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# The Contemporary Islamic World and the Environmental Crisis

*by Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

## The Significance of the Issue

**B**oth people and governments in the Islamic world, as elsewhere, are naturally paying attention to sundry problems, but outside the purely spiritual and religious dimensions of life, nothing is more important and worthy of consideration today than the environmental crisis. This crisis encompasses the natural ecological system of the globe as well as the human ambience, the air we breathe, the food we consume, the water we drink, and even the inner workings of our bodies. The crisis also endangers the harmony of the whole fabric of life on Earth and the system that makes human life possible. And yet, most Muslims, much like their fellow human beings, are wandering through this unprecedented crisis like sleepwalkers, barely aware of what goes on about them or of the deeper causes of a crisis that threatens human existence itself here on Earth. And this sleepwalking by the majority is taking place despite the powerful and persuasive spiritual teachings of Islam about the natural world and the relation of human beings to it.

My own concern with issues of the environmental crisis goes back to the early 1950s and my student days at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. Always sensitive to the beauty of nature, I used to walk alone, like Thoreau, around Walden Pond when the natural scenery of the area was still well preserved. It was the construction of Route 128 around Boston and the consequent separation, ecologically speaking, of the area inside the beltway from the relatively unhindered countryside beyond that brought home to me the fact that something was basically wrong in our relationship to nature. As a result of this human experience and of years of study not only of modern but also of traditional science along with religious perspectives concerning the natural world, I was led to foresee a major environmental crisis, whose real causes were spiritual, looming





on the horizon. I saw the blind development of modern industry as a cancer in the body of nature; this development was like a cancerous substance which would finally lead to the destruction of the harmony and balance of the natural world and to its "death" in the form that we knew it.

Upon returning to Iran in 1958, I took every opportunity to speak about the subject of the environmental crisis, and in 1966 I delivered the Rockefeller Series Lectures at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago on the theme of the encounter of human beings and nature and the spiritual crisis of the modern world, which predicted the environmental crisis and pointed to its spiritual roots. Although my book *Man and Nature*<sup>1</sup> containing the text of these lectures appeared in 1968 and was translated into several European languages, it was not translated into Persian until a couple of years ago and has never appeared in Arabic. Despite my efforts and those of a small number of Islamic scholars who turned to the subject from the 1970s onward, general indifference to the environmental crisis and apathy in seeking to find solutions to it based on Islamic principles continued until the 1980s and 1990s when, gradually, voices began to be heard concerning this issue among both members of the general public and various governmental agencies. Yet, even now those voices are often drowned out by those of others whose agendas do not put a priority on the preservation of the environment. Furthermore, among religious scholars in the Islamic world, who wield so much influence among ordinary people, only a few have risen to strongly defend the Islamic teachings about the natural environment and to criticize in depth actions taken by both governmental and non-governmental agencies which are detrimental to the health of the environment.

One can say, therefore, that despite a gradual rise in recognition of the seriousness of the environmental crisis in many Islamic countries and the reformulation in a contemporary language of both legal and philosophical/theological teachings of Islam about the natural environmental, there is still a general lack of awareness of this crucial matter. Furthermore, there is a clear lack of the will that is necessary to prevent further deterioration of the environment, a deterioration brought about through actions often carried out in the name of human welfare, but which result in the destruction of the health of the natural world without which human welfare, and in fact human existence itself, would not be possible. We must ask, therefore, why it is that the

Islamic view of nature and concrete directives for human action in the natural world are not being emphasized by governmental authorities or even by the majority of 'ulamā', who are the traditional guardians of Islamic knowledge in its various dimensions.

## Obstacles to Realizing and Implementing the Islamic View of the Natural Environment

When one studies the Islamic view of nature and humankind's relation to the natural environment, as well as the way classical Islamic civilization created a society and especially an urban setting in harmony with nature, and when one compares these realities with the situation in the Islamic world today, it becomes obvious that neither governments nor most people in Muslim countries are following Islamic principles in their treatment of the natural environment. Nor are most of the 'ulamā' teaching and preaching the Islamic view of this subject to the public. Furthermore, many Muslims, especially those uprooted from their villages and the countryside and residing often in squalid conditions in larger towns and cities, are not even continuing the practices of their parents and grandparents back in their villages as far as matters pertaining to the natural environment are concerned. One must therefore ask what the obstacles are to knowing and then implementing Islamic teachings concerning the natural environment.

This question becomes particularly pertinent if one remembers that throughout nearly the whole Islamic world, the religion of Islam is still strong. The mosques are full, and on Fridays thousands upon thousands listen to preachers discussing various issues. Books and media programs dealing with Islam have a vast readership and audience. To answer this question, we must turn to deeper causes that concern, not the religion of Islam, which places so much responsibility on human beings in their relation to nature, but the external obstacles that prevent these teachings (to which we shall turn later in this essay) from being propagated and implemented in a society in which the voice of religion is still very strong and where all ethics, whether they be personal, social, or environmental, have a religious foundation.

