

# Interplay of Theology in Environmental Sustainability towards Disaster Risk Reduction

By

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**Abstract:** The environmental predicament is now encompassing the entire universe at fast pace and nearing the total destruction. Bizarrely enough, destruction of the already scanty quality of nature by modern humanbeings is further subjugated in the perspective of secularism, yet huge population of the human species, is considered to play havoc upon the natural environment, directly or indirectly. That's why the role of religion needs to be studied in the context of the existing environmental crisis between man and the nature. Besides this, any dialogue on the religions and the orders of nature, which is now engrossed in curing the wounds of our planet and also ameliorating the existing environmental crisis, may become ardent on a global scale because each country and nation paves the way for self-interest. Unfortunately, we feel proud to have the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but not the green syrup for the survivability of our motherland upon which we feed and live.

Although there exists a well-known link between disaster reduction and environmental management; ISDR (2004), yet the research activity and policy formulation needs to be undertaken by incorporating a theological framework in environmental tools for disaster reduction for wide application by the practitioners of disasters and environmental management.

Subject study focuses on a design to investigate the importance of religious norms and values and its subsequent application on the management of adverse environmental conditions initiating the disasters, though the religions were already there and studied but not applied and practiced in true sense at the realm of disasters / environmental management.

**Keywords:** Theology, Religions, Humanbeings, Environment, Sustainability, Disaster Risk Reduction.



## 1. Introduction

The other day, while looking at the beautiful wrist watch, thoughts went past behind many curtains of nature while reminding about its maker. In a classic sense, from the configuration of an atom to the placement of trillions of solar systems among billions of the galaxies forming complex mechanism of universe, everything in motion in an artistic fashion, tells us about their sole creator; Allah Almighty, The God. Why He created everything and why He created mankind? For, He desired to be known by the logic and wisdom; He blessed us but not the other creatures. So was created the earth as a means to make us live and explore. He made all the arrangements, we

needed to live, breath, eat, drink and reproduce. Life and death were created to strike a perfect balance in the defined principles of nature with absolute justice. Amongst us, few were chosen as messengers of guidance to the right path. For this, the desire to worship was custom built. This desire to know, obey and worship God through the nature is "Theology" and all those arrangements possessing the essentials of life is the "Environment" with finely attuned ecosystems, the dissociation of which disturbs the natural balance leading to devastation and disasters.

Degradation of environment alters humanity's resource base thereby generating vulnerabilities affecting the natural processes. Principles of nature

compose environment, remain constant and do not change. Any alteration of natural environment affects human vulnerability. Decomposing the environment will increase the vulnerability, lessen the resilience and challenge the traditional coping mechanisms. While sustaining the environment shall attain natural balance to stay away from the exacerbated impacts of natural hazards. The lynch pin around which disasters and environment are interwoven is the "Theology" because it testifies the codes of ethic defined by the religion for the survivability of mankind on the planet earth through divine guidance and obedience of God. Practicing "Theology" is the essence of environmental sustainability and reducing the disaster risks while its discourse shall invite disasters here in and here after. That's why, we the human beings are held accountable for our actions, good or bad but none else among the creatures.

This paper dilates upon the theological aspects as means of environmental sustainability towards reducing the disaster risks.

## 1.2. Problem Statement

There is a paradox that the disasters occur with or without admonition, so blaming anyone else is useless as these just happen. This statement contradicts the principles of nature qualifying that the reason(s) remain, on one pretext or the other for causing the disasters to happen. Are there the reasons related to environmental degradation underlying which; are all those vulnerabilities caused by the homosapiens? Anthropogenic disasters are understandably caused by the human beings as many believe so. What about the natural disasters? Are these solely the act of God; or due to the annoyance resulting from violating the principles of theology laid exactly on the principles of nature? Who all are responsible to it? Who all make the environment unsustainable? Who is to be held accountable, the nature of God or we the slayers of environment?

## 1.3. Objectives of the Study

This study focuses at the:-

- i. Understanding theology, environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction.
- ii. Theological aspects of environment among different religions.
- iii. Role of theology in ensuring environmental sustainability and disaster risk reduction.

