

INNER AND OUTER NATURE:  
AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

*Munjed M. Murad*

The environmental crisis is rooted in a spiritual crisis. The outer is a reflection of the inner. Thus, uprooting the environmental crisis requires alleviating the spiritual ailments of modern humanity. This entails, most specifically, a restoration of the sacredness of nature in the eyes of scientific circles and the broader public. For the former, this involves a reintegration of metaphysics into the scientific worldview. For the general public, a genuine return to the sacred constitutes a return to God through sacred tradition. Other steps, such as the sincere commitment of religious authorities to environmental solutions, are also important in ending the crisis. Through this, modern humanity may make peace with the environment, itself, and, most importantly, God.

Keywords: Islam and the environmental crisis; spiritual crisis of the modern world; Islamic science; tradition; modernism; traditionalism; sacred; religion and science.

---

**Introduction**

This article presents a short overview of the Islamic approach to nature and the Islamic perspective on modern science.<sup>1</sup> These topics are addressed in light of the ongoing environmental crisis, to which this essay proposes a solution. The framework through which this is conducted is Islamic in particular and universal in principle.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. The present article is a substantially revised version of an earlier essay, "Islamic Environmental Stewardship: Nature and Science in the Light of Islamic Philosophy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 63, nos. 1&2 (2011).
  2. Regarding terminology, "sacred tradition" is used here in reference to all paths of revelation and enlightenment ranging from Islam to
- 

Munjed M. Murad is a student with interest in the intersection of religion and the natural environment. He is a recent graduate of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and is currently located in the greater Washington, DC area. Email: munjedm@gmail.com.

The main thesis of this essay is largely inspired by the work of the Islamic scholar and philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr—in fact, its bulk may be considered a humble summary of his writings regarding the intersection of religion, nature, and modern science. In 1966, Nasr delivered the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago, in which he traced the root issues of the environmental crisis to the spiritual crisis of modern humanity. The transcripts of the lectures became the basis of his book, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, which has been used as a prime text for direction and reference in this essay. The writings of the twentieth-century metaphysician, Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), have also had significant influence on this essay. The Islamic portrayal of the problems of modern science, as well as the metaphysical perspective on the environmental crisis, is primarily provided today by the Traditionalist school,<sup>3</sup> to which both Frithjof Schuon and Seyyed Hossein Nasr belong.<sup>4</sup> The traditionalist corpus is thus drawn upon as a main body of reference for this essay.

### Overview

With endangerment of various animal species still commonplace and climate change continuously proving itself a cause for concern, today's environmental crisis seems ongoing and perhaps far from ending.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the massive loss of natural recreational areas for people and the continuous repeats of intense “natural” disasters show that humanity itself is in grave danger. With this overwhelming plethora of catastrophes having become commonplace in the modern world, humanity must ask: How has such a pattern of calamity

---

Buddhism. Additionally, all references in this essay to traditional and sacred sciences are meant to address those sciences that study not only the physical domain of reality, but the metaphysical as well, and are typically associated with any of such sacred traditions. See the second-to-next footnote for a description of “tradition”.

3. Muzaffar Iqbal, *Science and Islam* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 171. For an introduction to the traditionalist perspective on modern science, see the subsection “The Metaphysical Perspective” at 171–178.
4. “Tradition” here means “truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind and, in fact, a whole cosmic sector through various figures envisaged as messengers, prophets, *avatāras*, the Logos or other transmitting agencies in different realms including law and social structure, art, symbolism, the sciences, and embracing of course Supreme Knowledge along with the means for its attainment.” Definition from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany, 1984), 67–68. A Traditionalist today is one who wholeheartedly embraces and follows Tradition as such.
5. IUCN, “The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.”, <http://www.iucnredlist.org/> (accessed September 15, 2012).

come to be, and how can it be stopped?

Simply put, the environmental crisis is but an outward reflection of the inward crisis of modern day humanity. It is not just the environment itself that is in crisis, but humanity as well. In fact, humans' own inward disharmony serves as a causal force for the disharmony prevalent in their surroundings. Humans' lack of self-discipline and morals—such as in excessive consumption and a lack of compassion—has translated onto their environment and into the crisis apparent today. The root of humanity's disharmony with nature is therefore the disharmony within humans' own selves.

More specifically, this inward crisis is a spiritual one. The lack of spirituality, rooted in a general lack of adherence to sacred tradition, has spurred the loss of merciful aspects such as benevolence, love, and compassion. Such a loss created a void in the soul that was instantly filled by the very antithesis of such spiritual characteristics. Vicious characteristics such as greed, apathy, and cruelty filled this void that was previously occupied by the fruits of sacred religiosity and spirituality. This marring of the human soul has translated from humans' inner nature onto the outward nature around them. Thus, the best method for the modern human to redeem harmony in the outer environment is by restoring harmony in the inner environment, that is, the human soul. Only with a purification of the heart, and hence the replacement of its diseases with attributes of a primordial and healthy character, can peace be attained both inwardly and outwardly.

