Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education

Sustainability in multi-religious societies: an Islamic perspective

Fadila Grine a, Benaouda Bensaid b, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor a & Tarek Ladjal a

a Department of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
b Department of General Studies, International Islamic University of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

To cite this article: Fadila Grine, Benaouda Bensaid, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor & Tarek Ladjal (2013): Sustainability in multi-religious societies: an Islamic perspective, Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education, 34:1, 72-86

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2013.759363

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Sustainability in multi-religious societies: an Islamic perspective

Fadila Grinea*, Benaouda Bensaidb, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nora and Tarek Ladjalaa

aDepartment of Islamic History and Civilization, Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; bDepartment of General Studies, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The question of sustainability in multi-religious societies underscores interrelating theological, moral and cultural issues affecting the very process of social coexistence, cohesion and development. This article discusses Islam’s understanding of the question of sustainability in multi-religious contexts while highlighting the contribution of Islam’s spiritual, moral, and legal values to sustainability. This article sheds light on key Islamic concepts and core values related to sustainable development in multi-religious societies. The study of Islamic insights to sustainability offers valuable considerations for the understanding and amelioration of development in multi-religious or multi-cultural societies.

Keywords: Islam; sustainable development; multi-religious; multi-cultural; alliance

Introduction

Concern over long-term sustainability was first publicly voiced in the Bruntlands Commission report, published in 1978, which loosely defined development as that which ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (Pirages 1996, 3–4). In practical terms, sustaining development draws on the function of values and beliefs, as well as the roles and practices of individuals and communities. This is what probably caused Conca to argue that the challenges for designing institutions for sustainability are complicated by virtue of the fact that societies embody existing sets of deeply entrenched rules and roles (Conca 1999, 17). Creating a more sustainable world therefore not only involves changing how natural resources are used and allocated, but also understanding that the rules and roles of a particular society or social group are decisive in reshaping values and institutions that have been moulded by generations of increasing materialistic affluence (Pirages 1996, 10).

It is further argued that if thinking on sustainability is to progress, attention must be directed to the potentialities of present economic systems and social regulations in order to assess how they may begin to bring about institutional and value change at the social and economic levels (Drummond and Mardsen 1999, 22–23). In order to acquire a better understanding of the position and impact of religious beliefs and values in shaping sustainability, it is perhaps best to explore the essence and characteristics of worldviews underlying the faith and practice of religious societies. This appears in Sardar’s view in which he considers the roots of present

*Corresponding author. Email: drfadilagrine@gmail.com

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
day ecological crises as axiomatic, for they lie in the very mindset/belief and value structures which shape human relationship with nature, with each other and the lifestyles (Sardar 1985, 218). It is through such a frame of analysis that Islam’s view of sustainability in multi-religious societies can be explored. This approach allows Islamic religious and moral values, its views on spiritual piety and purification, integration of religiosity and social action, and its theoretical conception of sustainable living to be better understood. Such a discussion however, requires a thorough examination of the Islamic views on sustainability in relation to theology, ethics and morality, spirituality and laws. Revealed norms, persuasions, directions, and priorities of Muslim communities in multi-religious settings furthermore require review along with education and an appreciation of their sustaining and de-sustaining practices in order for a representative appreciation of Islam’s vision of sustainable development to be remotely realised.

According to the broader view of the International Environmental Organizations, principles of sustainable development embrace the following:

…respect and care for the community of life, improve the quality of human life, conserve the earth’s vitality and diversity, minimize the depletion of non-renewable resources, keep within the earth’s carrying capacity, change personal attitudes and practices, enable communities to care for their own environments, provide a national framework for integrating development and conservation and create a global alliance. (Beder 1993, 7)

Many other definitions of sustainability however, place a central significance on the role of resources, while many visions of non-sustainability however are founded on the contention that resources are being degraded and destroyed (Pirages 1996, 9). It is in this context that one understands Pirages’ critique of the story of modern civilization for its ever increasing ‘command’ or ‘mastery’ of the material environment; as humans have appropriated more and more matter and energy for their own ends in order to live higher on the ecological log and support greater numbers. Pirages argues that what has been named ‘progress’ now stands as a self-destructive strategy for meeting basic human needs; both material and cultural. Not only is such a way of life intrinsically unsustainable, he argues, but it is not at all clear if it promotes genuine human happiness (Ophuls 1996, 40).