Let us then turn to a number of the major obstacles:

1. The present environmental crisis is directly related to the use of modern technology and the various applications of modern



science. One can see this in problems as far apart as the rise in population due to the practice of modern medicine and global warming caused by a set of complex industrial factors. But modern science and technology also provide those who possess them with power and are in fact the main reason the West can exercise domination over other societies, including the Islamic countries. Consequently, both Muslim governments and many Muslim individuals want to gain access to the very technology which has had devastating environmental consequences. Seeking to gain power for themselves in the intricate political and economic situation of today's world, they are, at best, always at the receiving end of a technology that is ever changing and needs to be constantly borrowed anew from the West and, to some extent, Japan. There is no pause in the development of ever newer forms of technology, a pause that might allow Islamic societies to create some form of equilibrium with the technology that is borrowed, to "humanize" certain aspects of it to the degree possible, and to minimize its negative environmental impact.<sup>2</sup> The governing classes in the Islamic world have their eyes only on emulating the West when it comes to the question of science and technology, but they are emulating an ever-changing model. They therefore remain constantly on the receiving end in a situation in which it is difficult, although not impossible, to apply Islamic principles to the economic and environmental fields while still being part of what is euphemistically called the global economic order. They seem to have neither the insight nor the courage and will to create an Islamic economic order in which the Islamic view of the relation of human beings to the natural environment would be central. And, being at the receiving end, they are even less prepared than the highly industrialized countries to ameliorate, to some extent at least, the negative effects of modern technology.

2. In the present period of human history, the agenda for major social and economic matters, including the applications of science and technology, is set by the West, while the rest of the world tries its best to provide answers on the basis of its own cultures. Rarely do non-Western cultures and societies

have the power to set the agenda themselves. This includes newer factors contributing to the environmental crisis itself and proposals for its solution. For example, recently the West has developed biotechnologies that are already having a global impact not only in medicine but also in agriculture. Muslims did not invent the problems arising from genetically altered crops. That agenda was set by the West. But they must now grapple with them, as they must grapple with the ethical consequences of cloning. Muslims, like nearly all other non-Westerners except perhaps the Japanese, have to accept the fact that in so many crucial issues the technologically more powerful West chooses both the playing field and the rules of the game. Obviously, this constitutes a formidable challenge to Islamic governments and societies if they wish both to implement the Islamic principles involved and to play the game. If they choose not to do so, external pressures become so great as to force them to enter the playing field. Only smaller units can in some cases remain separate and not have to participate in the game of the day, whose rules are set beyond one's borders.

3. Such rapid transformations are made possible by those who constitute the vanguard of what one could call "Faustian Science," to use the language of Goethe. There are only a few Muslims in that vanguard group, but they are for the most part different from others only in that they have Muslim names. Otherwise, they usually accept completely the modern scientific worldview and are champions of "Faustian Science." They also usually look upon Islamic science as simply a prelude to modern science, not as a science based on a sacralized and not secularized view of nature. Although the number of such advanced scientists in the Islamic world is small, scientism has a fairly substantial following, especially among the ruling classes in various Islamic societies. In fact, modernists as well as so-called fundamentalists are all in favor of the propagation of modern science and technology, to the extent possible, and of increasing Muslim participation in furthering the growth of "Faustian Science." Needless to say, such an attitude constitutes a major obstacle to the propagation



of the Islamic view of nature and the cultivation of sciences based on Islamic principles.<sup>3</sup>

4. On a more practical level there is the major obstacle of the migration of the vast number of people from the countryside to urban areas. Typically, such people lived in ecological harmony with their environment back home in their villages. They cared for animals and plants and were careful not to pollute their water resources. But once cut off from their traditional surrounding, they become uprooted people, dislocated not only on the human plane but also in their relation to the natural world. In urban settings usually impoverished and full of all kinds of pollution, their task becomes solely the survival of themselves and their families, with little interest in anything else. Even if the municipality plants trees before their houses, they usually care little for them and are often instrumental in their destruction. In contrast to the earlier population, which occupied the centers of the older Islamic cities and lived with an awareness of its responsibilities toward its environment, the new occupants, although from the countryside, wreak havoc not only upon shanty towns but also upon the old urban centers they now occupy. One need only to look at the old city in Fez or the heart of Cairo to realize the problem and to see how difficult it is to reeducate the more recent migrated groups in environmental concerns and make them regain the same respect for their new environment that they displayed back home in the countryside where they felt that the tree outside was their tree to be protected and the stream flowing by their house was their stream, not to be polluted. The mass migration of people from the countryside to the cities, which is a global phenomenon and one of the results of modern industrialization, is as fully evident in the Islamic world as elsewhere. Its effect on both the cities and the countryside has been devastating as far as the natural environment is concerned.
5. Governments in the Islamic world are, needless to say, confronted with these and many other social and economic difficulties not all of their own making. But solutions offered

