Nature of Knowledge and Knowledge of Nature in Islam

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Abstract
In order to understand the reason behind totalitarian approach to nature and human-nature relationship, this paper focuses on linkage between religion and nature. It is aimed here to answer two complementary questions; firstly, how the knowledge about nature has being produced in Abrahamic religious tradition, and secondly, if environmental ethics originated from Islam can work to prevent the crisis of nature. It is argued that because of originating from an Abrahamic tradition built on masculine power relations and with its value hierarchy based on sacralization and absolutization, and so one dimensionality, the attempts of creating Islamic environmental ethics cannot be enough to face the crisis of nature. To test this argument, the paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, the historical developments related to Abrahamic religion-based calls for environmental action are investigated. In the second section, the attempts of creating an Islamic environmental ethics are examined. And finally Islamic nature of knowledge is analyzed from Political Ecology (PE) perspective. As a result of critical content analysis based on PE perspective, it can be said that the crisis of nature is not stemmed from Renaissance thought and so re-sacralization of nature cannot be the solution to it. Instead, it can be linked to totalitarian thinking. This is so because the problem, here, is not science or religion but an epistemological problem which is produced and re-produced through power relations.

Keywords: Abrahamic tradition, environmental ethics, Islam, nature, religion, totalitarian thinking

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Introduction

Today, capitalist-militarist growth strategies cause many problems for the nature -the species including humans as part of it. In spite of being so vital, these problems are ignored or not considered as the top item in the agenda. This is mainly because of governmental policies produced through power relations in a globalized world. And there is not a consolidated opposition against these policies. Since people have mostly similar attitudes towards nature and human-nature relationship, the lack of consolidated opposition can be linked to a specific state of mentality.

At first glance, it can be said that ecological problems is about lack of adaptation. This means individuals, throughout the history, have been mostly choosing to subjugate nature instead of having a responsive position with-in it. It is believed that this is a result of mainstream knowledge production shaped historically by power. At this point, ecological crisis might be seen as the last phase of adaptation problem that is built upon power relations. At this last phase, the totalitarian efforts to control nature cause the crisis with-in nature and between individuals.

This research focuses on religion as the strongest dimension of individual's mentality which is believed to be crisis-prone. Because of being a socio-political phenomenon, religion is still a crucial aspect of socio-political life. Therefore, it also continues to be an important concept in academia. And since there is an urgent need for facing ecological problems, religions are also considered as potential instruments to implement some key concepts for supporting environmental ethics.

In order to understand the reason behind above mentioned totalitarian efforts, this paper focuses on linkage between religion and nature from a Political Ecology (PE) perspective.[1] Here, main assumption is that Abrahamic religions can be seen among important sources of knowledge production which shapes human thinking. It is also assumed that any academic research paying attention to religion must be held from an "out of religion" perspective, especially if it is not a theological one. Therefore, this research cannot be and will not be based on an ontological understanding but epistemological one.

Based on these assumptions, this paper aims to answer two complementary questions; firstly, how the knowledge about nature has being produced in Abrahamic religious tradition, and secondly, if environmental ethics originated from Islam can work to prevent the crisis of nature. It is argued that because of originating from an Abrahamic tradition built on masculine power relations and with its value hierarchy based on *sacralization* and *absolutization*, and so *one dimensionality*, the attempts of creating Islamic environmental ethics cannot be enough to face the crisis of nature. Although there are important Islamic principles, which can be interpreted under an environmental ethics, this is not sufficient to face the crisis of nature and adapt to it

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[1] The man-centered approach of Islam -as well as Abrahamic tradition in general- let the researcher use analytical possibilities of Political Ecology. Political Ecology reflects a relatively new vision considering "the political" and "the ecological" interrelated. This perspective is obviously stemmed from a critical understanding of the link between knowledge and power, and in this situation between knowledge about nature and power. Therefore, it has the potential to open a new phase in sustainability debate through a process of analyzing how knowledge about nature has being produced and how this has being affected by power relations.

through an eco-justice perspective. This is mainly about totalitarianism, which is a very prominent characteristic of religious thinking, stemmed from *one dimensionality* based on *sacralization* and *absolutization*. It is thought that this type of thinking does not question *the hierarchy of souls* principle shaping value hierarchy and so justifies subjugation of nature.