For Auty and Brown, the present inequitable distribution of income and wealth on the global scale, homogenization of societies and loss of traditional knowledge and culture, as well as the global environmental changes apparent in the most populated parts of the world to the most remote, are clear evidence of the unsustainability of ‘development’ as it has hitherto been perceived and practiced. To conceive of a form of development that is sustainable not only requires the adoption of a longer time horizon, but an understanding of the biophysical and ecological processes involved supplemented by a philosophical basis for assessing the social and economic outcomes of development (Auty and Brown 1997, 3). Similarly, Goulet maintains that the basic-human-needs (BHN) strategy goes beyond the redistribution model by specifying the quantifiable content of equitable redistribution. The primary task is neither to maximize nor to optimize aggregate growth, but rather to satisfy the basic needs of those segments of a nation’s population that lay beneath the poverty line. Basic needs include goods and services relating to nutrition, health, housing, education, and access to jobs (Goulet 1996, 197).
Interestingly Beder argues that essential human elements will be culturally determined, and will vary with community and individual values (1993, 3).

**Theoretical framework**

Why do we need to promote Islam’s vision of sustainability when contemporary theories on the topic are presumably humanistic and universal and seek to empower and sustain present and future human societies globally? The answer to this question requires a thorough examination of the Islamic beliefs, values, and its legal system in regards to the conception and implementation of the agenda of sustainability. First the theory of Islam appears to be continually preoccupied with merging beliefs with active spirituality and laws so as to build a God-fearing moral society integrating both the mundane and transcendent while ensuring balance, piety, social responsibility, and human compassion. Some of these meanings are illustrated in the following tradition reported on the authority of the Prophet: ‘The person who strives on behalf of the widows and poor is like those who strive in the way of Allah and like those who fast in the day and pray at night’ (Bukhari 1979, 6006).

While seeking the development of a maximum potential of balanced human development, the Quran appears to have primarily given attention to liberating the intellect from superstition, fiction and mythology so as to clear the path for creativity, independence, and responsibility. The liberation of the intellect and emotions is set to create a new type of social theology, spiritual and moral uprightness. In essence, the Quran sought to re-define the very nature and needs of human existence and hence to re-shape human thoughts, emotions, and personalities while exhorting individuals to continually explore better ways to excel in life (Quran 17:70, 16:90, 2:195). The Quran also explains the trust of stewardship as a fundamental responsibility associated with human existence (Quran 2:30). This responsibility transcends the current definition of sustainability and places monotheism at the core of planning a sustainable world as it guides human vision to consider religion, spirituality, and morality without overlooking the physical needs of life.

While the Quran forges vital bonds with the environment and historical experiences, it places the very vision and process of sustainability in a broader epistemological perspective that embrace human needs and ambitions as perceived through revelation. The Quran merges progress with beliefs, piety with social action, and law with morality so as to achieve holistic wellness. Similarly, the Quran enacts legal codes and principles to ensure human welfare. What is crucial in the process of sustaining development is to maintain a sense of devotion to the divine, spiritual discipline, and moral integrity while continually striving to exercise purification, worship, and good deeds. The vision of sustainability essentially seeks to promote certain positive thoughts and modes of life and actions that lead to the pleasure of the divine while engendering a continuous morality driven course of change and reform. The Muslim vision of sustainability is embedded in their intellectual, spiritual and social experiences set according to their interpretation and practice of revelation. The central task of perfecting the human self and conscience is instrumental to Muslim conceptions, approaches and attitudes toward sustainability.

The Quran draws interest to the rewarding status of those who promote goodness (Quran 3:110, 22:77). The state of goodness is set to empower education, sympathy and solidarity for it is through learning that societies re-capture their raison d’être in the universe. Similarly, it is through sympathy and solidarity that
Islam preserves the essential characters of a sustainable world. Without learning, Muslims would not only fail to sustain their own awareness in an ever changing world, but also the resourcefulness of their own immediate communities and other societies. As an example of social good in Islam, obligatory and voluntary charity set the ethical and legal norms for investing in development in general. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: ‘If a human dies, then his good deeds stop except for three: a continuous charity, beneficial knowledge, or a righteous child who prays for him’ (Ibn Kathir 1987, 2:83). Charity however, requires purity of intention, understanding of the priorities of human needs and challenges, and an acquaintance with the principle of public interest (maslaha).

On another level, one sees the Quran’s forthright condemnation of unsustainable moral and ethical wrongdoing and mischief as in the following verse; ‘Wrong not mankind in their goods, and do not evil, making mischief, in the earth’ (Quran 26:183). The Qur’an also concerns believers with the problem of poverty and distress (Quran 1:271) while associating moral and legal obligation to the welfare of the needy, destitute, widows, orphans, and wayfarers (Quran 9:26). This is set to regulate Muslim actions in regards to the problems of hunger (Quran 76:8), social justice (Quran 4:58), equality (Quran 49:10, 3:195), and sacrifice (Quran 59:9). The Quran continually promotes a strong bond of caring and compassion (Quran 3:134, 33:34), strengthens the sense of family (Quran 30:21), neighbourhood and community (Quran 4:36). While these examples underline some of the features of Quran’s general view of sustainability, they equally highlight the need to revisit the efficacy of the spiritual and emotional commitment of Muslims and their contribution to global human welfare.

