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Islamic Debates on the Environment: An Examination of Religious Rationales in Contemporary Iran

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Abstract

In recent years, Iran has problematized an issue that was previously considered less significant, yet that now draws greater attention from its religious establishment; the environment. While increasing efforts to bolster its industrial sectors, Iran has been experiencing severe environmental problems, especially those relating to the air, water, and soil. What was used to be outside of “Islamic concerns” has now become contentions of heated debates among religious leaders as well as environmental scientists. These debates are giving rise to diverse interpretations of Islam, while, at the same time, shaping and being shaped by the country’s modernization processes in which the governance of state affairs is mainly organized through scientific rationality. This paper looks at the development of a religious tradition that is unfolding alongside modern scientific knowledge. In particular, it highlights the ongoing debates concerning the environment among religious leaders and environmental experts in Iran, and examines how Islam, as a conceptual framework, is drawn upon to address these emerging issues.

Introduction

Iran's environmental problems became evident in the late 1990s when the country significantly intensified economic activities as a way to financially recover from the devastating Iran-Iraq war. Meanwhile, urbanization and population growth in city areas aggravated environmental problems relating to the air, water, and soil, in particular. Although Iran continually tackles environmental challenges, their efforts do not seem to bear fruit; on the contrary, the country recently has witnessed the escalation of environmental problems and has come to view them as a matter of national security. The Iranian government is now trying to cope with environmental crisis from differing points of view; for example, the ecological approach based on scientific studies of the environment currently serves as a main methodological framework in Iran. In addition to this approach, another distinctive framework is emerging in recent years: Islam. Religious leaders and government officials have begun to stress the importance of environmental protection from the viewpoint of Islam and are thus introducing a new measure to contain environmental challenges in the country.

How are Islamic discourses of the environment in Iran being addressed and developing in the modern politics of the environment in which science plays a prominent role? In order to explore a range of Islamic debates on the environment, this paper turns to a work of a prominent Islamic scholar as well as an exchange of views between Friday prayer leaders (religious leaders) and environmental experts that I recorded during my fieldwork in Tehran in 2016.

Islam and the Environment in Contemporary Iran

Islam provides the faithful with a conceptual framework to make sense of environmental quandaries in Iran and elsewhere (Dien 2000; Foltz 2003; Haq 2003). In recent years, many experts draw attention to Islamic principles to consider and account for the environmental problems we witness today (Omīq 2006; Tarraqī 2016; Velāyī 2009). Generally, God, for them, is the omnipresent creator and designer of the universe within which humans and other beings are hierarchically ordered. Every component that makes up the orderly universe is considered valuable, while at the same time serving as a distinctive sign of the omnipresent God. Humans, as the only beings bestowed with free-will, are said to play a special role in keeping the environment in its appropriate condition; one of their crucial roles is to retain the God-given order that adeptly sustains the environment. According to them, when this order goes awry, the system of the environment begins to malfunction, the phenomenon which we commonly call environmental crisis. To explain this disarray, the religious leaders typically point to humans' excessive greed and desire as the triggers of disruptive changes to the environment. It is in this light that, they argue, the teachings of Islam offer guiding principles to regulate and curtail human greed and thereby to properly sustain the order of the environment. In effect, the well-being of the environment is evaluated by how well its order is maintained alongside human activities.

In Iran, one of the leading religious scholars sets the tone of debates concerning Islam and the environment. Ayatollah 'Abudollāh Javādī-Āmolī is considered one of the key intellectuals of

the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and remains influential in Islamic scholarship. Trained initially in a seminary school in Amol and eventually in Qom, the largest center for Shiite scholarship in the world, he has attained prominent status as a religious scholar in a variety of fields, including that of the environment; his expertise on the environment culminated in the publication of a seminal book entitled “Islam and the Environment (*Eslām va Moḥīt-e Zīst*)” in 2009. My research suggests that this book serves as a platform for many—from religious experts and government officials to non-religious environmental activists—to address environmental problems from the viewpoint of Islam. Therefore, an examination of this book helps our understanding of the purview of environmental discourses of Islam in Iran upon which the scholarship of the environment is elaborated and expanded.

