafter we will be asked how the 'trust' was received, how it was used and maintained.

A similar concept of 'trust' has been realised by some Western environmentalists such as Orr (1994: 137), who claims that 'the Earth is given to humankind as a "trust" . . . we cannot forsake the duties of "stewardship" without breaking another trust with those who preceded us and with those who will follow'. However, from the Islamic perspective, this Western concept of stewardship is considered to be a narrow one. It does not explain how and by whom people are assigned to be 'stewards', and how the 'duties' between the generations can be taken seriously. Islam identifies the source being the 'supreme God', and the

'trust' being part of a 'covenant' between human beings and God. God has given humanity certain powers and faculties, the possession of which creates on humans' side special spiritual obligations, which they must faithfully discharge. Agree or disagree, it is hard not to accept the power, or at least potential, of such advocacy in regulating human behaviour towards the interest of a greater good – surely one of David Orr's main goals.

Accountability before God

The continuity between life on earth with that in the next world is a prominent concept in Islamic faith. Life is not confined to this transient, small world alone but continues beyond it to the everlasting, and the righteous and the wrong-doer cannot expect to be treated equally in the hereafter. The Qur'anic message to all human beings is not to misuse the 'trust' of God – and all creation, which has to be guarded with special care.

The relationship between people and nature

In Islam, people are not alienated from the earth, although earth was created prior to their existence. The body of mankind is said to have been formed from wet clay – the substance of earth – and moulded into shape. Thus fashioned, the Qur'an informs Man that he should realise his sacred bondage with earth:

From the [earth] did We Create you, and into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you out once again. (Taha 20:55)

This Islamic perspective, which of course has its parallels in other religions too, is in close harmony with strands of Western ecocentric thought, for example, evident in Orr's (1992: 134) view that 'a commitment to life requires a thorough knowledge of the natural world based on the recognition that we are only a part of a larger whole'. Bear and Slaughter (1994: 49) also imply a similar meaning: 'Any approach to knowledge, to our planet, to the cosmos and ourselves which fails to show that we are connected to and responsible for the whole is to be condemned, for it will create disorder, division, and ultimately destruction'.

And according to Islamic theology, God's creation is meaningful and life has a sublime purpose. Humans are not destined to look upon nature from only the point of view of self-interest. The integration of spiritual and material aspects of reality regard all constituent parts of nature as sacred. Islam dictates to people the awareness of the significance of the natural world to their own welfare, and the dire consequences of its destruction.

Conceptions of human history

The Islamic conception of history is a major aspect of its theology. The Qur'an points to the punishment of ancient people for breaking the 'covenant' with Allah. Stuart Udall (1962), without knowledge of the Islamic conception of history, stated that

history tells us that earlier civilizations have declined because they did not learn to live in harmony with the land . . . It is ironic that today the

conservation movement finds itself turning back to ancient Indian land ideas, that we are not outside of nature, but of it (cited in Devall & Session, 1985: 59).

More precisely, the Qura'n reminds humans to take warning from the deeds of the dwellers of ancient, prosperous cities that did not keep to their 'covenant'. As Al-Sadr (1991: 121) notes, 'like an individual, any nation *Ummah* lives, moves and dies . . . if the nation goes against the norms of history, plays with the divine laws of nature, it will disintegrate very quickly. It signs its death warrant with its own hand'.

From the Islamic point of view, naked materialism (Qutb, 1979; Sardar, 1987) makes a major contribution to the decline of a civilisation. Thus, Islam stresses (Siddiqui, 1981) that whatever a person does in his or her life has its value in history, and its worth can be judged from the good it has brought. Islam, therefore, interprets history as a constant struggle between right and wrong. It is not fortune that rules the world (al-Sadr, 1991; Mutahheri, 1991) but the powers of knowledge and faith.

Behishti and Bahonar (1993: 209) identify three fronts on which people must fight in order to secure historical evolution. They must,

- make efforts to discover the laws of nature;
- fight against unjust social relationships and secure justice, freedom and human rights;
- control their passions and fight against selfishness, base desires and inner evils.

Islam shows that people who blindly follow their desires making no attempt to modify them in the 'right direction' create mischief and engender potential destruction. It could be argued that the general rules such as listed above, are equally applicable to the present and future life of all human beings.

The Concepts of 'Sustainability' and 'Development'

Sustainability is a concept that is provoking a strong debate in the Western literature, sometimes criticised as ambiguous and open to a wide range of interpretations. Different perspectives on sustainability become linked to different conceptual realms including sustainable development, economic development, environmental protection, and social or equity considerations. The Stockholm conference in 1972 on 'The Human Environment' formed an initial frame for the development of the ideas of sustainable development, and of course sustainability was subsequently defined by Bruntland as being 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (cited in Adams, 1990: 59).

