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Odiljon ERNAZAROV[a]

[a] *International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan,*
PhD in History, Associate Professor of the UNESCO
Chair in the Comparative Study of World Religions
11 A. Kadiri, Tashkent 100011, Uzbekistan
E-mail: odil.ernazarov.88@gmail.com

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PLANT WORLD IN RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Abstract. *This article examines the historical and religious foundations of attitudes toward plants in the world's major religions. The study explores the place of plants within ancient mythologies and religious traditions across different civilizations. Trees, flowers, and fruits are shown to have been regarded as sacred symbols of life, fertility, purity, and immortality in numerous cultures. A comparative analysis is conducted of perspectives on plants in Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Particular attention is devoted to the plants mentioned in the Qur'an, including the olive, fig, date palm, grapevine, pomegranate, sidr tree, basil, and ginger; their spiritual symbolism and practical significance are examined in detail. The article highlights the role of plants as sources of nourishment and healing within Islamic teachings, and investigates the development of 'ilm al-nabat (the science of plants) in the Muslim intellectual tradition and its relationship with botany, medicine, pharmacology, and agriculture. The study also discusses the contribution of religious beliefs to biodiversity conservation and environmental sustainability, analyzing ethnobotanical knowledge preserved through religious practices as an important source for scientific advancement. The findings indicate that religious traditions have made significant contributions to the development of botany, pharmacology, ecology, and environmental ethics, and that the relationship between religion and nature remains an important foundation for promoting ecological awareness and sustainable development in contemporary society.*

Keywords: *plant cult, religions, botany, ethnobotany, ecology, biodiversity, Qur'an, nature, pharmacology, acculturation.*

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, plants have been perceived by humankind not only as a source of life but also as entities endowed with sacred and supernatural powers. Plants, and

especially trees, have been venerated in the mythological traditions of diverse cultures as symbols of life, immortality, fertility, and purity. Likewise, the tradition of creating gardens and cultivating flowers across different regions of the world stems from a belief in the sacredness of plants. According to the ancient religious and mythological beliefs of numerous cultures, plants were considered the original progenitors of humankind; ancient Iranian mythology, for instance, contains the notion that humanity descended from the sacred plants called "Mashi" and "Mashiane" (Adelazadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2015:27).

The notion of the "Tree of Life" occupies a prominent place in the religious and mythological traditions of virtually all civilizations. In Norse mythology, the cosmic tree Yggdrasil was believed to encompass and sustain the entire cosmos, while in Mesopotamian culture this concept was associated with sacred trees such as the cedar, palm, and pomegranate, which represented beauty, fertility, and abundance. Mythological narratives suggest that the fruits of these trees conferred immortality upon the gods, and that acquiring them necessitated struggles against demonic or supernatural forces (Adelazadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2015:28). Moreover, many cultures maintained that human life was inseparably connected with a particular tree, whose withering was interpreted as an omen of that person's death.

The religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity likewise contain explicit prescriptions regarding the conservation of plant life. The Bible, for instance, forbids the destruction of fruit trees even during military campaigns and the siege of enemy cities, emphasizing that "the trees of the field are not human beings" to be subjected to warfare. Within Christian symbolism, the fig tree and the apple possess diverse mythological and theological meanings, frequently representing fertility, knowledge, and the notion of the forbidden fruit (Adelazadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2015:29).

Within Eastern religious traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, the lotus (Nelumbo nucifera) holds a position of exceptional spiritual significance. Owing to its ability to emerge unstained from muddy waters, it has long been regarded as a symbol of purity, spiritual enlightenment, and immortality (Adelazadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2015:27). Buddhist teachings emphasize the interdependence of humans and the natural world, and the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), which prohibits causing harm to any living being, including plants, constitutes a fundamental ethical norm (Ocak & Çelikten, 2021:81). Similarly, Hinduism portrays nature as a "Compassionate Mother," and reverence for

the natural environment is considered a religious and moral obligation of every adherent (Ocak & Çelikten, 2021:77).

MAIN PART

Nature worship occupied a prominent position among the ancient Turkic peoples as well as in numerous other traditional cultures, often being articulated through the concepts of mana and taboo. Early Turkic religious beliefs centered on faith in Kök Tengri (the Celestial Sky God), who was regarded as the creator of all living beings, while seasonal festivals dedicated to the veneration of nature were celebrated during the spring, summer, and autumn months (Ocak & Çelikten, 2021:82). Within the folklore of Azerbaijan and other Turkic communities, fig, mulberry, and walnut trees have long been considered sacred, and beliefs that their destruction may result in misfortune or disease continue to survive in popular tradition (Haciyeva, 1997:218). Similarly, in Zoroastrianism, trees were viewed as symbols of light and solar power, and their planting, protection, and cultivation were praised as manifestations of supreme virtue and righteousness (Adelazadeh & Pashaei Fakhri, 2015:28).