In order to answer above mentioned questions and test the argument, the paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, it will be discussed how the knowledge of nature is produced through Abrahamic tradition. In other words, the historical developments related to Abrahamic religion-based calls for environmental action will be investigated. In the second section, the attempts of creating an Islamic environmental ethics will be examined. And finally Islamic nature of knowledge will be analyzed from PE perspective in order to show its relationship with today's ecological crisis and so why Islamic environmental ethics cannot save nature.

Knowledge of Nature in Abrahamic Tradition

The literature on the relationship between religion and "environment"[2] is quite new. Still, one can find important works focusing on this relationship. Especially, the article written by Cynthia J. Branton (2006, p. 212-214) is a well-organized work for understanding the general framework. According to Branton, religious tendencies and values are essential for encouraging individuals work together in order to create a sustainable future.

To begin with, it can be said that the literature linking religion and nature has become prominent with thought-provoking work of Lynn White Jr. in 1967: *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. In this work, he insisted that the Christian idea of domination over nature caused the long term ecological crisis in human history. Then he suggested a Franciscan interpretation of nature based on equality among creation (White Jr., 1974 [1967], p. 28-30). Richard L. Means (1967) followed him with similar arguments in his work *Why Worry about Nature?* On the other hand, Schaeffer (1992 [1970]) replied them in a counter way in *Pollution and the Death of Man*.

These first attempts focusing on nature-religion linkage later triggered new efforts. Assisi Conference held by Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)[3] in 1986 can be seen as an important institutional effort in the field. At that time, Prince Philip –the then international president- brought prominent religious leaders together to call their followers for environmental action. It is important to note that the conference was symbolically held in Assisi –the hometown of St. Francis.

At this point, it might be helpful to summarize Judeo-Christian understanding of nature through Assisi Declarations. According to these interpretations, Judaism stands for its concern and compassion for all creation. Order created by "God" out of chaos is a crucial dimension and following Adam, "man" takes the responsibility to keep this order in harmony before "God". It is said that Jewish festivals can be seen as the celebration of the cycle of seasons of nature. "Man" is accepted as the leader and custodian of nature world. In this sense, no harm principle is very crucial. It is also

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[2] Since environment is identified with a man-centered understanding of nature which is criticized from various perspectives, it is written in-between quotation marks throughout the paper.
[3] At that time, the name of the Foundation was World Wildlife Foundation.

important to note that being on the same rowboat is a metaphor used in Vayikra Rabbah (Leviticus) of Talmudic literature.

On the other hand, when Christian Call is taken into consideration, a similar interpretation of nature can be seen. Praising "God" through his creation is the basis of this interpretation. Similarly, harmony reflects "God"s power. Based on the concept of double citizenship, "man" is responsible not only in this world but also in heavens. In this respect, stewardship is a key concept. Assisi Declarations' Christian Call ends with St. Francis' "Canticle of Brother Sun" that sees all living and non-living creation from equality perspective.

These works, generally, focused on how different religious teachings might be brought together for enabling ecologically sustainable societies. In this approach, religion gains importance dependent to its influence on individual's identity formation and lifestyle. Beside this, there are some works aiming to match science and religion in order to protect nature. For example, Norgaard (2002, p. 842-846) tries to show how Christianity triggered scientific developments enabling nature protection in a more efficient way.

After these primary efforts, academic efforts got on the stage in 1990s and 2000s. Harvard, Yale and Oxford were leading institutions at that time. A conference with the theme of "religion and ecology" was held at Harvard University and then book series were published. Also, two institutions were established: *The Forum for Religion and Ecology at Yale* and Harvard University *Center for the Study of World Religions*. Later on, *the Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* and *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* were published consecutively, and also *International Society for the Study of Religion and Nature* was established in 2007.

