

The background of the entire image is a lush field of wildflowers. In the foreground and middle ground, there are numerous bright yellow poppies with dark centers, interspersed with some red poppies. The flowers are surrounded by dense green foliage, including tall grasses and leafy plants. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day, and the overall scene is a natural, untamed landscape.

# Seeing God Everywhere

## *Qur'anic Perspectives on the Sanctity of Virgin Nature*

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Corruption has appeared on earth and at sea because of what the hands of men have wrought; thus does God make them taste some of the consequences of their actions, so that they might return.

SŪRAT AL-RŪM, 'THE ROMANS', 30:41

**A**LTHOUGH PUT IN the past tense, this verse can be read as a prophecy relating to our times, and not simply as a description of a state of affairs existing at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. What we see around us today is exactly what the Qur'an describes in terms of *fasād* (corruption). This would have been understood at the time it was revealed to the Arabs of the 7th century as moral corruption, or disobedience. However, the Arabs would have been hard put to apply the term to the kind of corruption which we see today 'on earth and at sea'; and they could not have understood *fasād* in a global sense, that is, the kind of pollution we are facing now everywhere, on land and at sea, because of what our hands have wrought. This verse tells us that we are to 'taste' the consequences of our actions, and those of our predecessors, not simply to be punished, but in order to be alerted to the need to return to God; not in order to become despondent, but on the contrary, more fervent in our resolve to put right what is wrong, and return to that natural equilibrium in which we were created. Tasting the consequences of 'our' actions means accepting that in a mysterious manner we are not devoid of responsibility for putting right what our predecessors have done; for we, as members of the human race, form an organic unity: 'Your creation and your resurrection', God addresses the whole of humankind, in one of the most mysterious verses of the Qur'an, 'are but as [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul' (Sūrat Luqmān, 31:28).

In this essay I intend to address four themes in the light cast by the important Qur’anic prophecy made in the Sūrat al-Rūm:

- The first is the theme of the holiness of the natural environment from the point of the view of the Qur’an. Here, I will argue that the environmental crisis could not have happened in a world fashioned by the Islamic conception of *Tawḥīd*.
- The second theme concerns the spiritual roots of the environmental crisis: how this crisis came about, not from a technical point of view, but in respect of the deeper moral and spiritual attitudes which generated the actions leading to the crisis.
- The third theme concerns the relationship between the human individual—the microcosm—and the entire universe—the macrocosm. The argument here is that even if we are in the grip of a global crisis which may be the foreshadowing of ‘the end of the world’ (or of a cycle within this cosmos), the result of this presentiment should be a deeper sense of personal responsibility for changing oneself and one’s world for the better. This attitude of perpetually renewed resolution, together with an inextinguishable spiritual hopefulness, contrasts starkly with the despair and sense of personal impotence which so many are feeling in the face of the environmental crisis, which has already assumed catastrophic dimensions.
- Finally, the fourth theme is practical ethics: what we should actually do, in the light of the Qur’anic principles discussed, and according to the Sunna, in respect of the natural world. Here we offer some ways in which each and every individual can bring into his or her life some practical changes in accordance with the Qur’anic world-view so eloquently embodied and enacted by the Holy Prophet.

## 1. Tawḥīd and the Holiness of the Cosmos

The word *tawḥīd* should be translated as ‘integrating oneness’ rather than simply as ‘unity’. To ‘integrate’ or ‘make one’ is to be understood not just on the level of the Divine, where there is but one God as opposed to many gods. It is also to be understood on the level of Reality. There is one Reality that encompasses all that is, penetrates all that is. We need to move from an abstract, static, theological conception of Unity to a dynamic, spiritual intuition of all-embracing Oneness; it is not simply a question of affirming one God, but of grasping, and being transformed by, the principle that there is but one Being, one Reality, encompassing, penetrating and transcending all things. This perspective is not just a result of mystical speculation; rather, it is the fruit of meditation on key Qur’anic verses which allude to this mystery of the oneness of the Divine Reality, which is ‘The First and the Last, the Outwardly Manifest, the Inwardly Hidden’, *al-Awwal wa’l-Ākhir wa’l-Ẓāhir wa’l-Bāṭin* (al-Ḥadīd, ‘Iron’, 57:3).

The mystics of Islam may have expounded in detail the spiritual and metaphysical significance of this Oneness; but it is in the Qur’an and in the sayings of the Prophet that one finds the basis of this doctrine or world-view. In this regard, one of the most important sayings where God speaks in the first person is this: ‘I was a hidden treasure (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan*) and I loved to be known (*fa-aḥbabtu an u‘raf*) so I created the world’. This saying may not meet the exacting criteria for authenticity set by the hadith scholars, but there is a general consensus among these scholars that the meaning (*ma‘nā*) of the saying is sound. They arrive at this conclusion through the following verse of the Qur’an, and the comment on it by Ibn ‘Abbās, cousin of the Prophet, and one of the most authoritative Qur’an commentators: ‘I only created the Jinn and mankind in order that they might worship Me’ (al-Dhāriyāt, ‘The Winnowing Winds’, 51:56). Ibn ‘Abbās says that the word ‘worship’ is to be understood as ‘know’. The implication here is that worship of God is



at once rooted in knowledge of God, and finds its ultimate fruit in the highest knowledge of the divine reality, including a vision of this reality through the created world. The world then becomes a transparent veil over the divine reality, one through which the ‘eye of the heart’ can ‘see’, not God Himself, but His ‘Face’. For, as we shall see shortly, this Face—the self-revelation of some aspect of the divine reality—is to be seen, wherever we look.

The ‘hidden treasure’ which loves to be known reveals itself in, through and as this entire universe. This means that divine love is embedded in the very fabric of existence. In the famous words of William Blake, ‘everything that lives is holy’. The more one comes to know God through the revelation of His hidden treasure in the world, the more one comes to love Him. If the love of God does not deepen in accordance with our knowledge of the world, then it is not authentic knowledge of the world that is in question, it is mere conceptual knowledge of external data. By contrast, an authentic knowledge of the world leads to a spiritual intuition of the phenomena of Virgin Nature as ‘signs’ of God, *āyāt*, revealing something of the absolute, infinite and perfect quality of the source of Nature and all its glories and beauties. Even the first glimmerings of a vision for this source of the beauty of the cosmos cannot but be accompanied by love of this source. This love for divine beauty in turn heightens one’s capacity for spiritual knowledge; thus, love and knowledge serve to enhance one another in a mutually reinforcing relationship whose dynamic participates in the very process of creation: for the entire creation is itself the overflow of God’s love for the beauties of His hidden treasures to be known and loved by us. This can be seen as implicit in the following marvellous verse: ‘Nor is there anything but with Us are its treasures (*khazā’inuhu*), and We only send it down in a known measure (*qadar ma‘lūm*)’ (Sūrat al-Ḥijr, ‘The Rocky Plain’, 15:21).

The Qur’anic verses that most explicitly refer to this manifestation of the hidden treasure are ones which talk about God being not only ‘the

First and the Last’ but also, as noted above, ‘the Outward and the Inward’ (57:3). It is the outwardly manifest aspect of God, the divine reality as *al-Zāhir*, that has given rise to some of the most fruitful speculations and reflections on the mystery of the presence of God within creation. For it is clear to most intelligent people that God must be the origin of all things, and that He must also be the end of all things; the divine reality is the inwardly hidden—this, too, is easily intelligible. But how is God manifest through all things, in all things, as all things—whilst also being hidden from them, hidden by them, hidden within them? Pondering the meaning of God as *al-Zāhir* helps one to see that there is nothing in reality, nothing in existence, but God. The whole of the cosmos is penetrated by the divine reality such that, according to this beautiful verse, God’s Face is there, wherever you may look:

Unto God belong the East and the West.  
So wherever you turn, there is the face of God.

AL-BAQARA, ‘THE COW’, 2:115

You cannot turn anywhere without seeing a manifestation of the divine reality—this self-revelation being referred to as the ‘Face’ of God: some aspect of the divine beauty, of the hidden treasure, is reflected in all the phenomena of Virgin Nature, the infinitely variegated mirrors of creation. But this ability to see the Face of God implies the ability to see in addition that the plane on which the Face of God is manifested—the surface of the mirror wherein the divine beauties are reflected, the cosmic screen upon which the divine Qualities are projected—this terrestrial plane is itself impermanent, perishable, thus doomed to extinction. ‘Everything perishes except His face’ (*kullu shay’in hālikun illā wajhahu*) (al-Qaṣaṣ, ‘The Story’, 28:88).