even by relatively benign governments interested in the welfare of their people have been and remain to a large extent based on Western models. Nearly always they seek to apply attempted Western solutions to problems of Islamic society. Although there have been a few changes here and there in recent years, blind imitation of the West in this domain remains the norm in most places. Now, these governments wield power over their societies and use their power to oppose by force any movement which would challenge them. Since they base their solution to the environmental crisis on various Western models, they remain, naturally, opposed to any voice which seeks Islamic solutions, unless there is a situation in which such a solution would be favorable to the government in question.

6. The autocratic, and in some cases dictatorial, nature of regimes in many Islamic countries makes an environmental movement based on Islamic principles a threatening undertaking if it challenges government policies and plans—many of which are dangerous from the environmental point of view. One needs only to recall the opposition of the Ministry of Housing in Egypt two generations ago to the remarkable village built by the great Egyptian architect Hasan Fathy, because his philosophy of architecture—based on the use of local materials with full awareness of the necessity of the integration of architecture and the natural environment—was opposed to the views of the Ministry, which were based completely on prevalent Western ideas of the day. Considering how volatile opposition to state planning can be in such instances, in many Islamic countries open criticism of environmentally dangerous programs supported by the government can be politically dangerous. It is true that there are now “green groups” in certain Islamic countries, such as Iran, and that these groups assemble here and there to resist the destruction of the environment. And it is true that some governments have ministries and bureaus in charge of environmental matters. Nevertheless, in much of the Islamic world, open opposition to governmental policies which are environmentally dangerous can be politically risky, as is also the case in India, China,



and many other countries. This lack of freedom to oppose openly government policies which endanger the environment is a major obstacle in many countries from Bangladesh to Malaysia. This is one of the tragic conditions of our times, just when we so need to have heard those voices which speak for the health of the whole planet, and do not only claim to address the need for self-gratification of only one species, that is, human beings.

7. Strangely enough, movements in the Islamic world which have sought to revive Islamic teachings, often in opposition to existing political orders, have been for the most part blind to Islamic teachings about the natural environment. When such groups have opposed modernists and secularists on many issues, they have for the most part agreed completely with the latter group in their blind imitation of Western technology, servitude toward modern science and its application, and indifference to the consequences of the adoption of modern technology for the natural environment, as well as for the souls and minds of Muslims. They always speak of justice, but not of justice for all forms of life; although they espouse the causes of Islamic revival, they do not contribute to the revival of the Islamic understanding of the natural environment and of our responsibilities toward God's creation beyond the human world. It is interesting to note that Saudi Arabia, which is dominated by Wahhabism and which is usually called "fundamentalist," was the theater in the 1970s and 1980s for the largest transfer of Western technology in history. Yet, very few voices were raised concerning the consequences of this technology on the environment. Such concerns are only now being expressed in that country and some action is being taken. Also, when the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran occurred, there was at first strong opposition to the national park system created during the royal regime and many protected animals were killed. It was years before the government realized the importance of environmental issues and created the position of a vice president to deal with the subject. Altogether, the political revival of Islam has not meant an automatic revival of Islamic teachings concerning nature.

The revival of the latter has come through individuals and small groups who have made governments, whether modernist or "fundamentalist," gradually realize the crucial significance of the environmental crisis and the role that Islamic teachings can play in solving that crisis.

8. Finally, in enumerating the obstacles in Islamic societies confronting the task of reformulating Islamic teachings about the environment and implementing them in society at large, one must mention the lack of awareness and preparation of the traditional scholars (*'ulamā'*) who are the custodians of Islam and who have the ear of the vast majority of Muslims in all matters, including those pertaining to the environmental crisis. There are several reasons for this state of affairs. First, human beings traditionally were not a danger to the environment and lived more or less in equilibrium with it. Preachers in mosques, when addressing the relation between human beings and nature, usually spoke about ethical matters, including kindness to animals and the virtue of planting trees as the Prophet had commanded. They did not have to address the dangers of the destruction of bio-diversity and global warming. Second, during the past two centuries, Islam was attacked by intrusive colonialists and aggressively proselytized by either Christian or secularist missionaries from the West. Much of the energy of Muslim religious scholars was spent defending Islam from those attacks and preserving the people's religious identity. Third, as modernism spread within Islamic society itself, the *'ulamā'* saw their duty primarily as one of guiding people to the right path amid the chaos created within sectors of Islamic society itself, and they did not spend their energies studying in depth what was occurring in the West.

