

Environmental Purity and Cleanliness: Applications and Practices in the Early Muslim Society

Tarik M. Al-Soliman, Ph. D.,
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5915/20-2-13268>

Abstract

Islamic jurisprudence had laid the foundation for the cleanliness and hygiene of the human environment through a network of rulings and specifications. The concept of "purity" was introduced to encompass the conditions of cleanliness and hygiene representing the pre-requisites for religious and biological activities. Through the practices and applications of the "Muhtasib", those rulings and specifications were expanded and put to practice. This paper will attempt to illustrate how those rulings and practices have contributed to, and protected, public health long time before other cultures. Also, the modern contribution of such rulings and practices towards environmental health needs and regulations will be explored.

Key Words: Purity, cleanliness, hygiene, environment, muhtasib.

Based upon the detailed account of rulings and specifications describing the fit or worthiness of major elements of the environment from the Islamic point of view¹, practices and applications were developed by the early Muslim community. Practices and applications have started and were put to work with the advent of the "Muhtasib". The muhtasib represented an important personality assuming an executive position. His duty was to develop and enforce practices and applications necessary to implement the rulings set by jurists. In addition to looking after the cleanliness and hygiene of the public environment as well as foods and drinks sold in the market, the muhtasib was charged with observing public behavior and regulating trade and commercial activities according to Islamic moral codes and standards.

The aim of this paper is to identify those Islamic practices and applications pertinent to public environments such as markets, streets, and other common spaces. Next, those practices and applications will be compared with those of the modern era, the latter constitute the discipline of Public Health.

The major features of the Islamic concept of environmental cleanliness and hygiene will be described. Also, areas of precedence over other cultures in

the Middle Ages through the 19th century will be highlighted. Finally, the Islamic concept will be presented as an alternate model for assessing, interpreting, and determining environmental health needs and regulations in the modern time.

Cleanliness and purity of streets and markets

The muhtasib used to ban potential roads' and markets' pollutants from entering the town. Such pollutants included fire-wood, manure, and straw. These had to be unloaded outside the town. Also, he used to ask shopkeepers and residents not to throw their trash into the streets and to maintain the streets bordering their properties clean.² They were even requested to fill in and fix street pits that could hold water and mud.³ A jurist who lived in the tenth century AD, wrote a book entitled "The Laws of Market", in which he stated the need to ask market residents to clean up the accumulating mud if it was determined that shoppers and goods will be hurt.⁴

At nearly the same time in Europe, although major cities used to have their street sewers, there was always a shortage of drainage ditches for the streams of water to empty into. Filth used to find its way constantly into the muddy streets.⁵ Also, laws and ordinances were not very effective to that effect.

"Cities such as Troyes (France) legislate to make householders and shopkeepers clean the streets in front of their houses, and to forbid emptying waste water into the streets. But such ordinances are only half effective"⁶.

"While in the sixteenth century it was an offense in many English towns to throw rubbish into the streets,

*From the College of Architecture and Planning,
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.*

*Reprint requests: Tarik M. Al-Soliman, Ph. D.
College of Architecture and Planning, King Saud University
P.O. Box 57448, Riyadh 11574, Saudi Arabia*

in these early industrial towns this was the regular method of disposal".⁷

In another practice, the muhtasib prevented butchers from slaughtering except in special areas. The waste represented by blood, skins, and other offals had to be removed outside the market.³ Joseph Gies described the butchers' quarters in the medieval city by saying: "slaughtering is performed on the spot, and blood dries in the sun amid piles of offal and swarms of flies".⁶

The city inspector of health of New York city in 1842, advocated the removal of slaughterhouses from built-up parts of the town, and the necessity for clean streets.⁸