So, the natural domain within which God is reflected in and through everything is a domain that is evanescent. It is a container which cannot but disintegrate at some point in the future; but the Qur’an

puts it more mysteriously because it says everything is perishing not that it will perish: everything is *hālik*, it is being destroyed, right now. The nature of the cosmos is transience, it is inescapably engaged in a process of decomposition, even while appearing to subsist with stability and permanence. It is only the Face of God which truly subsists, now and eternally: ‘Everything thereupon [the earth] is being annihilated (*fān*), and there subsists the Face of your Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Bounty’ (al-Raḥmān, ‘The Compassionate’, 55:26-27)

The cosmos is characterised by this ambiguity: on the one hand, there is the divine content, the manifestation or reflection of the divine qualities in the cosmos, which alone are real and permanent; and on the other, there is the cosmos as such, which is impermanent, disintegrating at every moment. How does one decipher this ‘supernatural’ content, disengaging it from its ‘natural’ container? The Qur’an helps us interpret the universe by referring to the phenomena of nature as *āyāt*, as verses of the cosmic ‘text’. The word *āyā* is polyvalent, meaning a sign, a verse of scripture, a miracle, as well as a phenomenon which exists in the world and in the soul. The Qur’an makes these latter two connotations clear in the following verse:

‘We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and in their own souls  
until it becomes clear to them that He is the Truth’

FUṢṢILAT, ‘EXPOUNDED’, 41:53

In other words, God will show mankind His signs in Virgin Nature, as well as within the consciousness of human beings, until the Truth of God becomes manifest. So the signs are both inward and outward. Here we have an expression of a principle which is fundamental to Islamic spirituality: the idea of man as microcosm, a ‘small world’. The individual is a microcosmic recapitulation of the whole universe. What is within is identical—in essence, not form—to what is without. Understanding this principle is one of the keys to solving the environmental crisis, at least

as far as the individual conscience is concerned; but the ramifications and repercussions of this apparently ‘individual’ solution to the crisis are incalculable, as we shall see shortly, through some key Qur’anic verses.

This idea of the whole of the universe as a cosmic book is both a concrete perception and a spiritual conception. In the wisdom tradition of Islam one speaks of two types of Qur’an: one is *al-Qur’ān al-tadwīnī*, which is the written Qur’an; the other, *al-Qur’ān al-takwīnī*, the ‘creational’ Qur’an. The latter is a ‘text’ which consists of the whole of creation, so that all the ‘signs’ of virgin nature can be grasped as so many scriptural revelations, so many verses, so many signs of God, calling out to be interpreted, contemplated, revered, and assimilated within oneself. That is, the formal disclosures of divine beauty awaken an ‘essentialising’ awareness: a deeper consciousness of the paradisaal essences from which earthly beauties derive; an intimation of the Divine Names and Qualities which are the sources of those paradisaal essences; and a spiritual presentiment of the absolute unity of God—the ‘hidden treasure’—within which the Names and Qualities are comprised in all their infinite glory. In this way, contemplation of Virgin Nature can be defined as a ‘remembrance of God’, *dhikr Allāh* (to which we return below). The external ‘signs’ of God on the horizons rejoin the internal ones within the soul; the outward revelations elicit inward inspirations; the theophanies of beauty, holiness and majesty infuse the soul with boundless love, grateful contemplation, and reverential awe in the Face of God.

This aspect of the Qur’anic message takes us very close to the primal religions and their conception of the cosmos as revelation. For the Shamans and the representatives of the primal religions generally, throughout the world, the whole cosmos is a world of signs: the stars, the trees, the animals, and so on are so many modes of the Spirit, so many ways and means of which the ineffable mystery of the supreme Spirit, above creation, communicates with the intimate spirit, within the human soul. All of these are given a sacramental significance, just as, in the Qur’an,



they are given a sacred significance—witness the number of times God Himself swears by the phenomena of virgin nature: ‘I swear by the planets’; ‘By the Sun and her brightness’; ‘By the Night when it enshrouds’, and so on. The Qur’an is absolutely remarkable for the range, depth and subtlety with which it makes reference to the phenomena of nature; no other revealed scripture contains so many spiritually fecund references to the beauties of the natural world. Several chapter headings indicate the importance of the natural order, such as: ‘The Bee’, ‘The Star’, ‘The Moon’, ‘The Sun’, and so on. This constant reference to the phenomena of Virgin Nature invites people to contemplate, to meditate, to reflect on these signs as expressions of the Divine creativity, and thus of being venerable in their very substance.

The assertion, made by many Muslim environmentalists, that the environmental crisis could not have happened in a universe fashioned by the Qur’anic view of nature is incontrovertible. We cannot conceive of a small group of scientists breaking away from a community of believers who were inspired by the Qur’an with the sense of the holiness of virgin nature. And this holiness is not just an abstract holiness, it is compellingly concrete. The Qur’an tells us ‘There is no thing which does not glorify Him with praise’ (al-Isrā’, ‘The Night Journey’, 17:44). Now it is easy for an outsider to say that this is a sort of philosophical ideal, an abstract conception: everything ‘praises’ God by its existence, because the created thing manifests the power of its Creator. To manifest the Creator is, as it were, a manner of ‘praising’ the Creator. This philosophical point of view, however correct on its own plane, is inadequate; to its abstract logic must be added a dynamic, transformative element if the Qur’anic perspective is to be grasped aright. Consider this remarkable verse, which asks us rhetorically: ‘Do you not see that everything that is in the heavens and the earth praises God?’ (al-Nūr, ‘The Light’, 24:41). And then, just as one might think that this may be an abstract idea, the Qur’an gives us an arresting description, a graphic image of birds in flight: *wa’l-ṭayru ṣāffātin—kullun*

*qad ʿalima ṣalātahu wa tasbīhahu*: ‘And the birds in flight, each one knows its prayer and its mode of praise.’ When reciting these words according to *tajwīd*, ritually correct intonation, one cannot escape the onomatopoeic effect, for the first *alif* (the vowel ‘a’) in the word *ṣāffātin* must be prolonged to at least 6 beats. The result is that one recites the word in a manner which powerfully and almost irresistibly evokes the glorious vision of a flock of birds flying in perfect unison.

One cannot get away with a merely abstract philosophical idea here. The metaphysics of universal praise are expressed on one level, and then a concrete exemplification of the principle follows, the birds being the most wonderful example to be given here, for they are symbolic of the higher spiritual states. The birds’ flight indicates the defying of gravity, therefore, something supernatural; their singing evokes the melodies of Heaven. The ‘birds in flight’ give us, then, a marvellous image of the prayer and glorification of the whole of nature.

All creatures are dignified with the title of *umma*, ‘community’. There is a verse in the Qur’an that says: ‘There is not an animal on earth nor a flying creature with wings which does not belong to communities [*umam*, plural of *umma*] analogous to you.’ (al-Anʿām, ‘The Cattle’, 6:38). And then, to make this principle concrete, we can turn to this verse: ‘Your Lord has inspired the bee: make your home in the mountains, and on the trees, and the trellises which they erect; then eat from every fruit and follow humbly the ways of your Lord’ (al-Naḥl, ‘The Bee’, 16:69). Even the humble bee receives a form of revelation from God. Revelation here can be understood to mean that instinct which is given to all natural creatures to do by nature what we, as human beings, have to learn to do through supernatural revelation. We learn from these creatures, all of whom can be regarded as inspired beings: that is, beings inspired by their Lord. What animals do by nature and instinct, we have to do through ‘super-nature’, through revelation in the strict sense: our submission to revelation is our way of being true to our deepest nature, our way of being ‘supernaturally natural’.

The principle of revelation is one, but each species receives it and applies it according to its capacity.

Each species, then, being an *umma*, is a divinely willed community of beings, they are receptacles of revelation. ‘For every *umma* there is a messenger’ (Yūnus, ‘Jonah’, 10:47). From the environmental point of view, this is full of sacred significance: one must grasp intuitively, and not just speculate conceptually, that every living thing is a member of an *umma*, and that each one of these communities has its own mode of receiving natural revelation, just as it has its own way of naturally engaging in prayer and glorification. One of the implications of this conception of the natural world is this: the loss of any kind of species, any kind of creatures, is not just a catastrophe, it is a kind of cosmic sacrilege. Each species, being an *umma*, is not just some accidental feature of evolution, the loss of which may be somehow justified by the greater cause of our progress in the evolutionary scale. On the contrary, when the cosmos and its creatures are grasped as sacred manifestations of divine creativity, the loss of any species of life takes on its true, tragic and sacrilegious dimensions.