## 1.4. Significance of the Study

World population is around 7.095 Billion [1] out of which 90.34 % are the believers and follow different religious theologies while remaining 9.66 % are non believers of Oneness of God; [2] but still follow the ethics of human values on this globe. Details are referred on the bar chart 1.4.1 below.



**Table 1.4.1: World Demography of Religions**

Apropos religious demographics in view, it is envisaged that 90% of the world's population can reduce disaster risks to the minimum provided theological set of environmental sustainability initiatives are upheld only. Remaining 10% would take on an automatic follow of ethical values. Adding on to the allied tangible / intangible preparedness and mitigation measures; shall further minimize the disaster risks to negligible level.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Environmental Sustainability: It

is defined as "meeting the resources and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them, and more specifically, as a condition of balance, resilience and interconnectedness that allows human society to satisfy its needs while neither exceeding the capacity of its supporting ecosystems to continue to regenerate the services

necessary to meet those needs nor by our actions diminishing biological diversity" [3].

## **2.2. Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR):**

These measures are designed and adopted to protect the assets of individuals and communities as well as their livelihoods from the adverse impacts of hazards; [4]. It is done through mitigation, preparedness and advocacy efforts. Mitigation measures aim at reducing the intensity, impact, frequency and scale of hazards; [5]. Preparedness is vast and long term subject to strengthen the capacity of communities to withstand, respond to and recover from hazards. When capacity of the communities is exceeded, it then implements the governments and general partners concerns to establish appropriate and speedy interventions; [6]. Advocacy refers to the auspiciously influencing the issues which are related to environment, economy, politics and the society of human-beings as a whole, attributing towards the causes and extent of various hazards; [7].

## **2.3. Disasters & The Religion:**

In the study preview of catastrophic events, it is believed that the men, with guilt and a sinful attitude are never spared by the extremes of nature; Chester and Duncan et;al (1998, 2005). This concept attached the defeatist and passive attitudes of people towards the perception of risk among the traditional societies before the industrial revolution of 19th century; Burtenet'al (1993). However, this concept further took the turn in the shape of religious perspective e.g. Christianity, when stirring of Mount Lamington (Papua New Guinea) was seen in 1951 ; Keesing (1952) and similarly the Islamic and Buddhist mythologies in case of Tsunami 2004 at Sri Lanka and Indonesia ; Levy et;al (2009). Although, there is diversity in the religious beliefs and values across different countries of the world, yet the paradigm of vulnerability gains significant importance in terms of theological values vis a vis natural hazards and disasters e.g. monitoring of a volcano at Javanese and Yogyakarta is linked with social and political events on the island. Similarly, the devastation of Pakistan's Earthquake (2005) at Balakot city as per

local religious scholars was attributed to non-adherence of Islamic & socio-cultural values. In a broader sense, religions can never be isolated from socio-economic and geopolitical compulsions in making the peoples' vulnerability with regards to natural hazards. In other case, religion also amalgamates the structural causes of vulnerability e.g. Hindus discrimination of Muslim marginalized groups in granting access to their livelihood in Indian Occupied Kashmir in a Hindu dominant society. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the parity among the irregular number of deaths at the time of poor harvest and famine was higher where Hindu communities were in minority and faced the greater difficulties due to lack of access to the livelihoods as compared to the Muslim communities; Hartman & Boyce (1983). Now, in such cases, the vulnerability paradigm was not due to the sinfulness of Hindus or Muslims, rather due to discrimination and unfair distribution of power and wealth. Another view point is that speedy recovery was checked in the face of religious beliefs e.g. in Aceh, the Muslim majority province of Indonesia, Tsunami 2004 took away every saving of people in terms gold jewelry and other physical moveable properties related to dowry etc because they did not keep the interest based bank accounts being Haram (forbidden) in Quoran; Gailardet'al (2008).