Although on the other hand, Islam’s commitment to environmental responsibility and accountability is shown in its engagement to nature and wildlife conservation known as the harim and hima zones, which is maintaining protective zones around springs and watercourses, where no settlements are permitted, in order to preserve water from contamination. There were also meadows and forest areas which were open for certain periods of time only – after the pollen harvest, for example, or when dry periods were threatening (see Güvercin The Environmental Crisis is also a Spiritual Crisis).

According to Abu al-Naja, the mawat [virgin land] is a land free from specific usage or rights of proprietorship. Whomever regenerates it, Muslim or not, with the permission of the Imam (Caliph) or not, in the Muslim land or not, should own it. He, who besieges such a land, digs a well, runs course of water to it, or protects land from water’s submersion in order to cultivate it, would have then revived it. The Imam (ruler) should grant this land to those who revive it even when they have no title of ownership (Abu al-Naja n.d., 54).

Islam also sets the following land principles such as land cultivation (ihya’ al-mawat) which entitles right for reclamation; Land reclamation and development known as iqta’; Land lease (ijara) for development; conservation/reserve zones (hima); forbidden zones (al-harim) which could be set adjacent to sources of water and other utilities like roads and places of public resort; Office of Public Inspection (hisbah); consideration of Makkah and Madinah as inviolable sanctuaries (al-haramain) where trees cannot be cut down and animals are protected from harm within their boundaries and are thus viewed as environmental models; charitable endowments (waqf) set for specific conservation objectives (Khalid 2002). Islam sets the principle of sharing basic natural resources, including access to and
distribution of resources such as the rights of protection and conservation of water, vegetation (kala’) covering all types of plants, and fire such as minerals and mined fuels. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: ‘People are partners in three, water, vegetation, and fire’ (Abu Dawud 1968).

Hisbah (moral inspection and monitoring) is yet another distinct institution in Islam that broadly stands on the principle of enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong. It promotes pious practice of life and prevents abuse not only of the rights of individuals and groups, but also of violation of proper utilization of environmental resources. In essence, it uses the state power to reinforce a morally responsible undertaking of public life, both for present and a sustainable future. What distinguishes hisbah in Islam according to Al-Buraey is that it seeks the penetration of ethical and religious standards into day-to-day affairs, especially trade and business, since hisbah is not simply an institution of spiritual order, but also an integral organization of the complete Islamic environment which manifests mundane and material aspects as well (Al-Buraey 1985, 263). Muslim scholars have written numerous manuals on hisbah including Abu Zakariyyah bin Umar (d. 901AD) in his Ahkam al-Suq, Ibn al-Ukhuwwah (d. 1329 AD) in Ma’alim al-Qurbah fi Ahkam al-Hisbah, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 AD) in Kitab al-Hisbah, al-Shirazi (d.1354 AD) in Nihayat al-Rutbah fi Talab al-Hisbah, al-Mawardi (d. 1058AD) in al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah, and ‘Abdul Ghani al-Maqdisi (d.1203AD) in his al-Kanz al-Akbar min al-Amr bi al-Ma’ruf wa al-Nahy ‘an al-Munkar. In these numerous compositions, the hisbah monitors the smooth observance of moral standards and ethical procedures in regards to appropriate approaches and utilization of available natural and environmental resources.

The perspective of Islam on sustainability may be further grasped through an examination of the teachings and lifestyle of Prophet Muhammad, not strictly during his life in the city of Medina, but also in view of the effects and implications of his teachings leading to the development of Islam’s Golden civilization. Interestingly enough, his example sets the Muslim mind on teaching, guiding others to what is good and beneficial, and sharing with others while exploring ways for sustainable self-discipline and communal change. Prophet Mohammed taught Muslims to take education seriously, engage in social development by developing the characters of piety, humility and leadership. His teachings condemn isolation, alienation, greed, and discrimination while replacing them with the positive concepts of social interaction and integration, volunteerism and equality. Numerous Islamic traditions point to the essential concept of sustainability and demonstrate Islam’s interest not only with the present, but with the well-being of the future as well. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: ‘If the Hour (Judgment Day) is about to be established and one of you is holding a palm shoot, let him take advantage of even one second before the Hour is established to plant it’ (Al-‘Ayni 2000, 12, 219).

It is according to the theoretical concepts discussed above that that we intend to highlight some of the basic concepts, features and characters of sustainability according to Islam. This discussion includes issues pertaining to the role of self-discipline, learning and wisdom in building sustainability, developing multi-religious moral integrity, adhering to moderate approaches to sustainability, and forging multi-religious alliances. The exposition of such issues however, remains theoretical, dealing predominantly with Islam’s normative systems of beliefs, ethics and practice. In view of this, this study would eventually require further empirical research to test Muslim
engagement with the religious and moral ideals presented in this article, and identify the problems hindering Muslim translation of those ideals into concrete realities.