To sum up this first part of the essay: God is not only the creator of the cosmos, *ex nihilo*, ‘from nothing’. God also surrounds and penetrates the cosmos, as it were in *principio*, ‘in principle’, and not just ‘in the beginning’. This point of view is alluded to by the very word, ‘environment’ (*muḥīt*): it is that which encompasses everything, and this word is given as one of the names of God, *al-Muḥīt*, the ‘All-Encompassing’.

When we talk about the environmental crisis, then, we are talking about a crisis that wounds the sacred nature of the content of this divine environment, the environment which is, in the final analysis, the manifestation of the Divine Name, *al-Muḥīt*. The crisis afflicting this environment is an all-encompassing one, and if one wishes to address this crisis one must likewise address it an all-encompassing manner, going to the very root of the malaise which gave rise to the crisis, and not simply try and deal with the surface manifestations on the level of practical

solutions. So, one of the most important messages we can infer from the Qur’anic perspective on the environment is this: a crisis that is as all-encompassing as the environmental crisis, which afflicts the spiritual, moral and physical aspects of our being, must be addressed through a series of perspectives which, likewise, are all-encompassing, this being an application of the principle of *Tawḥīd*: all phenomena are organically interconnected within the oneness of divine Reality, a oneness that integrates all levels of being, from the most physical to the most spiritual. What the biologist Rupert Sheldrake has termed ‘morphic resonance’—the subtle energetic interconnectedness of all phenomena—is but one of the traces of this dynamic concomitant of the principle of *Tawḥīd*.

## 2. Spiritual Roots of the Environmental Crisis

Living in harmony with the natural world presupposes a sense both of the holiness of the cosmos and what one might call today ‘environmental ethics’. The basis of this kind of ethical discernment regarding the natural world is of course ethics as such. Our capacity to discern between the right and the wrong way of dealing with the environment is an application of our intellectual and moral discernment generally, our ability to discern between right and wrong, and, on the highest plane, between truth and error. What is striking about the Islamic approach to the root of ethical discernment between right and wrong is the extent to which it is in fact bound up with humanity’s relationship with the natural world.

The story of Adam’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden is how the Qur’an introduces the problem of evil and sin in relation to the human state. Already, on the surface, the simple story of Adam’s departure from the Garden is a kind of ‘organic’ or ‘environmental’ disgrace: the Garden of Eden is the state of primordial innocence, in which man and woman live in complete harmony with their God-given environment. The Garden thus stands not just for nature, but also for the innate harmony between the creation and the Creator, a harmony by means of which

the natural world participates in, and is penetrated by, its supernatural source. The Garden is the original home of the human being, and also mankind's ultimate destination—this is already replete with self-evident ecological significance.

If one delves deeper into the story of the sin of the first couple, this theme of living in harmony with nature is further reinforced. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden is a dramatisation of a fundamental tendency in man, a tendency of which we are now seeing, as it were, the extreme outward manifestation. Adam took advantage of his God-given gift of freedom and intelligence not just to disobey God; this disobedience was simply the form taken by his transgression. The essence of the transgression, its primary motivation, was the desire for eternity on the plane of the temporal, for absoluteness within relativity. This is clear from the way in which Satan, Iblīs, successfully tempts the first couple to disobey God, and again, this is full of 'ecological' import: 'Shall I show you the tree of immortality and a kingdom that endures forever?' he asks them (Ṭā-Hā, 20:120). He says to them that the only reason why God forbids them from eating the fruit of this tree is 'lest you become immortal or angels' (al-A'raf, 'The High Places', 7:20). Adamic disobedience, then, was rooted in pride, the desire to steal for oneself the glory of the angels and the eternity of the divine. This pride was properly speaking 'satanic', in two senses: on the one hand, it was insinuated into the first couple by Satan; and on the other, it is this very vice which prevented Satan from prostrating to Adam: 'I am better than him', he says to God, 'You made me of fire, him of clay' (Ṣād, 38:76). Satan is the embodiment of pride. When, therefore, the Qur'an warns us against Satan, telling us to beware of his enmity, the essence of his unceasing warfare against us is the insinuation of pride and arrogance in our souls. It is not for nothing that pride is referred to as the deadliest of the deadly sins.

Adam's choice was for divine eternity on the plane of human transience, desiring eternity for himself, instead of accepting gratefully his im-



mortality as a gift of God. It was as if Adam was originally fully conscious of the beauty and the sanctity of the Garden, but at a certain moment becomes aware that it cannot be eternal; it must one day come to an end because only God is eternal. And it is through this chink in the armour of Adam's piety that Satan casts his insinuation, luring him out of this paradisaal bliss: it is as if he whispers: 'Don't you want this to last forever? I will give you the secret of immortality and eternity—apart from God, and for yourself.' One might say that this is the only 'sin' that Adam is capable of committing in the Garden of Eden: the desire for the good he has been given by God to be fully and exclusively 'his', to appropriate the goodness of the Garden to the glory of his own ego forever.

This Qur'anic account of the Fall helps us to see the relevance of this interpretation to our present situation; one does not have to look back at some sin, a particular sin, that was committed by a particular human being in the industrial or scientific revolution that gave rise to the awful environmental crises unfolding around us today. One can see a force gathering pace in the past several centuries, a general tendency of increasing decadence, a focus on worldly success to the exclusion of the Hereafter, a selfish materialism: for that is what the innate desire for immortality becomes, when it is divorced from God, and attached instead to the things of this world: 'And you will most certainly find them the greediest of men for life [greedier] than those who are polytheists; every one of them would love to live for a thousand years. But his being granted a long life will not remove him in the least from punishment' (al-Baqara, 'The Cow', 2:96).

The punishment for such greed in relation to things of this world applies even—or perhaps especially—when those 'things' are good things. This sin is succinctly expressed in the verse in Sūrat al-Ādiyāt, 'The Charging Coursers', (100:8): 'Truly man is intense in his desire for good' (*innahu li-ḥubbi'l-khayri la-shadīd*). Man desires good things, but his love for them on the worldly plane—his love for such things as material comfort, pros-



perity, and the maintenance of that prosperity—becomes so intense that it takes him far from the source of goodness, the purpose of good things. This *shidda*, this intensity, is a caricature of the aspiration (*himma*, *ṭalab*) we should have for Paradise, and for that prerequisite for entering Paradise, which is piety. The ultimate egotism consists in desiring paradisaical bliss eternally for oneself, here and now, in one's fallen state of decadence and sinfulness. The intensity of this desire for 'good' generates a cloud of obscurity, causing one to lose sight of the difference of level between this world and the Hereafter, between the raw ego as insatiable desire and the sanctified soul as consummated love.

It is also very instructive to look at the words of Iblis when he declares his intentions regarding humanity; for here we find that one of his main goals is to make human beings live in an unnatural fashion, rending asunder the harmony between man and nature: 'And I will lead them astray, and arouse vain desires in them, and command them to cut the ears of the cattle, and I will command them to alter the creation of God' (*al-Nisā*, 'Women' 4:119).

It is interesting that the Qur'an uses the word for 'command' to describe the soul at its worst, *al-naḥs al-ammāra bi's-sū*, 'the soul which commands evil' (see Sūrat Yūsuf, 'Joseph', 12:53). The commands of Iblīs become, as it were, the commands issued by the unredeemed soul to the intellect, will and the heart, over which it has become dominant. One sees here the relationship between the prideful principle of egotistic self-glorification—Iblīs—and the corruption of the natural order, the abuse of the 'creation of God'. Man's essential, primordial nature—his *fiṭra*—is in complete harmony with God and with creation: 'The original pattern of God, in accordance with which He originated man; there is no changing the creation of God' (*fiṭrat Allāh, allatī faṭara'n-nās 'alayhā—lā tabdīla li-khalqī'Llāh*) (al-Rūm, 'The Romans', 30:30).

So this fall from grace indicates the improper use of the gift of human freedom, of human responsibility, this responsibility which makes man God's *khalīfa*, or steward, on earth: 'We offered the *amāna*, the trust, to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they shrank from it in fear; but man took up this trust. Indeed he has proved to be a tyrant and a fool' (al-Aḥzāb, 'The Clans', 33:72).