As far as the environment is concerned, even in the West itself Christian and Jewish theologians and thinkers did not turn to the "theology" of nature until the 1980s and 1990s; in the Islamic world the same trend is now gradually being seen. There are now a few eminent Muslim *'ulamā'*, such as the grand mufti of Syria, Shaykh Ahmad Kiftaru, who speak often of the Islamic teachings about the environment. But



the majority are still unaware of the urgency of this matter. When they do speak about it, it is often at the instigation of governments which want people to clean up the stream near their home or not to litter the park next door—but nothing more basic that could threaten various government projects. Governments know full well the power of the *'ulamā'* to influence the public at large. The problem, as far as the environment is concerned, is that most *'ulamā'* still remain unaware of the centrality of environmental issues. Nor do they realize how important their contributions can be to the physical, psychological, and social health of their communities. These traditional scholars need to become fully aware of Islamic teachings about the environment and be willing to speak about and act on them with courage in the face of immediate political considerations and contingencies.

### Islamic Sources and Their Teachings on the Environment

As in the case of everything else Islamic, the primary source of Islamic teachings about the natural environment is the Quran, in which the foundation of the relation between human beings and the world of nature is clearly stated. Then there are the collections of *ḥadīth*, in which one can find numerous sayings of the Prophet concerning the treatment of nature by human beings. After these twin sources of Islam, one must point to the injunctions of Islamic Law, or *Sharī'ah*. Although environmental law is not considered a distinct and separate part of the *Sharī'ah* in the same way that it has developed as a distinct domain of law in the West, recently there have been numerous *sharī'ite* injunctions dealing specifically with the environment, with such matters as water, soil, animal, and plants—issues that have a distinct bearing on the natural world and, in fact, constitute the natural environment. Likewise, texts of Islamic ethics are of significance, in their concern both with such human passions as greed, which have such a devastating effect on the environment in the modern context, and with animals and even plants.

On another level, one must mention texts of Islamic philosophy dealing with nature. The main schools of Islamic theology, or *kalām*, did not pay much attention to a "theology of nature" which

would be of significance in the present-day environmental crisis. By contrast, numerous works of Islamic philosophy provide not only an Islamic philosophy of nature, but what in the West would be called a "theology of nature." This is also true of Sufism, which contains the most profound expressions of an Islamic "metaphysics and theology of nature." Certain Sufi texts bring out the most inward meaning of the Quranic doctrine concerning the cosmos and human beings' relation to the world of nature.

Over the centuries Islam produced a major scientific tradition which dealt with the world of nature and at the same time functioned within an Islamic universe of discourse. This scientific tradition has much to offer in the process of formulating a contemporary language expressing Islamic views of the relation of human beings and the natural environment. This contemporary Islamic view, in conjunction with various forms of technology developed in Islamic civilization, could help find a way out of the impasse created by the current environmental crisis.

Islamic art complements Islamic science and its expressions, especially in architecture, landscaping, and urban design. These are visible applications and embodiments of the Islamic sciences of nature and cosmology. A careful study of the traditional Islamic arts, especially those just mentioned, could be an important source of both knowledge and inspiration for creating human living spaces in harmony, rather than discord, with the natural environment.

One of the Islamic arts is literature, which, in the form of poetry especially, has been able to propagate the most profound teachings about the spiritual significance of nature among intellectual elite and ordinary people. Numerous Arabic-speaking peoples recall the verse of the Arab poet Abu Nuwas:

*Wa li-kulli shay'in lahu āyatun,  
Tadullu 'alā annahu wāḥidun.*

In everything there resides a sign of Him,  
Providing proof that He is one.

And, is there a Persian speaker who has not heard the verse of Sa'di in his *Gulistān*?



*Bi jahān khurram az ānam ki jahān khurram az ūst,  
‘Āshigam bar hama ‘ālam ki hama ‘ālam az ust.*

I am joyous in the world of nature for the world of nature is  
joyous through Him,

I am in love with the whole cosmos for the whole cosmos  
comes from Him.