1. **Spiritual self-discipline**

Ophuls argues that having nearly exhausted the possibilities of material development, we are left with little choice but to foster spiritual development instead. He believes that there is a critical need of some concept of ‘higher nature’ that man seeks to fulfill and an ideal of an authentic freedom that would result from its fulfillment, for only thus will the human race be able to control its wants and moderate its demands. In summary, what is needed is a new social vision that replaces gratifying human appetite with the growth of human wisdom as the central purpose of human life (Ophuls 1996, 40). Along similar lines of analysis, Zohar and Marshall believe that spiritual capital and sustainability are intrinsically linked (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 4). For them, no other kind of capital works without an underlying basis of spiritual capital (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 5). The wealth of meanings, values, and higher motivations of spiritual capital are necessary to sustainable society. People, organizations, and cultures that have spiritual capital will be more sustainable because they will have developed qualities that include a wider, value-based vision, global concern and compassion, long-term thinking, spontaneity (and hence flexibility), and an ability to learn from and make positive use of adversity (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 4).

In this article, I argue that the quality of our reactions and attitudes to environment, and the shaping of our general perception of sustainability deeply reflect our spiritual maturity and state of mind. It is probably with this in mind that the Quran places heavy emphasis on the need for changing the self first while setting individual change as a fundamental pre-requisite to broader reforms (Quran 13:11). The Quran also associates the purification of the self with success and prosperity while associating corruption of the self with failure and loss as in the following verse: ‘Truly he succeeds that purifies it, and he fails that corrupts it!’ (Quran 91:9–10). Muslims are required to continually engage in spiritual exercises that shape their intellectual and emotional conditions. Such exercises are associated with an intense degree of reflection, contemplation and growth; virtually leading to unconditional cultivation of virtue and goodness. The process of spiritual perfection of character however, is open and transparent, real and optimistic, and reflects varying degrees of devotion to the divine with a serious interest in the change of the self and of the environment.

This spiritual self-discipline is the individual responsibility of believers. Muslims are required to develop their inner potential of understanding and exploration, and to apply their spiritual wisdom to the efficient improvement of the world as a validation and justification of their religious ascension to the divine. Spiritual self-discipline not only addresses the building of finely passive spiritual, emotional, or moral qualities but continually invokes the responsibility of perfecting human and social environments. This means that in Islam, self-discipline is not an inertly static engagement, but rather a vibrant and radiant commitment. A number of Prophetic traditions point to the proportionate rapport between self-perfection, religiosity and resourcefulness to the extent that one’s religiosity may rise to the level of serving common social interests. This highlights a distinct concept of superior purification validated according to the degrees of sustainable benefit.
engendered in human society. Religious deeds in Islam are viewed according to the positive changes they bring to human life as evidenced in the following traditions:

The best of the Muslims is he from whose hand and tongue the Muslims are safe. (Al-‘Asqalani 2001, 1:72)

The best of people are those that bring most benefit to the rest of humanity. (Sakhawi 1993, 515)

The best of people are those who live longest and excel in their deeds. (Al-Baghawi 1991, 7:319)

The best of you are those who are best to their families. (ZinuAllah 1994, 11:369)

The best of which man can leave behind for himself are three: a righteous child who supplicates for him, an ongoing charity whose reward continues to reach him and knowledge which others benefit from after him. (Abu Dawud 1968, 2880)

The most beloved of deeds according to God are the continuous ones, even if they are little. (Albani 1988, 761)

The best of Jihad is that man strives against his soul and desires. (Al-Asbahani 2002, 282)

The best of all charity is that which is given to the relative who harbors enmity against you. (Mundhiri 2000, 2:71)

The best charity is to provide water. (Qaysarani 1995, 2:913)

These traditions explain the need to invest in the development of intellectual, moral and behavioral practices across communities that should firstly begin with the cultivation of their spiritual wisdom. This however requires Muslims to adopt effective yet sustainable practices to ensure change in human society and to secure their honor (Quran 63:8). Honour is associated with piety, mercy, social responsibility and needs not be transformed into negative emotional concealment of weaknesses or deterioration in areas of human dignity and social justice. This implies that assuming honor while abuse is rampant, or when waste of resources is the norm, or when excessive consumption of material products and technology is held at the cost of spiritual and moral capital is simply unsustainable. This being said, human honor only applies when all forms of unsustaining ideas and practices are altogether removed and de-institutionalized.