*Fiṭra/khilāfa/amāna*—these are the principles that fashion man's relationship with God and with the environment; the environment which can be spiritually intuited as the formal manifestation of the divine quality expressed by the name *al-Muḥīt*. Acting responsibly towards the world of nature—on the moral plane—is the outward expression of an inner spiritual attunement of one's *fiṭra* with the ultimate reality, *al-Fāṭir*, 'the Originator' of all things, including the *fiṭra* of man, the two words, *Fāṭir* and *fiṭra* sharing the same root, which denotes the fundamental idea of the 'origin', and 'origination'. It is, then, our relationship with the Creator/Originator which will determine the quality of our relationship with the creation; the extent to which we are true to our 'primordial nature' will determine the extent to which we will be in harmony with Virgin Nature. Being true to one's *fiṭra* cannot but entail being true to *al-Fāṭir*, and this,

in turn, means that one will be in accord with the whole of the creation originated by *al-Fāṭir*. Being at one with the divine source, above and within oneself, entails being at one with all the manifestations of the divine within creation. For the creation is encompassed and penetrated by God.

From the esoteric point of view, the creation is actually constituted by the effects (*āthār*) of the divine Acts (*af‘āl*), of the divine Names (*asmā’*) and Qualities (*ṣifāt*), which in turn are the modes by which the divine Essence engages with relativity. Thus, the whole of creation is seen as comprising the outpourings of the divine Essence. From the exoteric point of view, the creation is seen to be governed by those Names and Qualities, and a more cautious note of separation is sounded, emphasising more the aspect of divine transcendence than that of divine immanence. However, even within this exoteric perspective, the holiness of the natural world cannot be denied, for the whole of creation remains tied to the Creator, even if the gulf between the two levels of being is incommensurable. As noted above, all the phenomena of Virgin Nature are holy as ‘signs’ of God, and cannot but elicit the deepest respect and reverence.

If, however, the *fiṭra* is clouded by vice and egotism, and the trust is betrayed, then the inevitable result is the corruption of the natural world, as expressed in the verse with which we began: ‘Corruption has appeared on earth and at sea because of what the hands of men have wrought; thus does God make them taste some of the consequences of their actions, so that they might return’ [that is: so that they might return to God] (*al-Rūm*, ‘The Romans’, 30:41). One should note the relationship between this ‘appearance’ of corruption, on account of the actions of man, and the ‘punishment’ of God: it is as a result of the operation of the principle of cosmic justice that human creatures are made to ‘taste the consequences of their actions’. What is anthropomorphically described as God’s ‘punishment’ can also be seen as the impersonal, ineluctable operation of the principle of cosmic justice. This correspondence between the principle of justice and the ‘punishment’ of God is reinforced by the description given in the

Qur'an of the various ways in which God 'punishes' communities who are guilty of different forms of deviation: 'So We seized each of them [the various wrongdoers mentioned in the preceding verses] for their sin: among them were those upon whom We unleashed a hurricane, and among them were those who were seized by the Cry, and among them were those whom We caused the earth to swallow, and among them were those whom We drowned. But it was not God who wronged them, but rather, it was they who wronged themselves.' (al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Ankabūt, 'The Spider', 29:40).

A whole array of environmental disasters is mentioned here: cataclysms from the air (hurricanes); from the earth (earthquakes); and from the water (drowning); the 'Cry' may signify a conflagration: the roar of flames which are burning out of control. One sees here that God's 'punishment' is but the natural or cosmic consequence of the sins which preceded and provoked the cataclysms, hence the concluding statement: 'It was not God who wronged them, but rather, it was they who wronged themselves'. Man can blame only himself, not God, for whatever befalls him: the 'punishment' of God is therefore another way of referring to the inexorable repercussion of the sinful acts of man.

This is the drama that unfolds as human beings go against their God-given *fiṭra*, exercising their freedom in a negative way by choosing worldliness and egotism over piety and devotion, focusing all of their aspirations on the perishable, forgetting their obligations to the Eternal. This takes the form of a manipulation and exploitation of nature as opposed to a reverence for nature. This reverence is inseparable from a contemplative view of the divine Reality, and this contemplativity has in fact characterised the Muslim mentality (not just artists and craftsmen but also philosophers and scientists) in traditional Islamic societies. This is a wonderful legacy, which Seyyed Hossein Nasr has described so well in his many books, articles and lectures. His work reminds us, among other things, that the majority of the scientists in the Muslim world were also mystically inclined; they were individuals who could not step out of the



framework of *Tawhīd* and thereby come to see the creation as something totally detached from the sacred. For them it would have been anathema to view nature as a mere experimental playground for humans; they could not have de-sacralised the natural world, emptying the cosmos of its divine mystery so as to start manipulating it simply for the sake of human benefit, for the sake of commercial gain or for whatever other material purpose. This is why the ecological crisis could never have happened in a world fashioned by a Qur’anic conception of the universe.

### 3. Microcosm and Macrocosm: Cosmic Dissolution and Human Resolution

If one reads the *sūras* of the Qur’an which deal with the end of time, with the Day of Judgement and with the Resurrection, one is hardly ever able to escape a microcosmic reference. That is, a reference to the ‘little world’ that man comprises. As is said in the Islamic intellectual tradition: ‘Man is a small world; the world is a large man’ (*al-insān ‘ālam saghīr*; *al-‘ālam insān kabīr*). One cannot evade direct, immediate, personal responsibility in the face of the dissolution—real or apparent—of the cosmos. And this restores to the individual, however bleak the environment may appear to be, an inalienable, personal, direct and indeed empowering sense of responsibility. There are many extraordinary verses that help us to go from an apparently irremediable cosmic dissolution (which might induce a sense of impotence on our part) to a perception of the ever-present possibility of a restoration on the part of man, thus, imbuing him with a restitution of the sense of personal responsibility.

Many verses of the Holy Qur’an help us effect this transformation of consciousness. I have heard that in America there are psychiatrists and therapists who have to specialise in dealing with traumas generated by the environmental crisis, a new kind of psychic affliction. People are more and more aware of the devastating nature of the crisis we are facing, but they are immobilised by a sense of impotence: ‘what on earth

can I do about it', they ask? The Qur'an answers this question in advance by helping each and every one of us to perceive the subtle but inalienable relationship which exists between human responsibility and cosmic harmony, despite the enormity of the negative consequences of actions committed by generations before us.

When we look around us and see what is happening, there are many Muslims who say that we are in 'The Eleventh Hour', as Martin Lings put it in his famous book of that title. But what should always be stressed before we go into any negative evaluation is that when the Prophet himself was asked when the Hour would come (he was asked this by the angel Gabriel who came to him in human form; cited in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*), the Prophet replied, 'The questioner knows as little about this as the questioned'. In other words, no-one knows when the Hour will come. However, the Prophet did say, when asked about the signs (*ashrāt*) that among the signs are that the slave girl of God will give birth to her mistress and the naked herdsmen of the desert will compete with each other in building tall buildings; and the angel Gabriel said, 'You have spoken the truth'.

What we can understand from this is that firstly, the signs are of course all around us. One sees with painful clarity what has happened in our times in the Arabian Peninsula as regards people who were once 'Bedouins' suddenly competing with each other in the manner described. But the Qur'an and hadith give Muslims no justification for despair or despondency; because the more one sees the signs of the impending end of this world, the more one is urged to do whatever is possible within the sphere of one's own competence, within one's own 'world'. This is based on the principle of man as a microcosm, a 'little world'; the whole of the world is, in some way, affected by the individual, for the individual is a recapitulation of the world, a reflection of the world; and the reflection cannot ultimately be separated from that of which it is a reflection. And there are myriad subtle interactions, on different levels of being, between the individual soul and all the phenomena in the universe.

This perspective restores to the individual an inalienable, personal, sense of responsibility, however bleak the outer world, the macrocosm, may appear to be. This environmental crisis may portend the end of this stage of history, the signs that we see around us might well be seen as pre-figurations of the eschaton but they cannot simply be equated with ‘the end’. The view which emerges here is one of hope as well as realism. It may well be that we are in fact caught up in a process of dissolution, but we are not impotent: there is always something we can and must do in the face of these crises. The Qur’an never lets one stray into hopelessness, or despair. It is as if we are told by God in the Qur’an: the more clearly you see the ‘signs’ of the end of the world, the more resolutely you must train your focus on what you, individually, must do about your world, within and without, for the ‘signs’ are there to bring you back to God, not to cause you to wallow in a sense of impotent despair. The purpose behind reading these signs is, precisely, ‘that they might return’ to God, as 30: 41 puts it.