Various literatures of the Islamic people, ranging from Arabic and Persian to Bengali and Swahili, contain a vast wealth of material on the Islamic view of the relationships between human beings and the natural environment. Literature is also an excellent means for the propagation of that view among contemporaries, not only through recourse to classical works, but also through the help of present-day writers and poets, some of whom could surely turn their attention to this subject if they were to be made aware of its crucial importance. If we were to examine these sources, what would we learn about Islamic teachings concerning the environment? Some work has already been done in this domain, and here one can only summarize some of its most relevant and salient features. The Quran in a sense addresses the cosmos as well as human beings, and the world of nature participates in the Quranic revelation. The cosmos itself is in fact God's first revelation, and upon the leaves of trees, the faces of mountains, the features of animals, as well as in the sounds of the winds and gently flowing brooks, are to be found the signs of God. These are the messages of that primordial revelation. That is why classical Islamic thought refers to both the recorded Quran (*al-qur'ān al-tadwīnī*) and the cosmic Quran (*al-qur'ān al-takwīnī*). Furthermore, the verses of the Quran, the phenomena in the world of nature, and events within the souls of human beings are all referred to as portents or signs (*āyat*) of God by the Quran itself, as in the verse, "We shall show them our portents (*āyat*) upon the horizons and within themselves, until it becomes manifest unto them that it is the truth" (41:53, Pickthall translation). Likewise, all the creatures in the natural world sing the praise of God. In destroying a species, we are in reality silencing a whole class of God's worshippers.

In the Quranic view creation is sacred but not divine, for divinity belongs to God alone. Nature is sacred because it is the effect of the Divine Creative Act to which the Quran refers in the verse, "But,

His command, when He intendeth a thing, is only that He saith unto it: 'Be!' and it is (*kun fa-yakūn*)" (36:81). What issues directly from the Will of the One who is also called the All-Sacred (*al-Quddūs*) in Islam and what reflects His Wisdom cannot but be sacred. Nature reflects the Wisdom (*hikmah*) of God and His Will (*irādah*), as also the Quran repeats in different places that it was created in truth and not falsehood. Nature is not there only for our use. It is there to reflect the creative Power of God, and grace, or *barakah*, also flows in the arteries and veins of the universe. Human beings are created to be a channel of grace for the cosmic ambience in which they live. Creatures in the world of nature not only have a relation with human beings and through them with God, they also have a direct relation with God and possess an eschatological significance. The Islamic paradise is full of animals and plants and is not only crystalline. Creatures will speak directly to God on the Day of Judgment. As Rumi says, "They are silent here but eloquent there." He adds in another poem:

If only creatures had tongues (here below),  
They could lift the veil from the Divine mysteries.

In fact, like the Quran whose verses have levels of meaning, the phenomena of nature possess inward levels of meaning and significance. The reality of nature is not exhausted by its outward appearance. Each phenomenon is precisely "an appearance" of a noumenal reality. The phenomena of nature are not only facts but are primarily symbols related to the higher states of being. Nature is not only the domain of quantity, the source of power and resource. It is above all the abode of spiritual presence and source for the understanding and contemplation of divine wisdom. Our need for nature is not only in its ability to feed and shelter our physical bodies, but also and above all in its ability to nurture our souls. As the complement to the Quran as revelation, nature responds to our spiritual needs.

A central concept of Islam cited often in the Quran is *haqq* (pl. *huqūq*), which means at once truth, reality, right, law, and due. The term *al-Haqq* is also a Name of God as well as of the Quran.<sup>5</sup> It is also of the utmost importance for understanding the Islamic view of human beings in relation to the natural environment when it is used in the case of creatures. According to Islam, each being exists by virtue of the truth (*haqq*) and is also owed its due (*haqq*) according



to its nature. The trees have their due, as do animals or even rivers and mountains. In dealing with nature, human beings must respect and pay what is due to each creature, and each creature has its rights accordingly. Islam stands totally against the idea that we human beings have all the rights and other creatures have none except what we decide to give them. The rights of creatures were given by God and not by us, to be taken away when we decide to do so.

The Quran speaks of human beings as both servants of God (*'abd Allāh*) and vicegerents of God (*khalīfat Allāh*). We have the right to practice our vicegerency on Earth only on the condition that we remain God's servants and obey His Will and His Laws. Even the permission to dominate (*taskhīr*) the earth is given to us on the condition that we remain in a state of submission to and servanthood of God. God dominates over His creation, but He also cares for it. In contrast to the interpretation of certain Muslim modernists and so-called fundamentalists, the Quran does not under any condition give human beings the right to dominate nature without protecting it and acting as its steward. We cannot take away the *ḥaqq* of various creatures given to them by God, but must pay each being its due (*ḥaqq*) in accordance with the nature of that creature. As for our rights (*ḥuqūq*) over nature, like other rights, they must follow our responsibilities toward God and the world of nature. In Islam there are no human rights without human responsibilities. Rights follow and do not precede responsibilities.<sup>6</sup>

The Prophet of Islam, who was the first and surest guide for the understanding of the Quran and whose sayings (*aḥādīth*) and actions and deeds (*sunnah*) complement the Quranic teachings about the natural world, reflected the Quranic teachings about the treatment of the natural world in his daily life. He encouraged the planting of trees, banned destroying vegetation even during war, loved animals and displayed great kindness to them, and encouraged other Muslims to do likewise. He even established protected areas for natural life, which may be considered Islamic prototypes for contemporary natural parks and nature conservancies. The books of *ḥadīth* are replete with sayings pertaining to the world of nature and the attitude of human beings to it, including strong opposition to wastefulness and the needless destruction of nature based only on greed and avarice. The *aḥādīth* emphasize cleanliness and disapprove of the pollution

of water and other substances that support life. It is the Prophet who said that it was a blessed act to plant a tree, even if it were the day before the end of the world.