2. Sustainable learning

Islam encourages Muslims to learn in the name of God while commanding them to apply their knowledge, and assure its good use for human welfare as per the following Qur’anic instruction; ‘And whosoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind’ (Quran 5:32). In order to develop a sustainable basis for learning, the Quran associates learning with effective communication in what might be referred to as common grounds of understanding (Quran 3:64). In all of their conditions and circumstances however, Muslims should
be actively engaged in understanding all sources and channels of wisdom. Their learning transcends religious, cultural and ethnic differences, and explores that which leads, guides, and supports human development. Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: ‘Wisdom is a lost treasure of the believer; he seeks it wherever he may find it’ (Al-‘Asqalan 1995, 1:151). Prophet Muhammad was himself instructed to teach wisdom alongside the scripture (Qur’an 2:151). A notable Muslim scholar like al-Razi (d. 925) perceives wisdom as an act of hitting the correct target in speech, thought and actions in the process of representing ‘the attainment of that which is true and right through knowledge and action’ (Lane 1968, 2:617). A person may acquire wisdom only with the fulfillment of the conditions of knowledge and action.

According to Muslim sources, acquiring beneficial knowledge is wise and praiseworthy, and stands in a higher ranking than religious worship. Unwise learning known as blameworthy learning however contaminates sustainable spiritual and moral development of societies and by such means consumes the world. It is with this concept in mind that Muslims need to strive in all sorts of beneficial knowledge to improve and sustain human life while thwarting all that which pollutes the flow of wisdom and acquisition of human knowledge across communities and societies. For learning to be effective and conducive in the context of multi-religious communities, Muslims need to nurture piety, tolerance and sharing. Cooperative learning sustains development according to its destined pinnacle of human wisdom and enlightenment. Overlooking these basic ingredients would reverse the progressive direction of wisdom, thus causing increased misunderstanding, confusion, and exhaustion of resources and energies and reverse the gradual building of sustainability. Muslims also need to unlearn all non-sustainable thoughts and practices beginning by first enriching their own learning and wisdom before sustaining other religious communities.

Sharing knowledge is part and parcel of building human capital and improving intellectual, social and civic institutions. Building human capital for religious communities lies at the core of sustainable learning. A favourable context of development largely depends on the level of human empowerment achieved therein. Sustaining development is highly favourable in the context of educated and civilized, transparent, and cooperative communities. Sustaining learning must start somewhere, and it must begin at home. This requires Muslims to avoid idleness and passivity, pre-occupy themselves with human empowerment, develop and share knowledge building along with soft and hard skills and capabilities. Such contributions to sustainability need not be viewed outside the folds of religious devotion for they help build the human potential necessary for better human life; paving the way for the most effective recipe of sustainability.

3. Multi-religious moral integrity

There appears to be a consensus on the existence of a moral crisis affecting not only the re-distribution of natural resources but destabilizing the very systems for building civilization. In the urgency to fuel the re-reclamation of human’s morality, debates are undergoing on the significance of morality to sustainable development and the various perspective for which morality can be viewed. For Drummond and Mardsen, many analysts view development as a moral concept that implies the maximization of well-being and the progressive achievement of equality in society. From this perspective, they argue, present day patterns of uneven development are
both morally unsustainable and a barrier to the achievement of more sustainable patterns of development in the future (Drummond and Mardsen 1999, 9). In the same course of thought, Ophuls calls for a recovery of morality. His argument is made in light of the fact that the story of modern civilization has been one of progressive demoralization in all three senses of the word: the corruption of morals, the undermining of morale, and the spread of confusion. For him, we can clearly see the problems that demoralization has already caused and the ominous terminus towards which it tends. It is now apparent by virtues such as wisdom, that it must be cultivated and indeed inculcated by the social and political order, or these ‘weapons’ will be turned to perverse ends and destroy both society and the polity (Ophuls 1996, 40).

A sound sustainable moral base in a multi-religious context rests at the core of any discussion on sustainable development. For Muslims, moral integrity is not simply the business of preserving balance and stability, but rather, concerns the sort of ethical engagement in building a sustainable world in a way that validates both worship and religiosity. This conception of morality is closely associated with worship, faith and social actions. Almost as if the entire religious mission was restricted and commissioned to such matters of morals, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: ‘I have only been sent to perfect moral integrity’ (‘Abd al-Barr 1993, 24:333). Such moral integrity however, is not mystical nor philosophical, but rather, a devout commitment and undertaking of positive change, which highlights the following Prophet’s recommendation: ‘The believer who mixes with people and patiently bears their annoyance will have a greater reward than the believer who does not mix with people and patiently bear their annoyance.’ (Al-‘Asqalani 1996, 451). This ethical social dynamism is better understood through the Quran’s condemnation of monastic practices set for religious and moral perfection. The Quran states:

But the Monasticism which they invented for themselves, We did not prescribe for them: (We commanded) only the seeking for the Good Pleasure of Allah; but that they did not foster as they should have done. Yet We bestowed, on those among them who believed, their (due) reward, but many of them are rebellious transgressors. (Quran 57: 27)

Muslims are urged to closely monitor their edifice of moral environment through active counsel, use of repentance as a means of learning good habits and unlearning negative practices. In addition, the application of religious invocations to rebuild their own characters in a real course of healthy change, wellness and optimized performance is important to improve their moral environment. The following are Islamic invocations repeatedly used in Muslim worship to enhance their affirmation of moral sustainability: ‘O God, guide me to good character, none guides to good character but You’ (Al-Dhahabi 2000, 1:141); ‘O God, I seek refuge in you from bad character, deeds, and desires.’ (Mundhiri 2000, 3:360); ‘O God, You perfectly created me, so perfect my character.’ (Mubarakfuri 2000, 5:402); ‘O God, I seek refuge in you from disability and laziness; from cowardice and avarice; from decrepitude and harshness; from negligence and impoverishment from lowness and humiliation. And I seek refuge in You from poverty and disbelief; from sinfulness, disunity and hypocrisy; from notability and show off.” (Shawkani 1998, 123).

Morality should not only sit at the heart of a sustainable vision, but needs to be present throughout the educational curricula, training and socio-cultural development.
Religious communities need to forge shared moral platforms. In the process of a community’s moral interaction, and in order to ensure that communities take ownership and pride in a sustainable vision of morality, there needs to be a platform of morality whereby moral acts are identified and integrated in local culture, religious practice, or community ceremony to gradually acquire a consciously broader scale of multi-religious existence. Such an approach would strengthen the foundations of moral development and further generate a culture that supports a collective vision of moral sustainability. Moral acts like decency, justice, compassion, human dignity and the like should be incorporated into this moral building exercise.

In striving for building shared moral principles, it is worthwhile drawing on the framework of the Shari’ah’s objectives commonly known as maqasid al-shari’a which essentially embrace the fundamental moral sustainability envisioned by Islam. The moral philosophy of the Shari’ah is set to preserve public interests while setting appropriate measures to preserve, support and enhance distinct modes of sustainable development. The objectives of the Shari’ah are three fold: The fundamental or essential values embracing the preservation of religion, life, intellect, lineage, and property. Some contemporary Muslim scholars like Tahir bin Achour (d. 1973) and Muhammad Ghazali (d. 1996) view freedom and justice as fundamental values in the system of the Shari’ah. The logic of these fundamental values dictates a certain hierarchy of life undertakings such as the act of sustaining human lineage and reproduction, which for example, requires Muslims to promote and support all sustainable means and practices of family building. This means that chastity, decency, and prohibition of sexual intimacy outside the folds of marriage are morally sustainable.

In order to enrich positive environmental education, Muslim jurists have developed a set of legal principles: the interest of the community takes precedence over the interests of the individual; relieving hardship takes precedence over promoting benefit; a bigger loss cannot be prescribed to alleviate a smaller loss and a bigger benefit takes precedence over a smaller one. Conversely a smaller harm can be prescribed to avoid a bigger harm and a smaller benefit can be dispensed with in preference to a bigger one (Khalid 2002). The framework of the Shari’a is set to preserve society from disintegration and deterioration. In effect, this is what preserves the essential value of protecting and enhancing human lineage. On this course of thought we detect similar useful thoughts in Ophuls’s illustration on the importance of family in the context of sustainability. Ophuls argues that an aspect of the impending social collapse that requires further elaboration is the breakdown of the family. This is because the disintegration of the little society of the family is a truly ominous development foreshadowing the ultimate collapse of the larger society (Ophuls 1996, 38). As such, societies struggling with developing a consensus on a sustainable future should first be aware of the risk to normalize unsustainable practices that only escalate impediments to the vision of sustainability.

In short the preoccupation of Islam with a sustainable moral environment transcends respective religious and cultural circles of Muslims thus affecting those interacting with their communities. This is understood in light of the fact that moral perfection transcends linguistic, socio-historical, and cultural layers, evolving instead into a moral meta-universal ground of sustainability. The radiantly fluid effects of morality permeate the religious and intellectual space of communities to slowly constitute a shared base for moral sustainability in multi-religious settings. This requires Muslims to demonstrate the finest examples of moral integrity, to uphold the finest morals and professional ethics, and transform their spiritual capital into
social action, leaving positive imprints on the course of the larger religious and social life. In so doing, they would hold the voice of humanity in sustaining its own characteristics rather than denying its own identity, and would also join their voices to other religious and cultural communities in a collectively systematic effort to nurture the moral philosophy of the sustainable world they wish to see. Should Muslims fail in the moral test or perform poorly in the moral challenge, they would then simply lose their potential to affect the moral development of multi-religious communities and forget all thoughts of potential leadership of sustainable development.