## **2.4 Religion & The Environment:**

In the recent past, disaster management experts have talked about the critical role of religion in the ecosystem management e.g. Taylor et;al recognized the fact that earth was in danger from the human activities and changes were ought to be made to sustain life. Berry et'al convene that it's the "human carelessness and greed" which has caused the serious environmental problems i.e. the climate change, global warming, ozone depletion, population explosion, scarce resources, water shortage, economic crises, extreme poverty and hunger etc. In this backdrop, last but not the least, theology is seen as the set of those common ideals and stronger beliefs that we the human beings may start solving our environmental problems with a view to get rid of devastating disaster risks. The link between environment and the religion is

actually the human attitude as it may be one of the chief reasons of environmental crisis;[8]. Some people, who do not regard nature as pivotal point, suffer attitudinal vulnerability. This attitude needs to be changed because this planet earth needs to be respected so as to preserve it for the generations to come instead of exploiting it for the present requirements.

### 3. Study Design and Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature using the methodology of different types of interviews and the focus group discussions. Interview types included witting, unwitting, telephonic and one on one interviews with the respondents belonging to Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikhs and other communities to seek answers to various questions; how their theological belief in God and nature had helped to recover from past disasters e.g. Pakistan floods 2010, also dilating; how they further see their theological support in achieving the environmental sustainability towards reducing the disaster risks. A random sampling method of two hundred respondents had been taken from various areas of Peshawar, Pabbi, Nowshera, Charsadda, Mardan, Akora Khattak, Kamra and Attock, representing all age groups, both men and women from teenage to forties and seventies, educated and uneducated who had been subjected to the disasters trauma of floods, earthquake and epidemics etc. The questionnaire; [9], with little modifications, was adopted from the work of Aimie L.B. Hope & Christopher R. Jones; (2014). Out of two hundred respondents, only one hundred eighty four expressed their willingness to talk about and discuss regarding their experiences and theological beliefs to ensure environmental sustainability in order to help reduce the disaster risks. The response rate was 92 percent.

### 4. Discussion on Findings & Summary of Results

#### 4.1. Interconnectivity of Environmental Sustainability & DRR

4.1.1. In the milieu of its definition, Environmental Sustainability is the sum total of human sustainability, societal sustainability and economical sustainability while remaining within bounds of ecosystem management and biodiversity. It also stresses the primary importance that the Environmental Sustainability provides an assurance to the effective DRR at the individual, societal, community and governmental level. Remaining all other structural / non structural interventions is of subsidiary and secondary nature.

4.1.2. Advocacy concerns of DRR provide for the interconnectivity of DRR with environmental issues. Mere attaining the environmental sustainability would achieve comprehensive DRR.

#### 4.2. Role of Theology

4.2.1. Religions too have proved to be effective among other coping strategies where many Hindus, Muslims and Christians referring to smaller hazard risks and troubles as a sign of being nearer to God for safety against highly damaging disasters.

4.2.2. At the time of suffering and chaos, prayers before Allah Almighty/God have been found to be very effective and instrumental in coping up with such situations morally, mentally and socially. Mitchell ; (2003) and Nolan; (1972) too believe that prayers ward off disaster events by conciliatory divinity.

4.2.3. Demonstrating the religious beliefs and values and remembering the sufferings of the disasters too have helped in coping up with their adverse effects, rapid recovery and in time preparedness through relentless efforts and toils of the community. Rebuilding of religious / worship places had been with the utmost speed. This derived immense motivation while rebuilding God's home even before constructing their own shelters.

4.2.4. Aristocratic view holds that religious rituals pose an immense and plenty of responsibility for up taking the quick remedy of environmental problems on account of moral and social bindings as well as our rights towards the divine obedience.

4.2.5. As long as the planet earth exists, the environment will also exist and so the religions would also persists because these are of tremendous value to us. Such values may either be instrumental, intrinsic, or both.

4.2.6. Integral role of religions is that these link people's emotions with natural world, permeating them with knowledge and such moral standards that produce attitudinal change thus making them more caring for themselves, their homes, the environment and their community..

### 4.3. Ideology of Contemporary Religions

4.3.1. Islam and Christianity are both monotheistic religions because the followers believe in oneness of God duly described in their respective holy books; Quoran and Bible. Both religions also believe in "Vice Regency" (Caliphate) as well as "Environmental Stewardship." Adding to Islam and Christianity, Orientalists believe and accept that human-beings are part of nature but surely not apart from it. This concept actually explains the "Interconnected-ness of Human-beings and Nature"; meaning thereby, they are not in actual control of nature, rather fiddle being its integral part. Comparative concept of "Balancing of Nature" is very important for us to understand along with the concept of "Yin Yang" i.e. duality. Human beings alter the nature by their activities and disturb its balance thus causing environmental loss leading to disasters, where as "Yin-Yang" provides the concept of duality while deriving environmental thinking out of all the laws of nature and the humanity.