Trzyna (1995) indicates that sustainability is not a precise goal but a criterion to guide attitudes and practices. One of its main characteristics is that it forces us to look at many dimensions of a situation. Materialist Western world-views are now being understood as having become fragmented rather than connected, whilst deep ecologists would want to redress the balance, to see people more and more as an integral part of nature, not 'over' or apart from nature.

Nonetheless, the opaque nature and flexibility of the term 'sustainability' poses substantial challenges to economic orthodoxy. Environmentalists question the viability of continued growth, for example. They throw light from many angles on the different aspects of sustainability, but fundamentally they show that development cannot continue indefinitely with depleted environmental resources. The agreed understanding seems to be that people must not take from nature more than what nature itself can replenish. This means adopting lifestyles and development paths that respect and work within nature's limits. In summary, sustainability depends on accepting, individually and collectively, a duty to seek harmony with other people and with nature.

Such sentiments are strongly reflected in Islamic theology, as we have seen. However, a major disparity is apparent in relation to the notion of 'sustainability'. The concept of 'sustainability' (or *eternity* in Islam) is reflected through belief in the hereafter. Islam enjoins its followers to limit their unnecessary wants. Development in Islam, as in enlightened Western thought, is not only an economic phenomenon but also a vehicle for betterment of human life on all its levels. This concept is a fundamental principle in the Islamic faith and has a potential for cultivating an individual's ethical and moral values. In contrast, the environmental ethics and values established, say, by much mainstream Western policy thinking for ensuring 'sustainability' seem directed mainly to enhancing economic prosperity. From the Islamic perspective (Mutahheri, 1993) the entire universe is continuously in a state of motion and gradual development. What determines the final destiny of mankind is its 'cultural evolution', not the evolutionary progress of the implements of production.

Furthermore, the Islamic notion of the possible abolition of humanity from earth has a strong resemblance to Gaian belief, which highlights respect for nature and predicts the possibility of the extinction of the human race. According to Lovelock's (1988: 212) conviction,

Gaia is stern and tough, always keeping the world warm and comfortable for those who obey the rules, but ruthless in her destruction of those who transgress. Her unconscious goal is a planet fit for life. If humans stand in the way of this, we shall be eliminated with as little pity as would be shown by the micro-brain of an intercontinental ballistic nuclear missile in full flight to its target.

In contrast to the Islamic philosophy, Lovelock does not justify how the 'rules of Gaia' have originated. Yet, Lovelock's vision of the earth's 'punishment' of mankind, as a response to misdeeds, has a resemblance to the Qur'anic description of the universal explosion that is believed in Islam to destroy the earth on Judgement Day, or as the Qura'an puts it: 'When the sky is rent asunder, and looks like a rose of ointment' (Al-Rahman 55:37).

A major distinction between an Islamic perspective and that of many Western environmentalists is that the latter hold ecological values, that are earth-centred. Some happen to resemble those of Islam, but they are characterised as 'laws' or principles identified by humans and set within certain Western norms. The concept of sustainability in the Islamic faith refers to human life in the hereafter, and is in contrast to the concept recognised in the most commonly held Western

world views, concerning the sustainability of human consumption in the material world.

Education for Sustainability (EfS) in a Kuwaiti Context

As noted at the beginning of this paper, it is the conviction of ecocentric Western thinkers that the roots of a growing ecological crisis reach deep into human nature. The practical implication for the new environmental ethic that they seem to propose represents an educational challenge. A number of critical, radical educationists (Fien, 1993; Hicks, 1996; Huckle, 1996) express their scepticism about existing educational organisation and processes. Orr (1992) has also posed fundamental questions around the role of education. For example, 'if education does not teach us that we need to renew our commitment to a sustainable human future and to be aware that our well-being is inseparable from that of nature, then what is education for?' (Orr, 1992: 147).

Such criticism connects to Robottom's (1992: 83–4) assertion, that

behind any educational process lies a philosophy, a moral philosophy . . . [an] educated individual should be in a position to ask such questions as: who took this decision? According to what criteria? With what immediate ends in mind? Have the long-term consequences been calculated? In short, he or she must know what choices have been made and what value system determined them?

Many prominent Western educators (e.g. Elliot, 1994; Sterling, 1993) have, in response to such questions and critique, come to support a transformative paradigm for education. The stress here is on the need for a global ecological dimension in the curriculum and an active approach to learning. For example, in an empirical study conducted by Szagun and Mensenholl (1993) on German adolescents, assessing their ethical and emotional concerns about nature, it was recommended that for affecting a long-term change in people's awareness of nature and the way they treat nature, it is not sufficient to impart knowledge or simply carry out practical projects. It is necessary to reach people's deep convictions and their emotions, at a level that informs ethical values.