There is a traditional account which displays the Prophet's attitude toward the natural environment and which should serve as a powerful lesson for contemporary Muslims. It has to do with the famous reclining palm tree of Seville, which the celebrated Andalusian Sufi Ibn 'Arabī mentioned in his account of the life of the Prophet. He considered the Prophet's dealing with the tree to be one of his miracles. The account given by Ibn 'Arabī is as follows:

In the vicinity of the Cemetery of Mushka [in Seville] ... there was a palm tree which, as one could see, was leaning over a great deal. The people in the neighboring houses, fearing that it might fall on their homes and damage them, complained to the local ruler who, in response to their concern, ordered it to be cut down. Those who were going to cut it down arrived at the place after the evening prayer and said: "It will soon be dark. Let us cut it down tomorrow, if God wills" ...

Now, it so happened that one of our companions [had a vision in which] he saw the Envoy of God—may God bless him and give him peace—sitting in a mosque situated in the middle of the Cemetery of Mushka. [And he saw how] the palm tree in question was ploughing through the ground with its roots until it arrived at his side. It then complained to him that the people wanted to cut it down on account of its curvature, for fear that it might harm their houses, and it said to him, "O Envoy of God, pray for me!"

The person who had the vision related that the Envoy of God then placed his hand on the palm tree, which immediately straightened, remaining upright and erect, and returned to its place.

In the morning, when the people got up, I went with a group of individuals to establish the veracity of that vision and we all saw that it had straightened up and become erect, without any curvature.<sup>7</sup>

Would that present-day Muslims remember this account when they



next try to cut trees only for the sake of convenience or greed!

As for the Divine Law, or *Sharī'ah*, it contains numerous injunctions pertaining to the natural environment. These include insistence on making natural resources that are used by the community as a whole, such as water and forests, public and not private property, and on guarding and protecting them. They also include the just treatment of animals and plants and the prohibition of killing living beings for wasteful or needless purposes. The ritual sacrifice of animals that can be eaten and whose flesh then becomes *halāl*, or permissible, is itself of the greatest importance in creating a spiritual relation between human beings and the animal world. Also, *sharī'ite* teachings about economic matters, including opposition to usury, to wasteful consumerism, and to the excessive amassing of wealth, are of the greatest direct and indirect import for human beings' relation to the natural environment. Altogether the *Sharī'ah* contains both concrete laws and principles for the regulations needed to help the Islamic community confront the critical environmental situation today and to find solutions that would be much easier to implement than secular laws and regulations, because Muslims would be more willing to accept and implement them. They would see them as God's Laws, rather than simply governmental regulations to be circumvented whenever possible.

### What Is to Be Done?

Facing the environmental crisis, which threatens human life itself, is of the utmost urgency precisely because of the rapidity with which the natural environment is being destroyed. The solution to this crisis requires the most urgent action, a turning to a sacralized vision of nature, as well as performing concrete actions on the earthly plane. In light of the Islamic teachings about the natural environment and the present situation, a number of actions can be taken in the Islamic world to ameliorate the severe crisis caused by the human treatment of the natural world today. Some of these actions are briefly outlined below:

1. Since the nineteenth century, scientism and the blind adulation of modern technology have spread gradually within the Islamic world so that today, among those who rule over various Muslim societies, as well as among most modernized Muslims and even a number of religious scholars there ex-

ists a prevalent scientism outwardly not very different from that existing in the West. Whether there is a modernist or a so-called fundamentalist government ruling over a Muslim society, there is a blind acceptance of modern Western science, and Western technology is adopted as rapidly as possible, with little interest in the environmental consequences of such actions. Where the Islamic world differs from the West is that the Western scientific world-view—with its reduction of both human beings and nature to a set of complicated molecular structures bereft of any sacred significance, except in a sentimental sense—has a less tenuous hold upon the Muslim mind than it has in the West, which has had several centuries of confrontation with the materialistic and quantitative view of nature. The first step in the Islamic world must be to criticize this stifling scientific view of reality and to demonstrate why it is opposed to the authentic Islamic and more generally religious point of view as such. There is no way to reconstruct the edifice of the Islamic view of human beings and nature without clearing the ground of all the decrepit ideological ruins posing as immovable monuments and cleansing the mental space of the Islamic world of all of the errors resulting from scientism, reductionism, and materialism just as the Prophet cleared the Ka'ba of idols in the Age of Ignorance.