4.3.2. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism strongly believe that human-beings and the nature are interrelated in such a way that these cannot be separated from each other. "Taoism" and the "Law of Karma" (in Buddhism/Hinduism) teach the human being to

behave accordingly in natural balance. It must be remembered that any sort of misbehaving may lead to natural disasters.

4.3.3. Marxism extracts political thinking from environment and stresses the importance of rational scientific behavior for the control of nature and society. All other historical findings, philosophical thinking and religious doctrines offer very interesting metaphysical concepts about environment presenting value added theoretical and ethical views, which must be reflected sincerely.

**4.4. Motivational Psychotherapy:** Religious motivation e.g. "Allah is Great", "Allah is Kind", "All ownership is to Allah", "Allah's Will is eternal" and "All praise be The Almighty" had been the common comment to all the distressful questions and the feelings. Returning the religious values and norms had been biggest source of motivational psychotherapy and is the easiest healer in environmental management as well as disasters management.

### Conclusion

There is no question of non acceptance of environmental crisis which is recognized throughout the world and agreed upon by all the major religions. Then what's' next? How do we, the human beings must proceed for thinking, creating and implementing a solution? Yes; there is one in the modern era of science, technology and awareness where we also know the religious norms and moral standards. When there is no ignorance then why to wait for and add into destruction. Do we know that the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide in 1958 was 350 ppm (parts per million), in Feb 2013: 96.80 ppm, Feb 2014:397.91 and now in Apr 2015, it is 401.75 ppm increasing at the rate of 0.02 % annually as against the safety limits of 350 ppm;[10]. We need to put in place environmental regulation and management mechanisms through combining our knowledge, education and awareness about science and religion honestly with dedication and motivation to reduce the disaster risks while mitigating the harmful / negative consequences of environmental degradation thus bring back the safety parameters.



Why science and religion because these are most powerful sources today to handle not only the environmental issues in terms of DRR but also to attain the moral and ethical standards of human personnel as well as the social conduct and behavior which are depleting fast. If one cannot feel the responsibility to correct him(er)self then, how can he/she correct the society and environment. First we need to prevent our internal moral degradation through incorporation the religious norms and ethical codes of conduct then in the society, community and the environment as a whole.

### Recommendations

- i. In the backdrop of this research / study as a whole and the discussion above, few of the following pertinent recommendations with inbuilt suggestions are proffered:-
- ii. Carryout non-structural measures by organizing educational and awareness programs at all tiers of the society. Universities be tasked to offer courses in religion and the environment. Various conferences and workshops may also be organized at global level.
- iii. While carrying out the vulnerability and capacity assessment of the vulnerable communities, their psychosocial and attitudinal vulnerabilities must also be highlighted and accordingly treated with true letter and spirit. Ensure psychosocial rehabilitation of the individuals and the community through the revival of various religious, social and cultural norms / traditions with moral uplift so that cross sectional responsibility is emerged to tackle the environmental issues. This will also help in bringing the social cohesion and normality among the global nations to preserve the geophysical, metaphysical and intra/inter human subsystems of ecology.

- iv. Never try to hijack the theological and emotional feelings of the all those who had long been subjects of various disasters. Always corroborate with the community to understand, estimate and repair the damage done to the environment.
- v. Since past few decades, the ecology has become more individualistic and systems based, therefore loss of moral and social awareness be salvaged first by creating an international dialogue on the environment among all the religious experts on a global scale. This is very crucial because the attitudes and values shaping people's concepts towards nature primarily emerge from religious worldviews and ethical standards. These moral value systems and the religions are quite obligatory in mobilizing the sensibility of the communities and also the global nations towards preserving the environment for future generations. Information and examples set by theology may adore a positive persuasion on how individuals would approach the environment and all its related issues.

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