

Comparative Ethics: How Secularism & Corporate Greed Leads to Climate Change

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After peeling the beautified layers of modernity characterized by technology, seamless mobility, large multinational supply chains, and the glitz and glamour of entertainment, lies the ugly underside of a bleeding society bereft of morality while edging towards anarchy and self-destruction. Nowhere is this more apparent than the natural environment that is being suffocated in the pursuit of higher bottom line income and corporate greed. Some stark examples are as follows:

- At the current rate of deforestation, mass agricultural practices and tree harvesting, nearly 75% of earth's land areas are becoming damagedⁱ.
- 24% of all estimated global deaths are linked directly or indirectly to environmental degradation and pollutionⁱⁱ.
- An Estimated 200 million people are at risk of being forced to evacuate their homes due to environmental disasters by the year 2050ⁱⁱⁱ.

The statistics just keep piling up as the world is starting to wake up to the hazy fumes common to cities like Shanghai, Mumbai, Dhaka, and other metropolitan giants to formulate plans to protect itself. In this short article, we will attempt to understand the true ideological source of these ecological mishaps, and how the central Islamic ethos counters these hedonistic narratives with its implementation of objective justice and piety.

Foundations of Ethics of Secularism

Every society that has a functional and organizational structure to facilitate its affairs and make its lands habitable will inherently adopt a system of creed, ideas, and policies that emanate from their core values. As the adopted '*Deen*' of our modern civilization is built upon secular thought, we need to first understand its origins and development. The principle at hand under the scope of secularism is the dichotomy between 1) the divine and 2) the political body of the state; with the latter entrusted with the affairs of the citizens. Its historic background goes all the way back to 325 CE in the Council of Nicaea, which, as the first ecumenical council held by the Christian church, sought to establish the ties

between the church and the Roman state^{iv}. This solidarity of church and state created a theocratic nation that legislated based on the Pauline texts. However, the cornerstone of this specific relationship that brewed in European society was based mainly on political *mal intent*. Although Christianity offers a rudimentary moral and ethical foundation for life, the practical implementation of that faith was false, incomplete, and corrupted by their own scholarship coupled with the self-motivated political campaigning of the Roman emperors resulting in objective oppression of the masses^v. From limiting the dissemination of books including the Bible, fueling a war against scientists and scientific advancement, and an unjust treatment of the genders, among others, these atrocious measures led the society towards a downward spiral of degeneration and darkness that lasted over a thousand years.

Fast forward to the end of the Middle Ages (around 14th-15th century), the European ideological transformations were taking shape at an alarming rate with the primary motivation of human beings to alleviate oppression from their necks. This era led to the renaissance period that produced the political theorists and philosophers such as John Locke, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and Adam Smith who pioneered the block to separate the church and state that led to the birth of modern secular nations. The focus on the preservation of private property in order to eradicate the oppressive policies of the theocratic empire in Britain became the one of the pillars of Locke's philosophy, while the focus on industrial and economic advancement became the hallmark of Adam Smith^{vi}.

The result of this socio-political compromise is that aspects of mannerism and affairs between the wards of society was placed in the hands of human beings. Thus, the same unitarian imposition of commands from past Kingships and Pharaonic dynasties was extended here, albeit now at the hands of a parliament. The collective voice of a few hundred members of parliament would now decide what is good, acceptable, reprehensible, and prohibited. Their ethical foundation became the desirous intellect of a limited creature like man, rather than the message that descended from the heavens. Allah ﷻ encapsulates the '*Deen*' of secularism and subjective utilitarianism as follows:

أَفَرَأَيْتَ مَنْ اتَّخَذَ إِلَهَهُ هَوَاهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَى سَمْعِهِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَجَعَلَ عَلَى بَصَرِهِ غِشَاوَةً فَمَنْ يَهْدِيهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ اللَّهِ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

Surah al Jathiya 45:23 - Have you seen he who has taken as his god his [own] desire, and Allah has sent him astray due to knowledge and has set a seal upon his hearing and his heart and put over his vision a veil? So who will guide him after Allah? Then will you not be reminded?