We can give here a few examples, amongst many, of passages in the Qur’an that make crystal-clear the relationship between cosmic dissolution and human responsibility.

### Sūrat al-Zilzāl, ‘The Earthquake’, 99:1-8:

When the earth is shaken with her final shaking  
And the earth yields up her burdens  
And man says: what is wrong with her?  
That day she will relate her stories,  
Because your Lord will be inspiring her.  
That day mankind will issue forth in scattered  
groups to be shown their deeds.

So whoever has done good, [even] an atom’s weight, will see it then,  
And whoever has done evil, [even] an atom’s weight, will see it then.

We are taken from a terrifying vision of the final earthquake that will afflict the whole world, to the tiniest speck of our own actions. ‘Mother Earth’

will speak, in a language we will all understand; the spirit or guardian angel of our planet discloses everything that has happened to her. This shows us that Mother Earth is spiritually alive, silently absorbing and witnessing all the actions, good or bad, that every human has performed in relation to her since the beginning of time. In the end, she ‘yields up her burdens’ and tells her sorry tale. And this repository of human action then becomes the recipient of divine inspiration. Each one of us is brought face to face, then, not just with the consequences of our actions, but with those very actions themselves, right down to the last ‘atom’—nothing is left out of the vision we will have of what we have done, each and every moment of our lives. Nothing is hidden ‘on the day when all secrets are revealed’ (*yawma tubla’s-sarā’ir*) (al-Ṭāriq, ‘The Morning Star’, 86:9).

From a vision of the entire earth shaking and being ground into dust we are taken to a vision of the tiniest particle of our own actions. We are being led, in this powerful chapter, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic, from the destruction of the entire world to the restitution of our sense of personal responsibility for our actions. The world will come to an end, but we are accountable for every single act we commit. Despair and terror at the prospect of the end of the world gives way, within a few verses, to a sense of resolution to do whatever we can for the good of our eternal Hereafter in whatever time we have left in the herebelow. And this good cannot but redound to the benefit of the whole world, however difficult it may be to discern or measure that benefit. As we shall see shortly, the Holy Prophet teaches us that our worship—the prayers of each and every one of us—is crucially bound up with the wellbeing of the entire world.

Sūrat al-Takwīr, ‘The Folding Up’ (81).

Each of the verses in the opening section of this chapter is a description of the eschaton, of ‘Doomsday’, if you will; but each can also be read as an accurate description of one or other aspect of contemporary ecological and social crises:



‘When the sun is folded up’

We have an image of this in nuclear weapons, which quite literally ‘fold up’ the power of the sun into subatomic particles. Niels Bohr referred to the atom as a ‘miniature solar system’.

‘And the stars fall’

Here the Arabic is *inkadarat* meaning ‘difficult to see’, as if dust-covered; the stars appear thus in so many parts of the world today.

‘When the mountains are made to move’



One has only to go to Mecca and Medina to see the reality of that; places once dominated by hills are now flattened.

‘When the ten-month pregnant camel is abandoned’

A ten-month pregnant camel was the most valuable object for the Arab in the desert. The abandonment of this precious creature today, in favour of cars and jeeps, can be read as a sign of the abandonment of Virgin Nature as such, and the headlong pursuit of artificial constructs, man-made objects, etc.

‘When the wild beasts are herded together’

This is frighteningly accurate: a description of today’s world in which wild animals are practically no longer in ‘the wild’, but herded up in modern zoos.

‘When the seas rise’

The word *sujjirat* literally means ‘to rise and swell because of heat’: again, an accurate description of the rise in sea-levels brought about by global warming.

‘And when the souls are coupled’

Then, suddenly, we are taken from a cataclysmic finality to an extreme particularity, from the end of all things to a very specific sin:

‘When the girl who was buried alive is asked for  
what sin she was killed’

The cosmos is breaking down, but then we are confronted with one particular girl, who was killed only because she was a girl in the pre-Islamic days: the most universal collapse leads us straight to a single, specific, horrific crime. The link between cosmic finality and human responsibility is the principle being affirmed in this powerful juxtaposition: the end of the world does not diminish, in any way, shape

or form, the responsibility of each and every human being for each and every one of their actions.

In the verses cited, the contrast is between cosmic dissolution and moral transgression. In the verses which follow in this chapter, the contrast builds up to an eschatological crescendo—Hell is ‘ignited’, Heaven is ‘brought close’—and then we are given the most sombre of reminders of what is of ultimate concern: the spiritual state of the soul as it stands before God at the end of this process of cosmic collapse:

When the pages are laid open  
And the sky is torn away  
And hell is ignited  
And when Paradise is brought close  
*The soul will know what it has made present.*

### Sūrat al-Infiṭār, ‘The Cleaving’ (82:1-5)

When the Heaven is cleft asunder  
When the planets are dispersed  
When the seas are poured forth  
And the graves are overturned:  
*The soul will know what it has sent before and what it has left behind.*

Each soul will know exactly what it has accomplished for the real life about to begin, and what it has neglected to do. The disbeliever exclaims: ‘Woe be to me: would that I were dust!’ (Sūrat al-Naba<sup>ᶜ</sup>, ‘The Tidings’, 78:40). On the day of Reckoning, he will understand all too painfully the true proportions of things, being seized at his core by the fact that al-ḥayāt al-dunyā, the life of this lower world, was ‘nothing but sport and play (lahwun wa la<sup>ᶜ</sup>ibun)’, and that ‘verily the abode of the Hereafter, that is true Life (al-ḥayawān)’ (Sūrat al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Ankabūt, ‘The Spider’, 29:64).

Sūrat al-Nāzi‘āt, ‘Those who drag forth’, 79:34-41

Here, again, we are presented with the starkness of the contrast between the soul of the believer and that of the disbeliever on the Day of Judgment:

So when the greatest Disaster befalls  
The Day when man will remember that for which he strove  
And Hellfire is revealed for all to see—  
So as for him who was rebellious  
And chose the life of the world  
Verily, Hell will be his home.  
But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord  
And restrained his soul from selfish desire (*naha'n-nafsa 'ani'l-hawā*)  
Verily, the Garden will be his home.

Reference in the passage above to the capacity of the soul to restrain its selfish desire (*hawā*) as being the spiritual imperative flowing from authentic fear of God evokes the ‘greatest spiritual battle’, *al-jihād al-akbar*. Earlier, we saw how the soul which ‘commands evil’ (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) is linked to satanic impulse. Once the conscience is awoken, and the battle with the enemy within begins in earnest, the state of the soul which ensues is described in the Qur’an as *al-nafs al-lawwāma*, ‘the accusing soul’. This can be understood as the soul whose moral conscience and intellectual consciousness censures and blames and tries to rectify the corrupted will of the soul, engaged in vices, outward and inward. What we should note in this reference to the ‘accusing soul’ is that it comes in the form of an oath by God, an oath which follows another oath, whereby God swears by the Day of Resurrection, *Yawm al-Qiyāma*:

Nay, I swear by the Day of Resurrection  
And, nay, I swear by the accusing soul

It is clear that the two great realities by which God swears an oath are subtly connected. One might even say they are mirror-images of each other: what happens globally and universally on the Day of Resurrection is reflected, moment by moment, in this world, by the soul that is struggling against its faults. It is taking account of itself now, in accordance with the prophetic teaching: ‘Take yourselves to account before you are taken to account’ (*ḥāsibū qabla an tuḥāsabū*; Tirmidhī, *al-Jāmi‘*, Qiyāma, 25). Reading the verses following this dramatic double oath helps the sensitive soul to galvanise itself for the inevitable day of reckoning:

Does man think that we shall not assemble his bones?

Indeed, We are able to restore his very fingertips.

Nay, man would like to deny what lies before him.

He asks: when is the Day of Resurrection?

But when the sight is confounded

And the moon is eclipsed

And the sun and moon are joined

On that day, man will cry: whither to flee!

But no, there is no refuge

Unto your Lord is the recourse this Day.

On that Day, man is informed of what he has sent ahead

and what he has left behind.