2. Having cleared the mental space and removed the obstacles which exist in the minds of so many Muslims and which prevent them from comprehending their own traditional universe, the Islamic understanding of the natural environment and humanity's relation to it must then be formulated and expressed in the clearest language possible, one that is comprehensible to contemporary Muslims.<sup>8</sup> The formulation of these Islamic teachings, drawing from the sources already mentioned, must be made on several levels. These formulations must be able to address the philosopher as well as the cobbler, the religious scholar as well as the peasant. There must exist the deepest metaphysical exposition comprehensible to those few rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition and/or well aware of Western philosophy, as well as poetic expressions to attract the large numbers drawn to literature



and to sermons preached to the multitudes in mosques. There is no reason why, if there is the will, in a few years the Islamic teachings about humanity's relationship to the environment cannot be made known to all levels of Islamic society using contemporary language. Much has been done, but has not as yet been widely disseminated.

3. Those who run the affairs of Islamic society are men and women who, obviously, have been trained in various schools and disciplines. It is essential to introduce courses on the environment at all levels of education and to emphasize themes and subjects pertaining to the environmental dimensions of other disciplines within those disciplines. For example, it is almost criminally negligent to teach various fields of engineering without acquainting the students with the environmental impact of this or that engineering project. Likewise, economic planning should never be taught without consideration of the environmental costs involved. The West has been more successful in this matter in recent years than the Islamic world, because modern educational institutions in the Islamic world simply emulate the West and are therefore usually a step behind. In many places educational systems are still following older, obsolete curricula of their Western models.

Courses on the environment, and emphasis upon subjects pertaining to the environment in other courses, should not, however, be limited to modern educational institutions, but most definitely should include the traditional schools, or *madāris*, in which the future religious leaders of the community are trained. These leaders are much more effective than governmental officials in turning the attention of the populace to a particular issue, and their role is crucial in creating awareness of the environmental crisis and of Islam's answers to it. But the religious teachers and scholars must first become aware of these issues themselves through appropriate education. They must be educated to realize that the environmental crisis is not going to be solved by condoning outlandish industrial projects which do irreparable harm to the environment but which are supported by the government, while preaching against the urban poor who pollute streams

with garbage. In order for this educational effort to succeed, there is the need to teach these matters from the Islamic point of view, not just from the Western one, and for governments to gain the approval of religious authorities in charge of the *madāris* rather than trying to force the issue through some governmental decree which will only backfire. Fortunately, as already mentioned, there are a number of leading religious authorities throughout the Islamic world who are aware of the great danger of the environmental crisis, but there has not, as yet, been a concerted effort to make this issue central to the curricula of religious schools throughout the Islamic world.

4. While such religious scholars are being trained, those who are already aware of the various dimensions of the environmental crisis must be encouraged by governments which control the media in the Islamic world to spend as much effort as possible in their weekly sermons in mosques and in daily contact with ordinary people, radio and television talks, and writings to increase awareness of environmental issues. As matters stand today, in most Islamic countries what the religious scholars say and preach is controlled by the government. And when the government does not want a hotly contested political or economic issue to be discussed, it usually orders the preachers in mosques to speak about bodily cleanliness, keeping the water pure, and not molesting cats and dogs in the street. These admonitions are fine, but they are not sufficient, especially when the government itself is the primary agent causing the deterioration of the environment. In such cases, little freedom to criticize the government is given to either religious scholars or civil leaders or teachers. Hence, the lack of political freedom becomes a factor in weakening efforts to solve the environmental crisis.

Nevertheless, there is still much that can be done in the educational field, so that a few years from now both government leaders and those outside of government will see the stark reality of the problem. For this to be realized, it would be much easier to have the efforts of the two sides be complementary, and to have religious scholars, preachers, and imams



who have the ear of the people, spearhead efforts to save the environment with governmental approval, rather than having ordinary people blame the government and the government ordinary people. Because faith in Islam is still strong, joint efforts by religious scholars and political and social leaders would have much more success in combating the increasing deterioration of the natural environment we see in so many parts of the Islamic world today.