Foundations of Islamic Ethics

Just a few thousand miles from Britain and mainland Europe, the Muslims under the guidance of Allah ﷻ and his Messenger ﷺ had already established the pillars of monotheism on large parts of the remaining world with their Khilafah state. This state was similar to the theocracies of Europe and far east in their implementation of the divine law, however, it was different in its premise and source. Undoubtedly, the Islamic state thrived in those centuries when Europe crumbled because of the same basic ideology that religion dictates every aspect of life. However, the variant sources of our ethos and moral anchorage came from revealed texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Allah ﷻ says:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِتَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ بِمَا أَرَاكَ اللَّهُ ۗ وَلَا تَكُنْ لِلْخَائِنِينَ خَصِيمًا

Surah al Nisa 4:105 - Indeed, We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth so you may judge between the people by that which Allah has shown you. And do not be for the deceitful an advocate.

Revelation that transcends the subjectivity of man formed a firm standard upon which everyone including the Messenger ﷺ was obliged to stamp the pillars of justice and equity. To this effect, Allah ﷻ says:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوِّمِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ شُهَدَاءَ لِلَّهِ وَلَوْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوِ الْوَالِدِينَ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ ۚ إِن يَكُنْ غَنِيًّا أَوْ فَقِيرًا فَاللَّهُ أَوْلَىٰ بِهِمَا ۗ فَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا الْهَوَىَٰ أَنْ تُعَدِلُوا ۗ وَإِنْ تَلَوُّا أَوْ تُعْرَضُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا

Surah al Nisa 4:135 - O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives. Whether one is rich or poor, Allah is

more worthy of both. So follow not [personal] inclination, lest you not be just. And if you distort [your testimony] or refuse [to give it], then indeed Allah is ever, with what you do, Acquainted.

As the slaves of Allah ﷻ understand their relationship to their past origins, their present purpose, and their future judgement, their intellect and limbs are aligned to pursue a perfection of character. As such, the Prophet ﷺ said on the authority of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah ﷻ be pleased with him):

إِنَّمَا بُعِثْتُ لِأَتَمِّمَ صَالِحَ الْأَخْلَاقِ

Verily, I have only been sent to perfect righteous character. [Musnad Ahmad 8729]

In conjunction with the above narration and the narration of Aisha (may Allah ﷻ be pleased with her) that equated the character of the Prophet ﷺ to that of Qur'an itself, Ibn Rajab al Hanbali (d. 798 AH) explained that the Prophet ﷺ's character was the adherence to the commands of Allah ﷻ and refraining from the prohibitions in its encompassing totality^{vii}. This includes within our relationship with Allah ﷻ, our fellow humans, and the physical nature including wildlife, forests, skies, and the earth. The comprehensive nature of Islam is the mechanism that extends the ideas of a 604-page Qur'an and turns it into a practical solution for all of man's problems.

Case Study – Ecological Crises of Modernity

Modernity has certainly given mankind its fair share of comfort and advancements never witnessed by humanity before. However, since the driving force behind it was the secular and God-less pursuit of hedonistic power and prestige, no care is given to long-term caretaking of the earth. When one defiantly absolves themselves of their relationship to their creator and the ensuing purpose of obeying Him, they no longer balance their actions on the scale of hope and fear. If they ignore the resulting judgement of their actions to come, what need is there to police oneself and give due rights of justice. Their abhorrent behaviour can be seen in countless examples such as the dumping of toxic waste by the United States and their large organizations within the shorelines of Latin and South America.