O, man has insight into his own soul

Though he proffer his excuses.

SŪRAT AL-QIYĀMA, ‘THE RESURRECTION’, 75: 3-15

In these last two verses our unavoidable responsibility is highlighted after the cataclysmic signs of the Resurrection are terrifyingly depicted. The graphic depiction of the destruction of the cosmos electrifies our anticipation of the terror of the Resurrection; and this sense of terror of what is bound to come in the future is translated into a sense of absolute urgency about what we must do, here and now. Each soul knows exactly

what it is doing wrong, and what it must do to put itself right. Each of us has a God-given *baṣīra*, an insight, into our own shortcomings, however much the superficial part of the soul tries to justify itself with excuses. Our inner knowledge of the true state of our souls in this world, together with our total certainty of being taken to account on the Day of Judgment—these two dimensions of human consciousness are powerfully synthesised in the following verses from the *Sūrat al-Isrā*, ‘The Night Journey’, 17:13-14:

And to each person’s neck We have attached his augury, and We shall bring forth for him, on the Day of Resurrection, a Book which he shall find wide open. [And it will be said to him:] Read your Book—your own soul is sufficient to you, on this Day, as a reckoner (*ḥasīb*an).

The Holy Qur’an gives us many instances of this galvanising juxtaposition between the inevitable finality of the world and the inescapable actuality of human responsibility. The sudden, dramatic transposition from apocalyptic eschatology to spiritual accountability is found again and again, throughout the Qur’an, but most particularly in the early Meccan revelations, of which we have given just a few examples in this section.

Let us conclude with one last example, this time drawing attention to the ‘soul at peace’, *al-naḥs al-muṭma’inna*, the soul which has been given divine peace after its spiritual struggle at the level of the ‘accusing soul’ to which reference was made above. In this passage from the *Sūrat al-Fajr*, ‘The Dawn’ (89:21-29), the soul at peace is contrasted with the wretched state of the disbeliever. After describing the crushing and pulverising of the earth, the coming of the Lord and His angels in ranks, and the bringing forth of Hell, we are told that ‘on that day, man will remember—but what use will that remembrance be?’ He will cry out: ‘Oh, if only I had sent something [good] ahead of myself for this, my [real] life!’ By contrast, the soul at peace, who has constantly struggled against the overt vices mentioned earlier in the *Sūra* (‘Nay, but you honour not the orphan; and



urge not the feeding of the poor; and devour heritages with devouring greed; and love wealth with excessive love’, 89:17-20), and against the hidden vice of egotism which wishes to take pride in the fact of having struggled against the outer vices, the soul at peace is then addressed:

O, soul at peace  
Return to your Lord, content in His good pleasure!  
Enter among My servants  
Enter My Garden.

SŪRAT AL-FAJR, ‘THE DAWN’, 89:27-30

The human drama has come full circle: the redeemed soul, at peace with himself, his Lord and the whole of creation, is brought back to the Garden from which our first parents were expelled. Divine grace, elicited—but not caused—by human effort, finally undoes the dis-grace of the human condition in its fallen state. The soul returns to its true Home, to its origin, to the perfection of original human nature, but only after having been reduced to the ‘lowest of the low’; and, recognising this fact, striving for the deepening of faith, the elimination of vice, and the attainment of virtue:

Surely We created man in the most beautiful stature  
Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low  
Except those who believe and act virtuously  
for them is a reward unending.

SŪRAT AL-TĪN, ‘THE FIG’, 95:4-6

#### 4. Practical Ethics: The Prophetic Paradigm

Environmentalists give us sound ecological recommendations which, on the whole, are in harmony with the Qur’anic emphasis on conservation, on the sanctity of nature, on the necessity of frugality, on the avoidance of extravagance, of waste, and so on. We are told in many verses of the

Qur'an to avoid wasteful extravagance (*isrāf*); and we are also told to bring together that which is lawful and that which is wholesome: 'O mankind, eat that which is lawful and wholesome on earth, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan' (Sūrat al-Baqara, 'The Cow', 2:168).

One might say that in today's vocabulary the term *ṭayyib*, good, wholesome, can be translated as 'organic', that which is natural, uncontaminated by those who 'follow the footsteps of Satan'. We saw earlier that one of Satan's aims is to make mankind 'alter the creation of God', so in this verse we can understand following Satan's footsteps to mean following a path that is fundamentally unnatural in regard to our food. One only has to think of such aberrations as factory-farming for chickens in this connection, or the industrial rearing and feeding, not to mention genetic engineering, of cattle. As we saw above (4:119), Satan predicts that he will command mankind, instill false desires in them, and make them 'cut the ears of the cattle'—a sign of the aberration of man's relationship with the animal world.

If one wished to conduct a programme of environmental ethics, one need only study carefully the Sunna of the Prophet; one need only 'follow the footsteps' of the Prophet to inaugurate a radical re-orientation of our relationship with the natural world. If we go from Qur'anic theory to Prophetic practice we will see a most stunning exemplification of the highest spiritual ideals given in the Qur'an. One could find dozens of sayings and actions which embody and express this prophetic paradigm of practical ethical orientation towards the natural world. Each of these can be seen as cultivating a mentality of respect, of care, thoughtfulness, of a kind of *ḥilm*, that is, a wise, restrained and respectful circumspection in relation to all creatures, animate and inanimate; and also, crucially, there is *zuhd*—the quality which confers the capacity to abstain from all excessive desire, and to deem the life of this world (*al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*) of little account in relation to the Hereafter. As noted earlier: one contemplates and respects the Face of God within each thing, while detaching

oneself from the evanescent, vanishing face of the thing itself. Thus, a vision of the divine in all things translates into both contemplative reverence and spiritual detachment: the world becomes, from this point of view, a source of *dhikr*—remembrance of God through contemplating His *āyāt*; and it generates an attitude of *zuhd*, detachment from the impermanent for the sake of the Eternal.

### A few examples from the Sunna

First, let us note the strong warnings against wastefulness (*isrāf*). For example, in relation to water, a resource that is dwindling in various parts of the world at an alarming rate. The Holy Prophet remonstrated with one of his companions who was using too much water while performing his ablution: ‘Why such excess (*saraf*)?’ The companion replied: ‘Can there be excess in performing the ablution?’ The Prophet said, ‘Yes, even if you are using water from a flowing river’. (Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 7186; Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, no. 460). This simple injunction expresses a principle of fundamental importance: even if there is an abundance of water and the river is re-generating itself constantly, what matters above else is the attitude which one must have: an attitude of frugality, of conservation, based on heartfelt and permanent respect for this God-given resource. This attitude should be extended to the whole of creation, for water can be understood to represent all the resources of Virgin Nature, which are to be regarded as graces from God, signs of His bounty, and to be revered accordingly. (See the beautiful passage in the *Sūrat al-Wāqīʿa*, 56:57-74, which shows us that supernatural Grace is the reality underlying all apparently ‘natural’ causality.)

### Respect for animals

Reading the many reports of the Holy Prophet’s respect for animals make one feel utterly ashamed of the way in which animals are treated in our times. Here are a few examples:

- A prostitute was passing by a well where she saw a dog at the point of death from thirst. She fetched water from the well and quenched the dog's thirst. According to the Prophet, her sins were forgiven. (Cited in Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.3505; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.5998.)
- By contrast: A woman who starved a cat to death was damned, according to the Prophet. (Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.2405; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.5989).
- A sparrow killed in vain will come to stand before God's Throne on the Day of Judgment, crying 'O Lord! This man killed me pointlessly (*‘abathan*), for no benefit [i.e., just for sport].' (Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, no.4463; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no. 19779).
- A man asked the Prophet, 'Is there a reward for the charity that we give to animals?' He answered, 'For every being possessing a moist liver, there is a reward'. (Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.2403; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.5996).
- 'When you slaughter [your animals for food], you should slaughter well. Sharpen your knife and give relief to your slaughtered animal'. (Muslim *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.5167; Nasā'ī, *Sunan*, no.4422; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no.17388, etc.).
- 'Whoever mutilates a living creature and then does not repent, God will mutilate him on the Day of Judgement'. (Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no.5765).
- As the Muslim army were marching towards Mecca, on their way to the peaceful conquest of the city, they passed a bitch with puppies, and the Prophet gave orders that they were not to be disturbed, going so far as to post a man there to ensure that no harm came to the dogs. (See al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, Cairo, 1984, p.804).