5. Only recently have non-governmental institutions begun to have some impact in the Islamic world, despite opposition in many cases by local governments. Now that such institutions are taking root, it is important to create some institutions which deal primarily with the environment, rather than with economic and social issues independent of the environment, as we see so often today. Such environmentally aware institutions have sprung up in the West during the past few decades, and a few have been instrumental in realizing laudable goals in the preservation of the environment through the purchase of pristine land and the protection of forests. There is no reason why such institutions cannot expand in the Islamic world if they are created more in keeping with Islamic teachings and norms, including the institutions of religious endowments (*awqāf*), rather than simply imitating Western models. There are many religious endowments for the creation of mosques, schools, and hospitals. There is no reason why endowments could not be created for the preservation of water, soil, trees, and animals. Of course, the degree of freedom of non-governmental organizations in the Islamic world is restricted by government regulations, but here again, there is a wide margin within which such institutions could function and flourish.
6. Both blindness to the dangers of many forms of modern technology and external and internal economic and political pressures have caused nearly all governments in the Islamic world to disregard their indigenous technologies, ranging from irrigation to medical drugs, in favor of Western substitutes. There must be a major campaign by those aware of the significance of many of the traditional technologies to

preserve such technologies and to use, whenever possible, alternative technologies that usually need less energy and have much less negative impact upon the natural environment. One sees such an awareness growing here and there, but much more work needs to be done. The implementation of alternative technologies can have a major impact, reducing the destructive effects of modern technology upon the environment.

7. In the contemporary Islamic world various forms of encouragement are used to further the cause of what the governments or various private or religious organizations consider to be important. There are national and international awards given within the Islamic world for the best book, artistic creation, and service to the cause of Islam, but there is little encouragement when it comes to the question of the environment. It would not be difficult to attract the attention of the gifted to this field through various forms of encouragement, such as are also beginning to appear in the West.

There are, of course, many other steps that could be taken, but the few enumerated here are among the most important and most feasible.

### Concluding Comments

In conclusion, one must ask who is going to carry out the program thus outlined, and what force can confront the powerful international economic and technological engine that is wreaking havoc upon the earth on nearly every continent? The answer for the Islamic world cannot be governments alone because, although they wield great power, they are more a part of the problem than the solution. The solution, at the present moment, lies for the most part with individuals and small groups which can perhaps expand in the future. What is certain is that, first of all, the environmental crisis must be recognized in its spiritual and religious depth as well as its outward effects. Second, the authentic Islamic view must be resuscitated with rigor and clarity and without compromise. Those who can be awakened must be made to open their eyes and to realize that the modern world is walking on the edge of a precipice and needs only to take another "forward step"



to face its own perdition. Awareness leads to further awareness. The Islamic teachings about God, human beings, nature, and the relation between them all constitute a clarion call for this awakening from the dangerous dream of scientism and humanity's selfish conquest of nature. They can set Muslims again on the correct path to a harmonious *modus vivendi* with nature, and they can also help the Western world to regain and recollect its own forgotten tradition concerning the role of human beings in God's creation. Let us hope that this awakening takes place through proactive human efforts and not as a consequence of the rude awakening resulting from ecological disasters that threaten the very possibility of human life on earth. In discussing such momentous matters, it is appropriate to remember the Islamic teaching that the future is in God's hands. Ultimately, God is, as one of His Sacred Names, *al-Muhit*, tells us, literally, our "environment."



## Notes

1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (1967; Chicago: ABC International, 2000).
2. The analyses of Ivan Illich made a generation ago still hold true. See his *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper, 1980). Also, although Jacques Ellul holds a rather anti-Islamic stand, his works have been well received in certain circles in the Islamic world precisely because he deals with the issue of the negative impact of modern technology upon human society in such a way that his words speak eloquently to those Muslims aware of the deeper issues involved in the introduction of modern technology into their own societies.
3. During the past two decades a number of both religious philosophers and scientists in the Islamic world have become aware of this question and of the necessity for reviving Islamic science along lines that I suggested several decades ago in *Science and Civilization in Islam* (1968; Chicago: ABC International, 2001) and several other works. Today, there are a number of centers in Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere concerned with the Islamic meaning of Islamic science and the danger of imitating modern science as if it were simply a continuation of the Islamic scientific tradition.
4. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 129 ff.
5. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002), 281-82.
6. *Ibid.*, 273 ff.
7. See Pablo Beneito Arias, "Life of the Prophet and Miracles of the Palm Tree," *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 30 (2001): 88-91. This vision was made famous throughout the Islamic world through al-Qazwini's mention of it in his *Āthār al-bilād*.
8. This task has already begun and, besides my own works, a number of books and essays from different perspectives have appeared on this subject. See, for example, Richard C. Foltz, ed., *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2002), 357-91; Akhtaruddin Ahmad, *Islam and the Environmental Crisis* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1997); and Fazlun M. Khalid and Joanne O'Brien, eds., *Islam and Ecology* (New York: Cassell, 1992). See also the *Journal of Islamic Science* 16, no. 1-2 (2000), where several essays are devoted to the issue of Islamic teachings on the environment.

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