According to the Brazilian Society of Toxicology, there are illicit trade agreements conducted in secret between the American oligarchs and small unregistered companies in South American to dump millions of tons of garbage and toxic waste yearly into their waterways, lands, rivers, and wells. A study in the 1960s flagged these disturbing practices as it caused spikes in cancer, birth defects, nerve damage, and blood disorders among the inhabitants of these continents^{viii}. The justification behind these malpractices was sold to their capitalist stakeholders as the reduction of waste expenses, higher earnings per share, and greater profit margins that will be reinvested into the company to generate further cash flow for investors. Furthermore, the Latin Americans are already economically dependent on the funding and loans given by the American and European powers, and hence, their lands and waterways are now open collateral that can be used for their personal gain. Such a solipsistic and self-centered worldview is the ideological offspring of secularism that separated divine influence from the affairs of humanity. On the contrary, Islamic values chain faith in the heart to its expression on the limbs as demonstrated in the narration of the Prophet ﷺ on the authority of Abu Shurayh:

عَنْ أَبِي شُرَيْحٍ أَنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ وَاللَّهِ لَا يُؤْمِنُ وَاللَّهِ لَا يُؤْمِنُ وَاللَّهِ لَا يُؤْمِنُ قَبِيلٌ وَمَنْ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ الَّذِي لَا يَأْمَنُ
جَارُهُ بَوَائِقَهُ

“By Allah, he does not have faith!” It was said, “Who is it, O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet said, “He whose neighbor is not safe from his harm.” [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6016]

Destroying your neighbouring country’s well-being and jeopardizing its citizens is farfetched, as maintaining the safety of the immediate neighbour is tied to one’s faith in God Himself. When one fears the consequences of misdemeanour in this life and hellfire in the next, while hoping for the reward of paradise from the actions written by the unseen angels on each shoulder, actions are rectified naturally.

Another example is the destructive influence of a specific type of oil extraction called ‘fracking’. Fracking is the process of injecting fluid at high pressures underneath the surface of the earth

to 'fracture' the bedrock formations in order to extract oil and natural gas. Although the process yields significant amounts of energy sources, the costs are the contamination of the land's water supply, tremors that cause movements of the land surface, production of toxic wastes, and other destructive effects^{ix}. However, if it wasn't for the consistent protesting of a few yet persistent environmental groups, governments and oil producers would have no problem rummaging the whole earth with their corrupt practices. The political filter of secularism is far too complacent as it prioritizes the temporary benefit of the host at the expense of long-term damages. In contrast, the Islamic ethos and code of conduct among its political leaders instills a strong sense of self-accountability. It is no wonder that when the second caliph of Islam, Umar ibn al Khattab (may Allah ﷺ be pleased with him) stepped into office, he was meticulous enough to care for even the rights of animals. Abu Nuaym (d. 430 AH) narrates the statement of Umar (may Allah ﷺ be pleased with him) on the authority of Dawud ibn Ali:

لَوْ مَاتَتْ شَاةٌ عَلَى شَطْرِ الْفُرَاتِ ضَائِعَةً لَطَنَنْتُ أَنْ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى سَأَلِي عَنْهَا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

If a lost sheep under my care were to die on the banks of the Euphrates, I would expect Allah the Exalted to question me about it on the Day of Judgement. [Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' 137]

Conclusion

Countless other examples can be given of ecological misconduct from air pollution through over-industrialization, to excessive deforestation practices that have rendered agricultural patches useless, and over-exhaustion of fertile lands from GMO seeds and fertilizers. However, it is imperative to understand the ideological source of these malpractices that has shifted the mindset of the masses from mutual cooperation to pursuing self-interest. Islam, as a total package of political, economic, social, and spiritual rectification is the solution to the present day's issues as it treats the world as a mere transitional breeding ground for righteous actions, while anticipating its real fruits in the life to come. Islam is the 'Deen' that the likes of ibn Khaldun (d. 808 AH) attributed to the elevation of the once-

humiliated Arab tribes that inhabited Hejaz in the desert wasteland to subsequently emerge as the intellectual and policy leaders of the earth within just a few decades of its practice.

May Allah ﷻ allow us to experience the rejuvenation of Islamic thought in the modern world and allow it to ascend nations as it did in the past. Ameen!

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Client Earth. (2022, March 29). *The human impact of fossil fuels*. Retrieved from <https://www.clientearth.org/latest/latest-updates/stories/the-human-impact-of-fossil-fuels/>
- ^{iv} The Encyclopedia Britannica. Council of Nicaea. Retrieved from Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Nicaea-Christianity-325>
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