Human excrements

The Islamic stand is very clear when it comes to human excrement. A Muslim is forbidden from utilizing water polluted by excrement until it gets purified by one of the means stipulated¹. Prior to that, a Muslim is commanded by the Prophet not to void excrement in Muslims' roads or shades, and not to urinate in still water.⁹ The rulings of the muhtasib indicate that neighbors could forbid any of them from digging a gutter in the street even if it is covered.¹⁰ In contrast, in the nineteenth Century, human wastes – particularly feces and urine – were still not considered as menaces to public health.¹¹ In 1892, Chadwick, whose work is described as the foundation of sanitary science in England, concluded that the abject misery of the working people was due in great part to the unsanitary environment in which they dwelt. In that period of scientific thought, disease was believed to be due to miasmata and to bad odors of any and all types.¹² Another report stated that despite attempts to provide for the general sanitation of the city of Boston under official auspices, the relation of the basic factors in environmental sanitation to prevention of illness was poorly understood.¹³

The role of the muhtasib has gone beyond the mere prevention of human excrement from appearing in the environment. Other conditions conducive to pollution spreading were also prevented. The muhtasib ordered the projected roof gutters to be removed in winter and replaced by vertical stucco recesses along the exterior walls. Also, people were asked to divert any waste (including that which is not dirty) water streaming to the street, to special pits inside their houses in summer.¹⁴

Also keepers of public bathhouses were requested to wipe and wash their facilities each day with fresh water. Workers in charge of turning on the upper tanks' faucets, were ordered to wash their feet before going up lest they carry polluted waste water. Sick and leper people were prevented from entering bathhouses.¹⁵

In 1848, a report on general sanitation in the

United States, stated that there was no concept of transmission of infection through water and no realization that food might be contaminated with infectious agents through its handling by persons who were ill with disease. There was no realization that human excreta might contain specific agents of infection.¹⁶

In addition to the previous applications and practices developed by the Muslim society in so far as the role of water and food in pollution are concerned, the following precedents were recorded:

1. The leper was forbidden from fetching water or performing ablution with healthy people. Others should carry water to him in his own pots. Such practice came as a direct application of the Prophet's Hadith stating:

"The ill may not mix with the healthy. The healthy can move any where he wishes."¹⁷

2. The muhtasib forbade garbage collectors from touching breads or foods in the market until they wash their hands. Also they were not allowed to touch water-carrier pots.¹⁸

3. The blind and diseased were forbidden from selling oil, vinegar, or other liquid foods.¹⁹ In the case of the blind, it looks like the rationale behind stopping him from selling liquids is his inability to see falling objects in the liquid.

Cleanliness and purity of the air

Historical records tell us that the Muslim society has recognized the problem of air pollution and did take some measures to stop it. It has been reported that the jurist Abū Yūsuf has ruled that neighbors have the right to stop a neighbor from converting his home into a bathhouse and annoying his neighbors by its smoke, unless theirs are as equal.¹⁹

Al-Shaizārī mentioned that bakeries should raise their roofs, have their doors open and provide their roofs with adequate exhaust opening to allow smoke out and not annoy people.²⁰ Dyers were not allowed to build their ovens along the roads for the same reason. Furthermore, they were not allowed to hang their dyed clothes along the roads since they might drip on passersby.²¹ The great Caliph, 'Umar Ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was reported to have demolished a blacksmith's shop and moved it to another location since it represented an annoying source of pollution.²²

The realization of air pollution has gone further beyond smoke to include odors and bad smells. It has been reported that the muhtasib should assign seafood shops within the market in such a way that they would not annoy shoppers.²³

Cleanliness of foods and drinks

Brockington, professor of social and preventive medicine, described the environment in his book "The Health of the Community", as:

"The conditions which surround a man from infancy to old age, the forces of nature, climate, cold and heat, summer and winter, his house, his workshop, the human society in which he moves, his social, economic and domestic circumstances, his food and drink, his habits, the strains and stresses of his life, the parasites and poisons, the agents of infection - all these from the environment".²⁴

The above description directs our attention to the importance of food and drink in the human environment. In addition to the previous precedents concerning forbidding the blind, diseased, leper, or garbage collectors from coming into direct contact with food and drink, the muhtasib has taken additional measures which guaranteed his direct intervention in some cases in order to protect food and drink from being contaminated or adulterated, even when the seller is in full health.