One of the most important expressions of above mentioned efforts might be the 2008 dated collective book entitled *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. The book is divided into three sections. While the link between traditional religions and nature is analyzed in the first section, the second section focuses on ecological problems caused by population growth, genetic engineering, etc. and the pressure created by these problems on religious beliefs. And third section deals with the question of how the link between religions and earth restoration is tested (Bauman, 2008, p. 14). The book is built upon two main questions. The first question is how world religions approach to individual's relationship with nature. Second one is how belief and action can be shaped in facing "environment."

However, the attempt of answering these questions unveils a basic concern. The aim of the book is stated as finding an ecological basis for religions and so enabling them theologically vital and politically energetic (Gottlieb, 2006, p. 8). It is obvious that the emphasis of "politically energetic" is just the opposite of what secular actors are willing to do to keep religion out of politics. It is also important to note that keeping religion out of politics is just a utopia in a historical process socio-political situation interacts with religions. However, such a secular vision is still crucial. Moreover, an effort about how religion can be linked to nature is as a methodological effort while this paper aims to analyze the link from an epistemological aspect which seems to be crucial for conducting an investigation based on knowledge-power relationship.

White Jr.'s claim gains more importance if it is interpreted as a critique of domination over the knowledge of nature. Although there can be alternative explanations of Bible or appearance of it, only one explanation can reach to the status of being "universal", in other words becomes hegemonic. This is a claim in line with Regis Debray's analysis of today's global society. According to Debray, the West (or "developed" North) still holds five trumps: Unprecedented cohesion, monopoly on the universal, global business school, programming human sensibilities, and scientific innovation (Debray, 2013, p. 30-37). Among these trumps, "monopoly on the universal" has been produced and maintained with help of other trumps in the long term.

However, it can be argued that "monopoly on the universal" is not a new but historical phenomenon. While masculine Christian church and state were standing as the local "monopoly on the universal" interpretation of socio-political facts and concepts at the past; today, the area of interest and influence has increased a lot. This means the change about "monopoly on the universal" is not about form and content but scale. Therefore, the knowledge produced by masculine Christian church and state about nature had first become locally "universal" and with the spread of capitalist-militarist modernity, it has become universally "universal". Additionally, there is one more thing about this universality. Beginning from ancient times mainstream philosophical arguments were explicitly or implicitly built upon the idea of *hierarchy of souls*. Starting from Pythagoras, all knowledge about nature has been produced without questioning the concept of hierarchy of souls. According to this concept, god is located at the top of the hierarchy, and below the god, angel, man, woman, animal, other creatures, and evil are respectively located. Thus, the belief in hierarchy in a spiritual level justifies the hierarchy in the world.

This universality is also true for the knowledge about woman and gender relations. The fate of Maria Magdalena[4] is just one of the many examples produced by masculine historical authorities in order to determine knowledge about woman and gender relations. Indeed, there is not a huge distinction between the knowledge produced about nature in general terms, and woman in specific terms, from the subjugation politics perspective. Both forms of knowledge have always been produced and re-produced through totalitarian thinking, based on masculine forms of power relations.

Knowledge of Nature in Islam

After investigating the positive and negative aspects of the knowledge of nature in Judeo-Christian tradition, it is now time to look at the attempts of developing Islam-based environmental ethics. First of all, it must be stated that there is a common tendency among scholars who link nature and Islam to blame the West for the crisis of nature. These views formulate the problem as either Western (political) hegemony or Western understanding of science and technology. For these scholars, "Islam is essentially good." Qur'an and Sunnah are taken into consideration as correct sources

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[4] Maria (Mary) Magdalena is the symbol of female leadership in Christianity but this knowledge was lived down by masculine church. It is insisted that 52 Bibles -which are older than 4 Gospels- have been found in Egypt which proves her close relationship with Christ and leadership after him. For more information, Eisler, R. (2015) **Kadeh ve Kılıç** (Original Name: The Chalice and the Blade), Trns.: Orhun Burak Sözen, İstanbul: Maya Kitap.

in order to develop an ethical opposition to West. Based on this idea, the efforts can be divided into two: those in civil society and those in academia.