4. Moderate approach to sustainability

Muslim sources call for a moderate character of faith and beliefs, thought and action, and adherence to a moderate life as exemplified in the following Prophetic tradition: ‘The best of your religion is that which is easiest’ (Bukhari 1979, 39). Moderate course of thought and action sustains moderate lifestyles and development in which Muslims are challenged to give due attention to the spiritual, moral, emotional and rational culture of development. The challenge of moderation requires the full commitment of Muslims to a moderate philosophy and strategy of sustainability while outlawing all thoughts or acts of extremism or exclusion. The first step of moderation begins with the initiation of common terms as described in the following Qur’anic passage: ‘Say: “O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you”’ (Quran 3:64). This is because the failure to properly spell out common terms hinders cross-religious moderation or may even jeopardize basic communication and interaction. This is understood in light of the fact that shaping a sustainable vision particularly in multi-religious communities requires first and foremost, an internal base of moderate understanding and coexistence and communication that stem from the very religious and cultural life systems of those communities. Such a base permeates the intellectual and religious make-up of each community hence shaping the sustainable future of a multi-religious mind-set. In the process of developing the moderate approach there shall emerge new temperate multi-religious mini-modalities of cooperation, gradually acquiring powerful growth that influences the shaping of normative social culture sustained by society’s civic and legal institutions.

A moderate multi-religious culture requires an objective thesis of theology, ethics, law, and politics including issues of spirituality, education, communication, community development, neighbourhood, business partnerships, counselling, social work, management and leadership, art and entertainment. It is in this context that we value the point of Zohar and Marshall concerning the motivational transformation of individuals and cultures in all aspects of society as critical to building a better world and those who live and work within such diverse areas of life as education, psychology, politics, the professional, and business can benefit from amassing spiritual capital (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 6). This interdisciplinary nature of discussion leads to the founding of a platform necessary for a workable model of moderation in multi-religious societies for it causes the emergence of new patterns of religious, educational, behavioural and cultural transformations affecting the community’s engagement in the process of sustainability. As any other social responsibility, moderation is not the sole work of Muslims, but is imbued in the doctrinal and moral make-up of all faith groups. This implies that diverse religious communities need to be intellectually engaged in the discussion and formation of
underlying fundamental concepts of moderation while actively formulating appropriate strategies and mechanisms so as to ensure effective understanding and contribution to sustainability in multi-religious settings.

Developing a moderate multi-religious culture necessary for sustainable reforms also calls for the review of theological and legal instruction. For Muslims however, theology should be introduced in ways that integrate belief with piety, religiosity with morality in a moderate and balanced fashion that sustains practices of devotion to God, social justice, freedom and equality. It is on this occasion that one sees how throughout Muslim history, certain interpretations not only condemned religious heretics, but at times caused intellectual and social chaos. Few theological expositions today still advocate religious obstinacy, exclusion, condemnation and even atonement. Muslims are required to examine the materials and legal verdicts, styles of religious instruction and preaching, and the debate over questions of faith and reason. They also need to formulate new religious curricula that ensure a moderate perspective on life. Most importantly they must make sure that their approach and delivery help realize their vision of sustainability. Such a critical need becomes more urgent in the context of multi-religious societies where the lack of understanding and harmony continues to cause detrimental damage and devastating results to human societies.

5. Multi-religious alliances
Successful global alliances cannot be attained without mature religious and cultural alliances. This becomes clear when religious values and ideals are used to better forms of cooperation in family, factories, communities, neighbourhoods, and societies at large. In so doing, Muslims would secure the building blocks of greater alliances while gradually acquainting themselves with greater problems and challenges often associated with global alliances. What matters first is to invest potential towards sustaining mini-religious alliances. This is probably what Zohar alludes to when she argues that social capital is reflected in the kinds of relationships we construct in our families, communities, and organizations, in addition to the amount of trust we place in one another, the extent to which we fulfill our responsibilities to others and the community, the prevalence of health and literacy that we achieve through our common efforts, and the extent to which we are free from crime (Zohar and Marshall 2004, 5).

Building an effective sustainability requires a full-fledged vision of strategic alliances carried out on many levels. Building multi-religious alliances is what secures operating avenues of understanding and cooperation on any given problem while enhancing mutual acquaintance with one another by means of collective history and shared future. It also strengthens each other’s character and identity in a spirit of mutual respect and consideration of one another. Sustainable multi-religious alliances require supportive structures that provide not only the technical know-how, but also the smart prioritizing of interests, as well as respective measures and indicators. For Muslims, multi-religious alliances should be subject to a proper understanding and application of the Shari’ah’s objectives and legal maxims, in addition to a fair examination of the religious, economic and cultural histories of other religious communities.