Concerning food and drink, the muhtasib's concerns covered additional aspects, the most important of which are: price, weight, cleanliness, and ingredients. As for price, the muhtasib's main concerns were to eliminate monopoly and speculation.²⁵ As for weight, he was too much involved in observing, testing, and setting scales and measures used in an elaborate way²⁶, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

When it comes to cleanliness and ingredients, the following is an example of a detailed description put by the muhtasib for what the bakery industry should look like:

"The muhtasib writes in his record the names of all bakers and their whereabouts. He should direct them to maintain their water, dough, kneading troughs, and other pots clean and covered. The baker should not knead with his feet, knees, or elbows. He should also put on an overall garment on his body with no sleeves in order to prevent his sweat from dripping into the dough. He should also put on a mask to protect in case of sneezing, or spitting while talking. His hair and forehead should be covered with a cap. The arms' hair should be shaved. If the baker kneads during daytime, another person should stand next to him to drive away flies".

"The muhtasib should see to it that the flour used is finely sifted. Also he should observe any bread adulteration with herbs, or chick-peas and rice which make bread heavier and puffed. Bread should not be baked until it is fermented since unleavened bread is both heavy in weight and in the stomach. Bread should not be taken out of the oven until it is well baked without burning".²⁷

In addition to the above, another record describes the types of flour, water amount, ingredients, sprayed spices, loaf sizes, and the specification of bread-seller. Also the record describes the types of

trades which should or should not be close to the bread shop. Among the latter are sea-food shops and cupping shops²⁸. Bakeries are further stipulated to be in safe areas, thus avoiding ground floors of homes.²⁹

Milk shops are found to have similar account in terms of their products, their ingredients, adulteration, pots used...etc. Historical records give us similar descriptions for other trades such as butchers, cooks, pharmacists, blacksmiths, grain shops, confectioners, grocers, tailors, shoemakers, roasters, money exchangers...etc.

The previous practices took place long time before the nineteenth Century where a great deal of fraud was practiced in the food industry in the West. Chalk and water were added to milk, apples and potatoes were "deaconed", sand was added to corn meal, and chalk was added to flour. All these procedures were considered shrewd but more or less legitimate business practices, and certainly were of no concern to the health department.³⁰

It can be said that "The Food and Drugs Act, 1955" in Britain represented a crucial step for efforts taken in that regard. Adulteration was defined as "The addition or extraction of anything from food which serves to render it injurious to health, or to affect injuriously its nature, substance, or quality."³¹

The Food and Drugs Act, 1955, provided for the appointment of a "Food Hygiene Advisory Council". In 1960, "The Food Hygiene Regulations" issued by the council, defined in detail the requirements for food handlers, food premises and food stores.³² The muhtasib's practices, rules, and definitions, although primitive and simple, served to a great extent the purpose of the previous Act's terms, and its subsequent requirements. Brockington mentioned that Arabia organized food hygiene, employing the first sanitary inspectors.³³

Environmental cleanliness and health in the modern time

In a recent publication³⁴, environmental health was defined as follows:

"Refers to characteristics of environmental conditions which affect the quality of health. Environmental health is that aspect of public health that is concerned with those forms of life, substances, forces, and conditions in the surroundings of man that may exert an influence on human health and well-being".³⁴

The scientific leaps achieved by humanity have undoubtedly contributed to unraveling the various characteristics mentioned above and which have emphasized the importance of environmental health as one of the main disciplines of "Public Health". However, those leaps lose their importance when they are not accompanied by appropriate enforcement for their desirable applications. Also, human accep-

tance for the codes and regulations supporting those applications, is very vital. Such acceptance is usually embodied within the value system for individuals and groups of the society.