Engel (1992) contends that the long-term task of environmental education is to foster or reinforce attitudes and behaviour compatible with the 'new ethic'. Sterling (1996), too, has argued that education for sustainability (EfS) may be part of a move away from the values and norms associated with modernity towards the alternatives associated with constructive post-modernity. But EfS is challenging for educators precisely because it calls for radical transformation in people's ways of thinking about nature and their relationship with it. It is through EfS, perhaps, that students are expected to gain the *conviction* that they have significant power in shaping the community's future, and even a willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the environment and the greater good.

The Kuwaiti educational system works under an Islamic ethos. From the preceding discussion it is possible to see that Islam may already bear a host of ethical principles and moral values needed to address the spiritual problems that are said to underlie the environmental crisis. It is often evident that Muslims react willingly to messages that come from their faith. In an analysis of

components of the Kuwaiti middle school curriculum (al-Naki, 2001), it was concluded that there was significant potential in introducing a much needed overt environmental education programme explicitly through an Islamic viewpoint. Interestingly, an evaluation of a workshop implemented with Kuwaiti middle school teachers in 1997 confirmed the notion that Islamic environmental traditions could act as a cross-curriculum vehicle, robust enough to develop and carry environmental education in an Islamic educational context.

Following the analysis, it was concluded (al-Naki, 2001) that radical possibilities exist in the Kuwaiti curriculum for teachers to understand that propagating the ethics of EfS could be seen as part of their obligation towards their faith. As a result, it was concluded that it was not necessary to insert a discrete environmental component into the Kuwaiti curriculum, either as a subject or in the form of a cross-curricular theme, for Islam already exists as the vehicle. This makes it possible to effect changes which integrate EfS into every existing subject area. Teachers would mainly need to realise the connection between their subjects and traditional environmental Islamic ethics. Kuwaiti teachers have the potential to explore the significance of reconstructing their own Islamic traditions and therefore explore EfS within the course of their profession and the framework of Islamic values.

By introducing a spiritual dimension to the educational experience of the learner, an educational curriculum under the framework of an Islamic ethos could make a long-lasting contribution to values and lifestyle changes in learners holding the Islamic faith. Thus, Islam could be a vehicle for propagating fundamental environmental ethics. This may be considered an advantage when faced with the evident difficulty apparent in Western literature in moving from rhetoric to implementation of 'radical' environmental education. It is acknowledged that in both contexts materialism and consumerism are serious threats. But it may be that Islamic communities have to hand a framework for the 'alternative' thinking that radical Western environmentalists have argued for in recent years.

Concluding Remarks

Deep ecologists believe that a characteristic of the prevailing Western worldview is the loss of a sense of the sacredness of nature. It is therefore deficient in providing for the welfare of future generations. The argument runs that the ecological crisis is too serious to be resolved by customary modes of thought as it is fundamentally a moral and possibly a quasi-religious problem. The 'ecological ethic' derived from the emergent ecocentric worldview may be thought of as the 'new world ethic for sustainability', which is considered to be a statement of values, based on the idea of sanctity of life.

Some of the principles and values implied and claimed to be rooted in eco-philosophy are, it is argued, deeply reflected in the Islamic thought. The principle of 'treading lightly' on the environment is a fundamental principle in Islam, as is its tradition of 'stewardship' which enjoins Muslims to care for and improve their surroundings. This has led to an appreciation, through the personal research referred to in this paper, of the potential contribution of Islamic religion in supporting deeper environmental understanding in Muslim societies.

Could a similar position emerge in Western contexts? Maybe it has already to some extent. Certainly, calls for changes in Western educational practices are widely debated, freely and openly, though views vary widely as to why change is needed and the means for effecting change. Education for sustainability (EfS) is seen to have the revolutionary purpose of developing the ethics of sustainable living, but it is the contention here that the spiritual dimension still remains elusive. At the level of practice in Western contexts, the question remains as to how the ideological aspects of EfS can lead to consciousness-raising and effective attitudinal changes towards the natural world – unless students address deeply held convictions concerning human–earth relationships. Does this have to be done within a formal set of religious teaching, as may well be appropriate in the Kuwaiti context? More likely each society must make its own way to enhance pupils' spiritual development. The discussion here merely suggests that some very difficult conversations between cultures may ultimately be of mutual benefit.

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Note

1. A translation of the Arabic terminology *Khalifahtoll'ah*, to mean representative and devoted servant of God.

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