It is claimed by various scholars that Islam's attitude towards nature is much friendly when compared to Judeo-Christian tradition (Manzoor, 1984, p. 232-239). Therefore, it is important to test if there is such a remarkable difference between the approaches of Islam and Abrahamic tradition to the "environment". Since *shari'a* is about practice (law and ethics), it is important to distinguish Islam's theory and practice before showing the inconsistencies between discourse and practice. However, it is also important to note that any religion's theory and practice cannot be separated from each other and any new interpretation becomes part of Islam, through an interactive process based on power relations. Here, this can be labeled as *religious praxis* bringing philosophy and practice together. In this respect, Islam generally refers to peace and focuses on absence of conflict and absolute harmony. But if the relationship between individual and nature cannot be balanced; there can be no room for harmony. Therefore, it is aimed here to answer the following question: Can Islamic values alone be considered as guarantors for nature?

Among the studies focusing on the relationship between Islam and nature, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin, 2003) can be seen as a master-piece by the ones who would like to make a detailed investigation in the field. This book is also seen as one of the main reference books for this paper. Additionally, the book titled *The Touch of Midas: Science, Values and Environment in Islam and West* (Sardar, 1984) gives a good insight about Islamic environmentalism although it was written almost 30 years ago. This book has triggered some questions which helped to develop main research question.

Obviously, two prominent scholars must be stated in the field of Islamic environmental ethics. Fazlun M. Khalid can be considered not only as an important scholar (Khalid, 2002) but also as a leading activist because of being the founder of Birmingham based *Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences*. Finally, Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a prominent figure in this field and his views can be followed in his book entitled *Religion & the Order of Nature* (Nasr, 1996). This work is also helpful to understand general framework for the attempts of knowledge production through Islamic interpretations.

Khalid claims that there are two fundamental reasons behind today's ecological problems: the change in perceptions and rise of wealth-money phenomena. These two reasons, for him, are stemmed from the interplay between secular-scientific ethics and modernity, and are against Islamic principles (Khalid, 2003, p. 301). The extended version of this claim can be seen in Nasr's writing which will be discussed below. So if these phenomena are against Islamic principles, what the principles –the guarantors for nature- are.

Four major principles that can be worked for creating an environmental ethics are listed as: *tawhid* (unity and oneness of god), *khilafa and amana* (stewardship and trust), *shari'a* (the ethics of action), and *'adl and i'tidal* (justice and moderation) (Manzoor, 1984, p. 155-159). Tawhid can be interpreted as a principle of environmental ethics within the interpretation of respect to the creation of god. Khilafa and amana are identified with the human that is the most important creation.

In this respect, any human-being must be protectionist and honest as part of his "ethical being."[5] Thus, shari'a, if defined as the ethics of action, is to be worked as an enforcement mechanism for environmental ethics through *halal-haram* distinction. The main ethical idea behind shari'a is not "being good" but "doing good." Therefore, shari'a has an absolute ethical understanding. Coming from same etymological roots in Arabic Language, 'adl and i'tidal can be identified with the concepts of balance and also harmony (between god, nature and history). I'tidal can also be interpreted as a crucial dimension of environmental ethics because of being against consumption. Some scholars also pay attention to *ahiret* (belief in hereafter) as an additional principle.

An investigation about *khalq* (to calculate) will also show how it gains importance in Islamic environmental ethics. In this sense, god has some attributes such as *al-khalid* (creator), *al-wali* (governor), *malik-ul mulk* (real owner), *al-nazzaq* (supplier), *al-muquit* (nourishing) and *al-hafz* (protector) which can be considered as fundamentals of environmental ethics. Also, it is important to note that out of approximately 6600 *ayat*s, 900 *ayat*s deal more or less with the protection of water resources, 1400 *ayat*s are about economic issues, and the rest about the environment, nature and ecological problems. Moreover, it is stated that there is a hadith emphasizing equal use of water, pasture and fire (Kumar, 2003, p. 147-150).