In the modern time, each society has its own share of codes regulating its relationship with the environment. At the global level is the "Declaration of Principles" which was developed by the United Nations Conference on the Environment at Stockholm (1972). This³⁵ stated a set of environmental rights which include:

1. Clean air and water
2. Healthy living space
3. Essentials of life (food, clothing, and shelter)

Despite the codes and regulations aimed at supporting environmental rights, the problem lies in the difficulty of reaching an acceptable formula of human adoption for those codes within the circle of human convictions, beliefs, and values. Added to that is the need to have a cohesive and integrated social structure. Lack of such cohesiveness and integration in the modern time has led to the aggravation of the environmental crises since the majority do not get concerned unless they are directly affected by the crisis.³⁶

The comprehensiveness of the Islamic legislations as they relate to cleanliness was adopted in full by Muslims due to the non-secular orientation of their way of life. The social cohesiveness and integration between members of the society, which are religious determinants, fostered a further enrichment and continuity for the concepts and ideals of purity. The Muslim society was, therefore, more accepting and responsive to environmental requirements as derived by jurists' interpretations or scientific works. Among the latter come the works of Rhazes (860-932 A.D.) and Avicenna (11th century A.D.). The latter has recognized water-borne spread.³⁷

It should be mentioned here, that the need for a universal value system of a comprehensive approach for the study of environmental health has been discussed.³⁸ He concluded that the attempt to put together in a comprehensive form a workable approach to resolving present and future impacts of man's growth and development has not yet been initiated.³⁸

When considering the comprehensive Islamic perception carried by its teachings and practices towards the various human and physical aspects of life, in addition to the supporting models of implementation and execution, we realize how much a system has effectively fulfilled the needs of its followers for the last fourteen centuries. It might be safe to say that such a system may contribute immensely towards the realization of a universal value system in many ways. It would be the duty of researchers in different disciplines to look for those ways.

Comment

The Islamic stand for environmental cleanliness can be described as a single component in a total conception of cleanliness and purity which includes all items of the environment including man himself. Such conception was based on Qur'an and Sunnah as it is the case with all facets of Muslims' life. However, adherence to those sources did not mean precluding or inhibiting the movement for research and investigation undertaken by Muslims, leading to their documented interpretations and applications related to the issue of cleanliness. The details covering such an issue indicate an early awareness of many of the modern scientific methods and concepts. A great deal of Muslims' practices and applications in the field of cleanliness conform with the "Principles of Environmental Control" as outlined recently.³⁹ These principles are: isolation, substitution, shielding, treatment, and prevention.

In addition to, the theoretical and legislative aspects, the methods of execution were as important in assuring the vitality of the legislation. Execution proceeded in two directions. The first direction was in producing the personality of the multi-directional muhtasib. The second direction was in producing a society which will not only observe and abide by the rules, but in fact accept them as part of their basic belief in Allāh, and as such, a form of "Ibādah", therefore making such an observation of rules rewardable by Him.

The various principles which have regulated the trades in the post could contribute in directing the codes and regulations for environmental health in the modern Muslim society. The aim of such principles was to secure the greatest health protection for the individual and the consumer while preserving the rights of the provider.

The methods adopted in dealing with the cleanliness of streets and markets could reflect on the modern undertakings. This does not necessarily mean going back to the rudimentary methods in drainage and garbage collection – probably with the exception of recycling. Old methods can be utilized by means of investing on those basic beliefs which could direct efforts for cleanliness in a collective fashion with minimum expenditure. Here, the idea of collective responsibility starts to emerge as an instrument of guidance for group activities of people sharing their surrounding environment. Collective control implies giving the group the feeling of responsibility and the ability to make decisions related to their shared environment. This latter concept proved to be very instrumental in producing a well-kept living environment in the Muslim city.⁴⁰ It could ensure the effectiveness of environmental cleanliness and reduce other authorities' role and spending in the process.

At the level of individual relationships, Islamic

teachings may represent a good background against which rulings governing the relationships between adjacent homes can be derived. This means inhabitants' rights in realizing a clean inner and outer environment can be preserved.

Also, when it comes to public facilities such as parks, playgrounds, and lakes, it is expected, that those applications related to neighborhoods' and roads' cleanliness, as well as water standards of purity should reflect on the operational plans for such facilities. Again, collective control and responsibility should also contribute in defining the ideal ways for utilizing public facilities.

For example, we expect to be able to derive many of the specifications defining users' types, times of uses, and behavioral patterns for users which should observe and conform with the public codes of conduct and decency as was determined by the muhtasib. Also we could establish users' rights and responsibilities towards the facilities and other users by defining the possible areas of damage such as setting fire, littering, destroying trees, vandalizing furniture and property, polluting water, insulating and attacking other users . . . etc.