In the book, ‘Abudollāh Javādī-Āmolī highlights some qualities of Islamic precepts that would refine and enrich certain aspects of non-Islamic sciences. In particular, he argues that verses of the Qur’ān enhance non-Islamic scholarship. All sciences, he claims, are perceived through human wisdom which itself is bestowed by God. Therefore, all sciences, whether they be natural sciences or other kinds, are religiously oriented. For him, all end results of reason and statement are religious. He further remarks that long-held opinions (*nezārat*) of Imams are also invaluable sources of knowledge (Javādī-Āmolī 2009: 114-115). This particular understanding is reflected in the ways he conceptualizes an Islamic approach to environmental problems in the book; he usually provides Quranic verses or hadith of Imams as a conceptual tool to confront modern problems.

One of the book’s chapters is devoted to the discussion of spiritual acts that would benefit the environment, especially the proper commitment to one’s occupation (*kār*). He provides rationales of why moral forces can be exerted through such commitment. Ayatollah Javādī-Āmolī (2009) argues that, because one’s occupation and one’s character are correlated with each other, committing to a “suitable occupation” is of particular importance in character building: “Those who are going after money cannot choose a suitable job for themselves. They not only hurt themselves but also tarnish their character at the same time” (262). In contrast, engaging in honorable, virtuous jobs can generate spirituality and morality inside the workers, enabling them to disentangle the complexity that restrains society, he explains. He attributes his rationale to the following commentary by the sixth Shiite Imam: “God loves glorious (*shokūhmand*) and excellent (‘*ālī*) jobs, while he does not favor lowly and easy jobs.” To further advance his point, he frames his argument within a tradition of Muslim families, which is still widely cherished in Iran, wherein the father is responsible for selecting suitable occupations for his children. Thus, Ayatollah Javādī-Āmolī looks at the commitment to a proper occupation as a key practice not only to build one’s character but also to create a healthy environment in which community members are able to live by the principles of spirituality and morality, not by those of greed. Furthermore, he draws on commentary of an Imam to demonstrate some contributions of Islamic teaching to resolving environmental problems.

It is interesting to note that, in his argument, the exegetical authorities do not offer technical explanations for environmental sciences *per se*. Rather, he offers a solution based on Islamic prin-

ciples that focuses on the moral force of individuals, which is different in kind from the solutions offered by environmental sciences. Yet, Ayatollah Javādī-Āmolī does not object to the knowledge made available through environmental sciences: “Although environmental sciences are concerned with the natural sciences, their effectiveness in improving human ways of life and health has its background in the human sciences and religious orientations” (Javādī-Āmolī 2009: 127). What he authorizes is the interpretation of religious sources against a scholarly milieu in which ecological sciences have become prominent for dissecting environmental problems. Thus, according to his understanding, Islam and ecological sciences do not operate independently from each other.

Exchange of Views: Friday Prayer Leaders and Environmental Experts

I observed during my fieldwork that Islamic discourses of the environment are illuminated through the dialogues between those who specialize in Islam and those who specialize in environmental sciences. In order to look at how Islamic discourses are made pertinent to non-Islamic environmental schemes, namely those of ecological science, the paper now turns to an exchange of views between government officials of science and Islamic leaders that I encountered during my fieldwork. I had the opportunity to attend a meeting in March of 2016 where Friday prayer leaders and environmental experts discussed ways to mitigate environmental problems. The Friday prayer leaders who were present deliver sermons every Friday in nearby mosques and are thereby fashioning religious orientations of the faithful (Adelkhah 2000). The environmental experts in the meeting were trained in scientific disciplines in Ph.D. programs, distinctively different programs from those at seminary schools. Examining the debate among these officials helps us see how officials of Islam are accommodating their views to the discussion of environmental problems with the scientific (i.e., environmental) experts, an encounter increasingly becoming urgent in Iran (Najmabadi 2014; Tappan 2015).