Islamic environmental ethics has been advocated and re-produced by various scholars. And all these attempts can be summarized through Seyyed Hossein Nasr's (1996, p. 3) interpretations of religion and its relation to modern man. According to him, "the destruction of the sacred quality of nature by modern man dominated by a secularist perspective is directly responsible for this [ecological] catastrophe" and he advocates for re-sacralization of nature through religious understanding (ibid., p. 7). However, what is interesting with Nasr's position is that he also states humans causing "catastrophe" with their actions "still live within a worldview dominated by religion." This can be interpreted as a sentence weakens Nasr's argument. According to this, if people living religiously still cause ecological problems, the reason behind these problems could not be de-sacralization of nature but anything else. By indicating totalitarian claims of modern science (ibid., p. 6), Nasr is approaching to show the reason. However, what is missing in his explanation is that totalitarian claims are not unique to modern science but also mainstream pre-modern thinking which also includes religions. The problem is not about lack of religion and so the solution cannot be re-sacralization. People still have religion(s), and religion(s) still dominates their worldviews but the crisis of nature increasingly continues. Therefore, the main reason might not be science, not religion, but totalitarian thinking itself which is seen as the main characteristic of both fields.

Islam and Nature: Not Exempt from Totalitarian Thinking?

Although Abrahamic tradition –including Islam- adopts some important concepts for environmental ethics, because of being man-centered and totalitarian, they also have the potential to cause negative outcomes in nature. It is obvious that these negative outcomes increased dramatically after the developments of urbanization and

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[5] Here, the usage of "his" is consciously preferred in order to indicate that the human-being responsible for not only nature but also woman is seen as a male by religion throughout the history.

industrialization. However, the mentality behind these developments can also be related to totalitarian thinking which is closely associated with *homo-religious*. What does this mean from Political Ecology perspective?
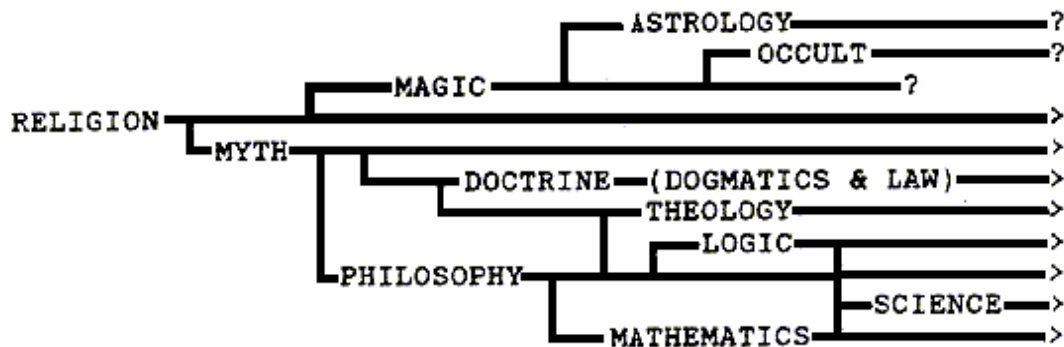

Figure 1: Evolution of human thinking (Anonymous, nd)

According to Friesian Doctrine, religion prioritizes other phenomena which produce human thought. Moreover, the basic difference between religion and philosophy is religion's "authoritative link to a mythic context." While this mythic context is not necessarily dogmatic, it is always historical. It can be said that in their evolutionary development, religion, myth, philosophy, science, etc. have their own route but also interact with each other. And because of being the oldest, religion has much power to affect the others in this interaction. This is so because it is closely related to human psychology beginning from childhood –may be mother's womb. Therefore, it is believed to determine main stream human thinking. Indeed, this form of thinking, framed as *religious,* triggers and reproduces totalitarian thinking. It must be stated that *religiosity* in this sense is a more comprehensive concept than *religion* itself. While religion indicates any system of belief, religiosity means a type of thinking in which the organization of ideas is based on *one dimensionality* through *sacralization* and *absolutization*. Then, it can be said that common sense has been produced by religious thinking. And main characteristic of the common sense is one-dimensionality through sacralization and absolutization of belief and knowledge. Here, belief and knowledge become identified and this characteristic determines mainstream human thinking on nature as well.