- The pre-Islamic Arabs were accustomed to torturing their animals; such practices, together with organised fights between animals, were abolished, as was the customary overloading of beasts of burden. The Prophet is reported to have said in this connection: ‘If you behold three mounting an animal, stone them until one of them descends.’ (Cited by al-<sup>ḥ</sup>Asqalānī in *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, kitāb al-libās, part 99).

Let us note that the Prophet and his companions were virtually vegetarians, eating meat most probably not more than a few times each month. In this regard, the following saying of Imam ‘Alī is of great practical import for our times: ‘Do not make your stomachs graveyards of animals (*maqābir al-ḥayawān*)’. (Sharḥ Nahj al-balāgha, Ibn Abī’l-Ḥadīd, Beirut, 2009, vol.1, p.23; ....)

Respect for animals extends to the inanimate world—there are strong prohibitions regarding the unnecessary cutting down of trees. For example, the Holy Prophet said: ‘Whoever cuts down a lote tree, Allah will cast him headlong into the Fire’. (Abu Dawud, *Sunan*, no.5241).

## Fasting

One very practical and inspiring element of the Sunna which can be adopted by all who wish to do something concrete is this: to fast one or two days per week, Mondays and/or Thursdays. This was the prophetic custom, and it is full of significance both ecological and spiritual.

In adopting this practice, one enters into a new mould of thinking and is liberated from the prison of consumerism, allowing one to enjoy numerous spiritual benefits, such as the prolongation throughout the year of the spirit of Ramadan, that spirit of heightened sensitivity to the power of prayer which the Muslims experience during Ramadan, and the ‘taste’ of the happiness that comes through self-control, a foretaste of the beatitude of self-mastery and self-transcendence. This practice

would greatly assist the individual to adopt that moderate austerity, that mild asceticism (*zuhd*) that should be the framework for every Muslim and in general for all those who realise that the only way out of the environmental crisis is to radically reduce our consumption; and, most importantly, to eliminate the mind-set of insatiable desire generated by mass consumerism, advertising, and so on.

Let us recall the basic principle invoked earlier: the microcosm is inseparable from the macrocosm. What we do within our souls affects our environment. One of the most important verses affirming this necessity of individual change as the pre-requisite for global change is the following, mentioned briefly above: ‘Truly God will not change the condition of a people until they change the condition of their own souls’ (al-Raʿd, ‘Thunder’, 13:11).

The principle expressed here is reinforced by these verses:

‘... and whosoever fears God, God will appoint a way out for him,  
and will provide for him from a source which he did not expect. And  
whosoever places his trust in God, He will suffice him’

AL-ṬALĀQ, ‘DIVORCE’, 65:2-3

‘As for him who gives [generously] and fears [God], And affirms  
goodness, surely We will ease his way unto the state of ease’

AL-LAYL, ‘NIGHT’, 92:5-7

That means that the macrocosmic solution can never be divorced from the change that is required at the individual level. Whether our actions at the individual level generate enough critical mass to serve as a magnet, as it were, to attract the mercy and grace of God, is not for us to speculate. All we can do is give ourselves to these simple outward acts of austerity, conservation, mild asceticism in doing what we can for the environment, whilst realising that our rectification of our own inner faults contributes in an invisible way to the resolution of the environmental crisis. The greater our faith in this relationship between the inner and the outer world—the



greater our faith, that is, in the all-embracing reality of *Tawḥīd*—the more earnestly, joyfully, and gratefully shall we do whatever we can within the framework of possibilities given us by God through our destiny.

This does not in any way imply a kind of dilution of our sense of the transient nature of the world. Indeed, one of the key requirements of our current situation is to understand that the world is perishing; but we should also appreciate that our detachment from the world as a perishing entity will paradoxically enable us to give greater reverence to the world, to respect its sacred content even more deeply, and to put right whatever we can in our world. We need to see the world not as Heaven but as reflecting heavenly archetypes; we will perceive those archetypes more clearly if we are able to sense the ‘metaphysical transparency’ of the world. The more we are detached from the world on the level of its own manifestation, the more we attach ourselves to its sacred content which transcends the level of its manifestation. Then, the manifestations are respected as ‘signs’ of what goes beyond them. One gives more, not less, respect to the phenomena of Virgin Nature by seeing through them to their archetypes, the Divine Qualities of the ‘hidden treasure’ which ‘love to be known’.

### **Spiritual Action**

The Prophet made two important statements concerning the end of the world, statements which are subtly connected, and which point to the spiritual dimension of the solution of the crisis in which we are plunged:

- The Hour will not come for as long as there is someone on earth saying *Allāh, Allāh*. (Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.148).
- If the Hour is upon you, and you have a sapling in your hand, continue to plant the tree. (Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no.1249).

The first of these sayings leads us directly to the principle and practice of the ‘remembrance of God’, the invocation of the divine Name. One

should note the repetition of the name, it is not simply a question of saying and believing in God, but of invoking His name, repeating His name, intently, methodically. The Qur'an tells us that the canonical prayer, *al-ṣalāt*, keeps us away from indecency and evil, but 'the remembrance of God is greater (*wa la-dhikru'llāhi akbar*)' (Sūrat al-<sup>ʿ</sup>Ankabūt, 'The Spider', 29:45). Methodic invocation of the Name of God is the greatest act of worship, and its consequences are incalculable, for the individual and for the cosmos. Taking the prophetic teachings cited above in the light of this, and many other verses concerning *dhikr Allāh*, we see an allusion to the subtle but real relationship between the spiritual action of each individual and the very sustenance of the cosmos. The cosmos is, in an intangible but intelligible manner, sustained by spiritual action, by rites and rituals, by prayers and invocations, which form the core of the praxis of all the religions of mankind. There is an intrinsic relationship between human beings performing that function for the sake of which we were created and the creation itself. As we saw earlier: 'I only created the Jinn and mankind in order that they might worship Me' (al-Dhāriyāt, 'The Winnowing Winds', 51:56). So this worship, and in particular its quintessence, *dhikr Allāh*, purifies the heart, according to a well-known saying of the Holy Prophet: 'For everything there is a polish (*ṣiqāla*), and the polish of the hearts is *dhikr Allāh*' (cited in Bayhaqī). The repercussions of this purification are incalculable, but undeniable: the end of the world cannot come about even if one person is invoking God's Name. If the world is kept going only by prayer, the implication is that it is kept going *only for the sake of prayer*. This in turn implies that prayer is not only the reason why God created mankind and the Jinn, it is also the reason for the creation of the cosmos—as we saw earlier, everything in creation hymns the praises of the Lord. And let us remember that the purpose of prayer is the permanent, loving awareness of the presence of God. Human prayer, made on the basis of free will, on the one hand collaborates with the prayer of the cosmos; on the other, it as it were 'animates' cosmic prayer, for the final

collapse of the cosmos is kept at bay by human prayer. There are many sayings of the Holy Prophet referring to people through whom God averts disasters from the earth (often called the *Abdāl*, or ‘substitutes’); others referring to souls (often given as forty in number) whose hearts are akin to Abraham’s, and through them come food and drink for all mankind. Imam ‘Ali also gives us the following description of these saints, referring to them as the ‘servants of al-Rahman’ (*‘ibād al-Raḥmān*, see *al-Furqān*, 25:63-76), who belong to the highest category of mankind:

They have taken the earth as bedding, its water as perfume, the Qur’an as garment, and prayer as robe. Their eyes weep, their clothing is dusty; and they have severed all ties with this world. If they leave, they are not missed, and if present they remain unknown. If they ask for a hand in marriage, they are refused, and if they speak they are not heeded. Yet it is because of them that God averts scourges, calamities, and trials from the world. It is because of them that God gives people water to drink, by sending rain from the sky, droplets from the clouds. They are the servants of God. Truly. Yes, truly (*ḥaqqan, ḥaqqan*).