One of the foremost concerns addressed by the environmental experts in the meeting was technical matters; for example, the environmental experts spent a great amount of time discussing environmental justice (*‘edālat-e zīst-i moḥītī*), sustainable development (*towse‘eh-‘e pāydar*), and the effects of greenhouse gas (*gāzhā-ye golkhān‘eh*). Their concerns reflected core concepts of environmental sciences through which they explore the workings of “the environment” as an object of scientific studies. In light of these themes, one of the participants in the meeting commented that “unless we meet proper conditions for sustainable programs, we will not be able to control the problems of global warming, polar ice melting, land lost to sea level rise, and, moreover, world security.” He then stated that the preservation, restoration, and sustainable development of natural resources have been central tasks at the DOE. Comments like this highlight the nature of discussion initiated by DOE environmental experts; that is, the environment is a material object that can be properly maintained with appropriate management.

In the following Q&A session, Friday prayer leaders had opportunities to express their concerns, to ask questions, or simply to have dialogues with the environmental experts. I noticed that,

they focused their attention on practical issues of the environment rather than on technical ones. Many of their comments were related to Islam in one way or another; for example, some emphasized the importance of tree preservation from an Islamic perspective, while another raised the issue of stray dogs in town, an animal considered unclean in Islamic traditions.

What is interesting is that they did not address technical aspects of environmental problems *per se*, but they spoke about the attitudes of religious faith with which to combat them. In the meeting, Friday prayer leaders often expressed their concerns by referencing anecdotes of revered religious leaders. One of them, for example, spoke about the general attitude toward natural resources that Iranians ought to have: “Even in times of war, the Prophet (may peace be upon him) encouraged his followers not to pollute wells, not to cut trees, and not to start fire in the field. Why can we not do the same now, in a time of peace?” Quoting a verse of the Qur’ān “It is God who created the heaven and the earth” (32: 4), another Friday prayer leader pointed out that “as long as people see the sky, the land, and in-between as being separate from each other, we will not be able to solve environmental problems.” Friday prayer leaders in the meeting authorized religious interpretations of sacred sources to agree with and accommodate environmental concerns problematized in environmental sciences. In other words, religious leaders defer technical matters of the environment to DOE officials (i.e., scientists); while at the same time, using religious rationales to discuss environmental concerns (Stolz 2018).

Although environmental experts seemingly frame environmental debates through the language of modern science, the relation of authority over environmental knowledge between environmental experts and Friday prayer leaders is not completely asymmetrical. During the discussion, a DOE official addressed some particular ways in which Islamic principles are exercised to push forward their environmental agenda, stating that “the Islamic principle of ‘enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil’ in the realm of the environment is a key tool to bring forth the desired outcomes of our efforts.” According to Izutsu (2002), the term “what is good” refers to the source of rightness that lies in the will of God, whereas “what is evil” means any acts that would conflict with God’s commandments (213-221). With reference to God, the DOE official sees the actions of individuals as an ultimate cause of environmental conditions. Furthermore, it is Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khāmene’ī, who is granted the authority to influence the ways in which environmental policies are laid out and then implemented in the country. In this meeting, indeed, both environmental experts and Friday prayer leaders were invited to discuss Ayatollah Khāmene’ī’s religious interpretations of existing environmental problems in Iran. Thus, Islam, to some degree, also shapes the parameters of environmental debates among environmental experts. The meeting between Friday prayer leaders and environmental experts showcases the interplay of Islam in environmental debates in Iran.

Concluding Remarks

This paper looked at how Islam has entered the debates concerning environmental problems in Iran and introduced some parameters of rationales employed by prominent religious leaders as

well as environmental experts in the country. By showing some examples of Islamic debates in the realm of the environment, it attempted to demonstrate how traditions of Islam have been developing through the debates of the environment at a particular time and place. This paper was not intended to cover a full-range of what Islamic discourses of the environment might look like. It rather attempted to argue that a corpus of knowledge disseminated through the religious leaders crucially both reflects and is reflected by the relations of authorities of Islam and science. My argument is that the course of environmental discourses of Islam is contingent upon how the environment is problematized, debated, and instituted at a given time and place.

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