Under these circumstances, above mentioned type of thinking does not allow the individual to associate, e.g. *ayat*s of Qur'an about water with historical-geographical conditions in which Islam was born. It is obvious that water was essential in this equilibrium. Therefore, Islamic environmental ethics, affected by socio-economic conditions, strongly advocated water conservation at the very beginning. This means, 14 centuries ago, Islam was ecologically sound. But it has lost its ecological essence in time. Why? At once, two explanations come to mind. Firstly, socio-political and economic conditions harmed this essence. And secondly the monopoly of Christian West on the universal (knowledge about nature) also dominated Islamic environmental ethics. By taking the risk of being essentialist, it can be said that both explanations are correct. In what sense? In the course of time, early Islamic vision about nature has changed due to the factors such as urbanization, industrialization, population growth, etc. and additionally Christianity was the motor for above mentioned developments although Abrahamic tradition as a whole directed the

modern era. However, there is another factor in this process: Totalitarian thinking. Starting from monotheistic tendencies of Abrahamic tradition, totalitarian type of thinking can be traced.

Toynbee insists that there is a correlation between the rise of monotheism and the maximization of material wealth and thinking in terms of unlimited liberties with nature is about thinking in monotheistic terms. For him, this is the main cause of the crisis of nature and it can be seen in the example of Japan Christianity (Toynbee, 1974, p. 145-147). Japan Christianity because of following Western Christianity has made same mistakes during its modernization. What Toynbee explains through monotheism can also be explained through totalitarianism. This is so because monotheism –a symbol of rationalization in the history of religions- closes the door for multidimensional thinking. The lack of multidimensional thinking historically becomes part of *homo-religious*. And Abrahamic tradition can be accepted as the consolidated version of monotheism although there had been previous attempts of monotheism in history, e.g. Ancient Egypt.

Conclusion

In this scheme, there are two layers of reasoning: Firstly, "mainstream" masculine-monotheistic interpretation of Judeo-Christian tradition is based on the concept of hierarchy of souls and has the monopoly on the universal (knowledge about nature), and secondly, "mainstream" masculine-monotheistic interpretation of Islamic knowledge production (about nature) is also based on the concept of "hierarchy of souls" but does not have enough power to determine the universal.

Even the thinkers Nasr blame for the crisis of nature were not exempt from religious thinking based on hierarchy of souls. When Nietzsche attempted to insist that "god is dead," he was aiming to criticize metaphysical foundations of modern science and philosophy which could not have worked anymore. However he died but metaphysics survived in a stronger way and resulted even in fascism in Germany. This might be interpreted as a reflection of metaphysics' influence on physics.

As a conclusion, it can be said that totalitarian thinking is not unique for religion or science but can be seen as the main definitive element of human history. In this history, *homo-religious* does not "prefer" to question but believe. And beliefs are shaped by a value hierarchy based explicitly or implicitly on the idea of hierarchy of souls. For example, it is believed that water, as part of nature which is "God"s creation, is sacred and this is the absolute truth. However, this type of acceptances lead to other acceptances such as thermal power plant, nuclear power plant, etc. is good for humanity. Science or religion –as socio-political phenomena- are value independent but hierarchically valued by powerful actors. In this sense, interpretations of (male) scholars based on power relations consolidate one dimensional understanding of religions. And other attempts for creating religious environmental ethics remain marginal too.

Looking at nature based on an "us-others" distinction and considering nature as "our environment" can be seen as the outcomes of such a thinking. Therefore, struggle for nature is able to overcome struggle against nature only after totalitarian thinking can be overcome. And as Levinas put it before, political totalitarianism is based on

ontological totalitarianism (1990, p. 206), which means totalitarianism inherent to human thought but is reproduced through socio-political and economic conditions.

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