In brief, it appears that the concept and practice of environmental cleanliness in the early Muslim society is unique but yet poorly understood. The discontinuity of this experience in the modern urban Muslim society is due in part to its replacement by practices imported from other societies. Except for the physical and biological common attributes, the Muslim experience was based on ideologic and cultural attributes different than those adopted by other societies. Consequently, we notice that despite the current efforts and methods applied in cleaning and maintaining the environment in the Muslim society, they are still costly and inefficient. It would be the role of the architect, planner, environment engineer, jurist, sociologist, civic leader, residents' representatives, and relevant others to devise appropriate methods for environmental cleanliness and purity based upon the traditional experience while considering modern times' needs and technological potentials.

References

1. Al-Soliman, T.M.: Environmental Purity and Cleanliness: An Islamic Perspective. *JIMA* 1987; 19:100-105.
2. Al-Shaizari A (12th century A.D.). *Nihayat al-Rutbah fi Talab al-Hisbah*, verified and revised for publication by A. al-Areeni, Dār al-Thaqāfah, Beirut, Lebanon (no date), p 13.
3. Ziadah N: *Hisbah and Muhtasib in Islam*, Catholic Press, Beirut, Lebanon, 1962, p 135
4. Bin 'Umar Y (9th century A.D.). *Aḥkām al-Sūq*, edited by Faraḥāt al-Dashrāwī, Tunisia Company for distribution, Tunisia, 1975, p 95.

5. Holmes U: *Medieval Sanitation: II*. In: Detweiler, R, Sutherland, JN, Werthman, M, eds., *Environmental Decay in Its Historical Context*. Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1973, p 93.
6. Gies, J. Gies F: *Medieval Sanitation: I*. In: Detweiler, R, Sutherland, JN, Werthman, M, eds., *Environmental Decay in Its Historical Context*. Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1973, p 95.
7. Mumford L: *The Impact of Industrialism*. In: Detweiler, R, Sutherland, JN, Werthman, M, eds, *Environmental Decay in Its Historical Context*. Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, Illinois, 1973, p 102.
8. Simillie W: *Public Health, Its Promise for The Future*. Arno Press, New York, 1976, p 369.
9. Ibn Dagīg A (12th century A.D.). *Iḥkām al-Aḥkām*, Scientific Books House, Beirut, Lebanon, (no date) Volume 1, p 21.
10. Sanami OM (12th century A.D.). *Niṣāb al-Iḥtisāb*, An Arabic Religio-Legal Text, edited, translated, and annotated by David H. Partridge (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1962), University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.
11. Reference 8, p 170.
12. Reference 8, p 238.
13. Reference 8, p 247.
14. Reference 2, p 14.
15. Reference 2, p 87.
16. Reference 8, p 167.
17. Reference 4, p 130.
18. Reference 3, p 115.
19. Reference 4, p 129.
20. Reference 2, p 22.
21. Reference 3, p 186.
22. Reference 3, p 151.
23. Reference 3, p 141.
24. Brockington CF: *The Health of The Community: Principles of Public Health for Practitioners and Students*. J & A Churchill Ltd., London, 1965, p 139.
25. Reference 4, p 40.
26. Reference 4, p 108.
27. Reference 2, pp 22-23.
28. Reference 3, p 143.
29. Reference 2, p 170.
30. Reference 8, p 175.
31. Reference 24, p 175.
32. Reference 24, p 153.
33. Reference 24, p 11.
34. Purdom W: *Environmental Health*. Academic Press Inc., New York, 1980, p 6.
35. Fritsch AJ: *Environmental Ethics*. Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, New York: 1980, p 258.
36. FitzPatrick MS: *Environmental Health Planning*:

Community Development Based on Environmental and Health Precepts. Ballinger Publishing Company, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, pp 3-4.

37. Reference 24, pp 12-13.

38. Reference 36, p 5.

39. Reference 34, p 26.

40. Akbar J: Responsibility and The Traditional Muslim Built Environment. (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation), MIT, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984, p 236.