Within religious traditions, plants are portrayed not only as objects of spiritual significance but also as practical agents of healing and well-being. Evidence from the Brahmin and Limbu communities of Nepal demonstrates that more than fifty plant species are incorporated into ritual practices, thereby contributing to the ecological preservation and continued survival of these species. It may therefore be concluded that religious beliefs and cultural values have long served as important mechanisms for the conservation of biodiversity and the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

In Islamic teachings, plants are regarded not only as sources of food and healing for humankind but also as signs (āyāt) of Allah's infinite power, beauty, and creative artistry. The Holy Qur'an mentions various types of plants, each of which possesses distinctive ecological, spiritual, and practical significance.

The first group of plants mentioned in the Holy Qur'an consists of what may be termed "blessed trees and fruits." Among them, the olive tree occupies a particularly distinguished position, being described as a "blessed tree" and referenced in a divine oath (Qur'an, al-Tin 95:1). Classical and contemporary Muslim scholars attribute this

status to the olive's multifaceted benefits, emphasizing that it has long functioned not only as a source of food but also as a remedy, while olive oil has been widely used for illumination and the maintenance of human health (Tekin, 2016:123). A chapter of the Holy Qur'an is titled after the fig (tīn); Muslim scholars have traditionally regarded the fig as one of the fruits of Paradise, highlighting its rich composition of nutrients beneficial to human health (Tekin, 2016:100). The date palm (nakhla) is among the most frequently mentioned plants in the Qur'an, appearing approximately twenty times, and is described as a blessed sustenance that functions both as a staple food and as a fruit (Qur'an 2:266; 6:99, 141; 13:4; 16:11, 67; 17:91; 18:32; 19:23–25; 20:71; 23:19; 26:148; 36:34; 54:20; 55:11, 67; 69:7; 80:29). In a well-known hadith, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) compared the date palm, which retains its foliage throughout the year, to a believing person (Tekin, 2016:92). In the Qur'anic text, grapes (ʿinab) are often mentioned together with dates and are described as one of the bounties of Paradise (Qur'an 2:266; 6:99; 13:4; 16:11, 67; 17:91; 18:32; 23:19; 36:34; 78:32; 80:28). Grapes are traditionally considered among the most refined and beneficial fruits for human well-being. The pomegranate (rummān) is likewise referenced as an example of Allah's exquisite creative design, and the precise and orderly arrangement of its seeds has been interpreted as a sign of divine omnipotence.

In Islamic sources, shade-providing and medicinal plants are given distinct recognition. The sidr tree (Ziziphus spina-christi), a thorny species native to the Arabian Peninsula, is particularly noted for its provision of shade and edible fruit that serve human needs; the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was reported to have warned against the unjustified cutting of sidr trees, thereby underscoring the importance of environmental protection (al-Sabuni, 1981:110). The pumpkin (yaqtīn) is mentioned in the Qur'an as a plant that provided shade and relief to the Prophet Jonah (Yunus) after his emergence from the belly of the fish (Qur'an 37:146); it is characterized by its rapid growth, insect-repellent properties, and positive effects on cognitive function (Turgay, 2011:155). Basil (rayḥān) is a fragrant plant noted for its soothing and pleasant aroma; in the Qur'an it is referred to both as a blessing of Paradise and as a worldly provision (Qur'an, al-Raḥmān 55:11–12; al-Wāqiʿah 56:88–89). Its scent and therapeutic properties, especially in alleviating coughs and stomach ailments, are widely appreciated.

A further category of plants mentioned in the Holy Qur'an can be described as those associated with the beverages of Paradise. Ginger, for example, is referenced as part of the

composition of heavenly drinks (Qur'an, al-Insān 76:17–18); historically, ginger has been employed for its digestive benefits and its role in regulating body temperature (al-Zuhayli, 2003:318). Camphor (kāfūr) is likewise described as a fragrant and cooling substance included in the drinks of Paradise (Qur'an, al-Insān 76:5–6); in traditional pharmacology it has been widely utilized for its antimicrobial properties and its stimulating effects on cardiac function (Gültekin & Rado, 1982). The banana (ṭalḥ) is mentioned among the arranged fruits of Paradise (Qur'an, al-Wāqiʿah 56:29); in Eastern medical traditions, particularly in Anatolia, bananas have been valued for their high nutritional content and their reputed ability to enhance memory and cognitive performance (Tekin, 2016:109).

The Qur'an also makes particular reference to several plant species commonly used in daily nutrition. Garlic (fūm), onion (baṣal), lentils (ʿadas), and cucumber (qithṭā') are mentioned in the context of the Banu Israel's request for earthly provisions (Qur'an, al-Baqarah 2:61). These plants have historically formed a basic component of the human food supply and have been widely employed for their therapeutic properties, including antimicrobial activity and the regulation of blood pressure, among other health benefits.