(Cited in al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā’ī’s collection of sayings of Imam ‘Ali, *Dustūr ma‘ālim al-ḥikam*, translated by Tahera Qutbuddin as *A Treasury of Virtues: Sayings, Sermons and Teachings of ‘Ali*, p. 65; translation modified)

Let us look at the second saying of the Holy Prophet: When you see the Hour approaching, and you are planting a tree, continue with the planting of the tree. We can understand from this saying that we must never think that our action is of no consequence simply because Doomsday is upon us. The planting of the tree is to be completed because it can bear consequences that go infinitely beyond our imagination. Any good action, no matter how seemingly insignificant—and what could be more apparently useless than planting a tree when the whole world is collapsing?—every good action, then, is of immense significance not because of its magni-

tude or ‘weight’ in worldly terms, but because of its quality of goodness. The Qur’an asks us: ‘is the reward of goodness anything but goodness?’ (al-Raḥmān, ‘The Compassionate’, 55: 60). Acts are judged according to intention, as the Holy Prophet taught, so this ‘atom’s weight’ of good—planting a tree moments before the end of the world—will not be judged according to its worldly consequences but according to the measure of the goodness of the intention motivating the act. God, the source of all goodness—including the goodness of our good intentions and actions—promises to transform our puny actions on earth into pure wine in Paradise: ‘Their Lord serves drink to them [in Paradise] a pure wine: this is indeed your reward, your effort is gratefully acknowledged (*kāna sa’yukum mashkūran*) (al-Insān, 76:21-22).

We see here an ‘alchemical’ miracle: the ‘lead’ of our earthly action is transmuted into the ‘gold’ of celestial wine by virtue of that ‘elixir’ of heartfelt sincerity eliciting divine Grace—a transformative grace manifested through the divine quality of gratitude, *al-Shakūr* (and let us not forget that the words ‘grace’ and ‘gratitude’ share the same Latin root). Our effort, insofar as it is motivated by sincere intention, has consequences that infinitely transcend the scale of our earthly actions. The Qur’an refers in several places to the idea of effort (*sa’ī*): the sincerity of an intention is proved by the effort we make for the sake of bringing about that which we intend. Some verses on this theme that richly reward deep reflection:

- The Day when man will remember that for which he strove (al-Nāzi‘āt, ‘Those who drag forth’, 79:35—cited above)
- There is nothing for man [in the Hereafter] but that for which he has striven; and his effort will be visible (al-Najm, ‘The Star’, 53:39-40)
- On that Day, souls [literally: ‘faces’] will be delighted, content on account of their effort (al-Ghāshiya, ‘The Overwhelming’, 88:9-10)
- And whoever desires the Hereafter, and strives towards it with due

effort (*wa sa‘ā lahā sa‘yahā*), and is a believer—for such, their effort is gratefully acknowledged (*kāna sa‘yuhum mashkūran*) (*al-Isrā’*, ‘The Night Journey’, 17:19)

- Indeed the Hour is surely coming—I would well-nigh conceal it—that every soul may be rewarded for that for which it strove (*Tā-Hā*, 20:15)

Let us return to the idea of planting a tree in the very teeth of the Hour. Between the planting of the tree and *dhikr* Allāh there is a very subtle relationship. In the chapter named after Abraham, we have this verse: ‘Do you not see how God strikes similitudes? A good word is as a good tree. Its roots are firm and its branches reach up into heaven. It gives forth its fruits in every season, by the leave of its Lord’ (*Ibrāhīm*, 14: 24-25).

So here we have a combination of a natural image with the practice of the invocation. Spiritually speaking, the roots of the divine Name are firm, deep within the divine ground, the ultimate Reality. The heaven-reaching branches are akin to the celestial ascent of the invocation from the invoker to the Invoked (*al-Madhkūr*). In the words of Martin Lings (Shaykh Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din), commenting on this passage:

This may be interpreted: an invocation, and above all the Supreme Name which is the best of good words, is not a flat utterance which spreads horizontally outwards in this world to be lost in thin air, but a vertical continuity of repercussions throughout all the states of being. (*What is Sufism?*, p.85)

And the fruits come forth ‘in every season’. The fruits of the invocation, of all spiritual actions, transcend time, space and all earthly limitations and scales of measurement. But they also have an immeasurable impact on our earthly environment, the ‘fruits’ of prayer fall to earth; and the earth is thereby nourished in myriad, albeit invisible, ways. This seems to be what is implied by the Holy Prophet’s sayings about the holy souls through whom heavenly graces are channelled, graces which avert catastrophes

and sustain the natural world. Only when they pass away—when there is nobody left on earth invoking Allāh, Allāh—does Doomsday come to pass.

This perspective on *dhikr* Allāh, and its relationship to the natural world is not, by any means, confined to Islam. It is something that is found in all religious traditions and, in a sense, it is an expression of the principle that the whole of creation is the utterance of God, a spoken Word (*qawl*) of God, the Name of God. The Name is always an expression of the Named. So when a human being within the world utters the divine Name, that human being is integrating himself within the divine Nature and the whole of creation thereby participates in that re-integration. Platonic philosophy brings this truth home through its notion of remembrance—*anamnesis*, literally, the undoing of forgetfulness. The principle of remembrance (literally: re-mem-bering, to put back together what has been dismembered) through invocation of the Name of God is also expressed in all the major spiritual traditions of the world, as is the idea that the human microcosm is a small world, one which is not just part of the macrocosm, but a recapitulation of it in its entirety. To change the one is to change the other. This is a concomitant of the principle of *Tawḥīd*. Every single phenomenon is interwoven with every other phenomenon in the entire universe, and affects it in ways that are just beginning to be glimpsed through the discoveries of postmodern physics, and through such ideas as ‘morphic resonance’ championed and scientifically substantiated by Rupert Sheldrake. But these ideas have always been known, and indeed spiritually realised, by the sages and saints, and intuited by the pious, of all the world’s great spiritual traditions.

For those of us who believe in these subtle dimensions of *Tawḥīd* as an active, unifying principle, the result is that ‘hope springs eternal’: we are given the grace of a resolve perpetually renewed by spiritual hope, not infantile optimism. This hope and this resolve, together with trust and resignation, subsist even in the face of imminent collapse; our relationship with God should, in principle, regenerate ever anew a firm resolve



to do whatever we can to improve ourselves and our environment, social and natural; and to do so as an expression of our sheer gratitude to the Creator. Purifying our souls; rectifying our attitudes and actions towards Mother Nature; preparing ourselves for the encounter with God, in the ‘real’ life of the Hereafter; wholeheartedly praying, reciting the Qur’an, singing God’s praises, invoking His Name—all of this, we believe, cannot but have beneficial repercussions for ourselves and our world, spiritually and morally, both in the herebelow and in the Hereafter. We believe that these repercussions reverberate throughout the whole universe, and thus contribute in incalculable ways to the magnetising of that Grace which, alone, can resolve the crises mankind has inflicted upon Mother Nature.

On the one hand, the ‘corruption’ wrought by mankind should cause us to ‘return’ to God: ‘Corruption has appeared on earth and at sea because of what the hands of men have wrought; in order that God may make them taste the consequences of their actions; so that they might return’ (Sūrat al-Rūm, ‘The Romans’, 30:41). And on the other, the more wholeheartedly we return to the Lord, the greater the possibility of global change through His Grace. Again, let us cite once more the verse which we should always bear in mind, as it constantly takes us from a paralysing sadness at the state of the world to a grace-filled resolution to put right the state of our own soul, and thereby, to participate in the process by which divine grace will put right the state of our world:

Truly God will not change the condition of a people until they  
change the condition of their own souls

AL-RĀʿD, ‘THE THUNDER’, 13:11

## From the Secular to the Sacred

By now, the difference between an Islamic conception of environmental ethics and a secular one should have become clear. Both may, on the surface, appear to have the same goals, but in truth the Islamic perspective integrates an environmental ethic within a much more universal

framework of reality, not only addressing the surface manifestations of the environmental crisis, but also engaging its deeper roots in the fundamental spiritual and psychological tendencies which gave rise to the crisis in the first place. We receive many laudable recommendations and proposals by secular environmentalists, urging us to change our actions and even our habits; and such recommendations are in accord with the Qur’anic emphasis on conservation, on the necessity of frugality, on the avoidance of extravagance, of waste, and so on.

However, a secular set of recommendations regarding environmental ethics is flat and horizontal, lacking the dimensions of height and depth which are bestowed by a sacred view of the environment, one in which wholesome attitudes towards the natural world are rooted in the principle of *Tawḥīd*, which engages all levels of the ‘environment’, from the material to the moral to the spiritual and the Divine. Thus, a circumspect attitude towards creation goes hand in hand with moral responsibility to the Creator and spiritual attunement to the ultimate nature of Reality. Then our environmental ethics will be inspired by the sanctifying beauty of Mother Nature, the awe-inspiring majesty of her Creator, and the transforming alchemy of Divine Grace.