The successful management of mature yet effective multi-religious alliances enhances positive interaction and leadership, and removes confusion, bias or
prejudice. It is argued that when Muslims address the issues and challenges of sustainability seriously whether in education, health, governance, human rights, law, economics, or finance; religious communities would positively react to their plea to sustainability. Muslims need to improve their intellectual, social, moral, and economic conditions, and should translate their ideals into concrete realities, thus enhancing the lives of immediate religious communities. For example, in communities where building human capital is viewed as a serious social strategy, local or regional development would struggle less with the negative effects resulting from ignorance, arrogance, political despotism or persecution, illiteracy, close-mindedness, poverty, poor health, education or economy. In such circumstances, the contributions of Muslims would significantly enhance high exposure and visibility securing improved intellectual, political, social, and civic institutions of society.

In the course of developing multi-religious alliances, especially for developing a common vision of sustainability, Muslims are required to revisit their understanding of next-of-kin as outlined in the following Qur’anic verse: ‘It is prescribed, when death approaches any of you, if he leaves any goods that he makes a bequest to parents and next of kin, according to reasonable usage; this is due from the Allah-fearing.’ (Quran 2:180). This Qur’anic passage raises the importance of good will, benevolence, charity and philanthropy which need to be extended to further levels and stages of sustainability. It thus becomes necessary to extend charities to immediate then farther circles of needs, which requires Muslims’ contributions to travel outwardly, according to the major needs of their respective communities and societies. This is justifiable in light of the fact that when immediate and local needs are properly addressed, for the most part the greater community would no longer be in need in view of having their needs met by their family members. By analogy, developing sustainable alliances requires Muslims to attend to the needs of their close religious communities prior to looking farther.

**Conclusion**

Shaping a vision of sustainability in multi-religious communities does not grow in a vacuum. It requires unwavering support of faith, morality, freedom and justice, alongside an untiring commitment of social, civic and political institutions, and long-lasting devotion to learning and development. This was probably what Chapra wanted to indicate in his comment that concentration on economic development with the neglect of other requisites for the Islamic vision may provide Muslims with a higher rate of growth in the short-term, yet hardly may be sustainable in the long-run because of inequities, family disintegration, juvenile delinquency, crime, and social unrest. He further argues that such a decline may gradually be transmitted to other sectors of the polity, society and economy causing further deterioration of the Muslim civilization (Chapra 2007). The sought after model of sustainability requires revisiting many methods of learning and thinking, exploration and experience, communicating and sharing, and objective assessment of historical memory. Sustainability requires Muslims to sustain learning and wisdom while revisiting their societal role, the responsibility of their religious and civic institutions, and the degree to which their faith and spirituality are sustainably practiced in society. Looking towards the future however, one clearly notes that there is serious need for building effective meanings and practices of sustainability in multi-religious societies while bearing in mind that larger scale theories of sustainability are not the result of
overlarge ambitions, but rather, originate and result from a genuine and mature interaction among diverse religious, spiritual, and cultural experiences of communities and societies.

Notes on contributors

Fadila Grine is a lecturer at the Department of Islamic History and Civilization. Fadila obtained her Ph.D. in Islamic culture and civilization from the Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysia. Fadila has published various papers in her field. Fadila’s areas of academic interest are in Islamic history and culture, Muslim women's studies and leadership. She was instrumental in founding many Islamic projects in Canada and conducts numerous workshops on self-development, Muslim women, leadership coaching, educational development and parenting.

Benaouda Bensaid is a lecturer at the International Islamic University Malaysia. He earned his BA (Hons.) from Algeria, his MA from the International Islamic University Malaysia and his Ph.D. from McGill University, Canada. He is currently associated with the Department of General Studies, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University, Malaysia. Prior to his appointment in IIUM, Bensaid worked as the Director of the Canadian Islamic Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor is currently the Deputy Director (Research & Development) at the Academy of Islamic Studies, University of Malaya, Malaysia. Prior to that, he served as Head of the Department of Islamic History and Civilization. Dr. Roslan’s broad academic interests involve the Middle East, Muslim affairs, Islam and multi-culturalism and civilization.

Dr Tarek Ladjal is currently a visiting lecturer at the department of History and Islamic Civilization, University of Malaya, Malaysia. Prior to that, he was a lecturer at the International Islamic College University of Selangor. His broad academic interests involve Islamic thought, Sufism, Middle East politics, Islam and multi-culturalism, civilizational issues and dialogue, and he leads two research clusters at the University of Malaya.

References


Güvercin, E. *The Environmental Crisis is Also a Spiritual Crisis*. Retrieved from: http://theamerican muslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/islam_environment_and_sustainability_the_environmental_crisis_is_also_a_spi/0017345.