The approach to plants found in Islamic sources contributed to the development of specialized scientific disciplines within the Muslim intellectual tradition. For example, in the classification of sciences employed in the Ottoman Empire, 'ilm-i nabāt (botany or plant science) was regarded as intrinsically linked to several other fields of knowledge, and in particular to physics. In the classical system of sciences, especially within the worldview of Muslim philosophers influenced by the Aristotelian tradition (such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina), 'ilm-i nabāt was primarily regarded as a branch or subdivision of physics ('ilm al-ṭabīʿī) (Kocabaş, 2023:164–175). Physics, as the discipline concerned with the study of natural entities, classified plants among "natural bodies" (ajsām ṭabīʿiyya), since they were considered to possess the properties of growth and movement; for this reason, physics was regarded as a foundational (primary) science, whereas 'ilm-i nabāt was considered a derivative (secondary) discipline subordinate to it.

In the overall hierarchy of the sciences, botany was conceived as a component of theoretical philosophy (Kocabaş, 2023:168). Theoretical philosophy itself was subdivided into fields such as mathematics, metaphysics, and physics, with 'ilm-i nabāt being linked to philosophy through physics, the discipline concerned with the study of the corporeal world. The most significant practical relationship of 'ilm-i nabāt was its association

with the science of medicine (Kocabaş, 2023:169). Scholars considered the primary benefit of studying plants to lie in their application to the treatment of human diseases; in particular, the sections of medicine dealing with "simple remedies" (adwiyat al-mufrada) and pharmacology (aqrābādhīn) were closely connected with 'ilm-i nabāt. Theoretical knowledge concerning plants was also closely linked to the science of agriculture (Kocabaş, 2023:169). Whereas 'ilm-i nabāt was concerned with the theoretical study of plant types and their properties, 'ilm-i filāḥa focused on the practical cultivation of plants, including their care from germination to full growth, techniques of grafting, and methods for enhancing crop yield. In classical scholarly sources, 'ilm-i nabāt is further associated with several related fields, including pharmacology, ḥawāss al-ashjār (the study of the extraordinary or hidden properties of plants), and pharmacognosy, in which the biological and chemical descriptions of plants were systematized through works such as Dioscorides' Kitāb al-Khasā'is (Kocabaş, 2023:170).

It can therefore be concluded that plant-related teachings and religious practices across the world's religions have made a significant contribution to the development of global scientific knowledge, particularly in the fields of medicine, pharmacology, ethnobotany, and ecology. Since ancient times, the perception of plants as sacred entities endowed with supernatural qualities has encouraged their systematic study as well as their protection and conservation. Consequently, religious beliefs concerning the sacredness of plants led to the establishment of gardens and the cultivation of flowers across various cultures, which may be regarded as one of the earliest expressions of scientific curiosity about nature.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the main benefits of religious teachings to global science and culture are reflected in the following domains.

Contribution to medicine and pharmacology. The tradition of employing plants as sources of healing within various religious systems has provided a foundational basis for the development of modern medicine and pharmaceutical science. A significant number of drugs used in contemporary clinical practice are derived from plants and rooted in ancient religious and folk medical knowledge; for example, approximately

25% of pharmaceuticals marketed in developed countries, including compounds such as vinblastine, reserpine, quinine, and aspirin, are based on plant-derived active substances. The antiviral and antibacterial properties of plants such as garlic, onion, and ginger, frequently mentioned in Islamic, Hindu, and other religious traditions, have been substantiated by modern scientific investigations.

The formation of ethnobotany as a scientific discipline. Over the course of centuries, the religious and spiritual interrelationship between humans and plants has contributed to the emergence of the important scientific field of ethnobotany. Knowledge concerning plants used in religious rituals has been transmitted across generations in both oral and practical forms, thereby providing scholars with a substantial empirical foundation regarding plant species and their properties. The Brahmin and Limbu communities of Nepal, for instance, have preserved and transmitted knowledge of more than fifty plant species through their ritual practices over many centuries.

Botany and the classification of the classical sciences. In the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, ’ilm-i nabāt (botany) was systematized as a branch of physics, where it played a significant role in the physical and biological classification of plant life. The intellectual motivation to study plants as signs of divine power contributed to the emergence of botany as an independent scientific discipline and to the formation of its hierarchical structure of knowledge, distinguishing between primary and secondary sciences. This tradition further developed and extended the works of ancient scholars such as Aristotle and Dioscorides to a higher level of scientific articulation.

Biodiversity conservation and ecology. Religious beliefs have functioned as a form of practical ecological strategy in the conservation of biodiversity. Many plant species, such as rudraksha, peepal, and olive, have been considered sacred within various religious traditions, and the prohibition (taboo) against cutting them has contributed to their preservation from extinction. Likewise, the tradition of “sacred groves” has protected entire ecosystems from human intervention, thereby ensuring the survival of wild flora and fauna. This indicates that science and religion have historically functioned as complementary partners in the protection of the natural environment.

In conclusion, religious teachings have treated the protection of plants not only as a moral and spiritual value but also as a source of practical knowledge, thereby contributing to global scientific progress in revealing the complexities of the plant world.

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