In turn, direction is needed. Generally, the human self seems too prone to lawlessness to direct itself to a selfless state of peace. In order to understand how to best travel on the route of love, humanity can best turn for guidance to the Loving. A turn to God, regardless of the sacred tradition taken by each individual, is necessary for lasting inner peace. Humanity's solution to the environmental crisis depends on a solution to its own spiritual crisis, which, for each individual, depends on his or her relationship with God.<sup>6</sup>

A study of this from an Islamic perspective may prove beneficial for many, given not only the Islamic sciences of the soul and the Islamic reverence for nature, but perhaps also what Islam shares with other religions. Given its

---

6. Of course, different traditions have different portrayals of the nature of Divinity. Whether the approach is to God as Immanent, as perhaps more apparent in Eastern traditions, or as Transcendent, as perhaps more apparent in Western traditions, the other end of this "relationship" remains essentially the same, for God is at once both Immanent and Transcendent. For help understanding the "non-theism" of sacred Eastern traditions, see the following concerning Jainism: Lynna Dhanani, "An Introduction to Jainism: Embodied Knowledge in a Non-Theistic Tradition" in *Light from the East: Eastern Wisdom for the Modern West*, ed. Harry Oldmeadow (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2007), 147–148.

theological correspondences to Western religions and its esoteric similarities to Eastern ones, Islam has the capacity to provide a universal basis that can benefit those of other sacred traditions in their own approaches to the environmental crisis. Regardless of differences in nuance and emphasis, approaches to the environmental crisis are similar across religions. As with Islam, many sacred traditions affirm sacred qualities to nature and recognize humanity's responsibility towards it. In this essay, Islamic teachings serve as the lens through which these sacred qualities of nature are observed.

### **The Qur'ān and the Environmental Trusteeship**

[T]ill, when they came upon a valley [full] of ants, an ant exclaimed: "O you ants! Get into your dwellings, lest Solomon and his hosts crush you without [even] being aware [of you]!" Thereupon [Solomon] smiled joyously at her words, and said: "O my Sustainer! Inspire me so that I may forever be grateful for those blessings of Thine with which Thou hast graced me and my parents, and that I may do what is right [in a manner] that will please Thee; and include me, by Thy mercy, among Thy righteous servants! (Q 27:18–19)<sup>7</sup>

When the Prophet Sulaymān (upon him peace) happened upon an ant colony and heard an ant communicate to others, he smiled and was inspired to pray to God.<sup>8</sup> What significance does such a scenario, as portrayed in the Qur'ān, hold for the daily life of a Muslim? How can such a prophetic reaction to nature bear influence on the Muslim response to the environmental crisis today? To what Islamic resources can Muslims refer for knowledge, inspiration, and guidance in the development of their own approaches to their natural surroundings?

The Qur'ānic portrayal of the natural environment is one of a companion in the glorification of God, a gift of sustenance, a cosmic book to contemplate, and more. In the Muslim world, the Qur'ān is considered the sole literary source of sacred knowledge available today with unquestionable authenticity. Its legitimacy as the Word of God is considered sacrosanct and undeniable within the religion.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while a plethora of Islamic traditional texts could be referenced, perhaps the case for Islamic environmental trusteeship would be put forth well enough through direct Qur'ānic reference, as briefly done in the following examples.

### **Harmony**

---

7. As interpreted by Muhammad Asad.

8. Cf. Q 27:15–19.

9. Cf. Q 4:136; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 22–27.

It is Islamic belief that humanity has a divinely ordained responsibility to act with care for the natural world and not to transgress the balance and harmony placed within it.<sup>10</sup> Within the Qurʾān, humans are portrayed as God’s vicegerents and stewards of the earth.<sup>11</sup> In this role, the human purpose is to return to the primordial self and thus return to God by reflecting His names and characteristics in this life—all within the boundaries of a divinely ordained balance while maintaining a divinely set harmony.

Within this harmony, the natural world is in a constant state of prostration to God.<sup>12</sup> Nature’s constant worship of God serves as a foundation to its peaceful harmony. Lightning, birds, mountains, and all other natural creatures and phenomena live by laws that set the harmony existent in nature today.<sup>13</sup> In each honeybee’s worship of God, it naturally cannot but contribute to a honey-making process and fulfill its role for the sake of God within His ordained balance. For this reason, it is neither flora nor fauna that wreak havoc on earth, but rather humans. Humanity has the freedom to not worship God, while nature has no choice but to do so. It is thus the role of humanity, as God’s vicegerents, that each human maintain harmony within the inner self and outer environment. God willing, through the preservation of such harmony, peace may be attained in this world and the next.

### **A Cosmic Book**

Embodied throughout the cosmos are messages concerning all orders of reality. They have significance for all kinds of knowledge, from those regarding the superficially physical to the metaphysically ontological and more. All such messages ultimately allude to God, His qualities, and His supreme oneness. They are the Signs of God (*ayāt Allāh*)<sup>14</sup>—shown for people with specific characteristics, such as those who contemplate and seek a greater kind of

---

10. *Cf.* Q 55:1–13.

11. *Cf.* Q 2:30, 33:72.

12. *Cf.* Q 13:15, 16:49, 22:18, 55:6.

13. *Cf.* Q 16:49–50, 64:1.

14. There may here be an argument in favor of “symbol” over “sign”. It may be said that, metaphysically speaking, a symbol connotes a symbolism of one level of reality by another, while a sign may simply be a thing conventionally agreed upon to represent another thing. For example, a red traffic light is a sign that drivers understand as signaling them to stop, while, on the other hand, the symbol of the Sun may be used to refer to the Divine Reality, and Its rays the manifestations of It. That being said, the word “sign” is used here for a few reasons including its common usage in similar discourses on the subject. Thus, the metaphysical connections that phenomena have to each other in different levels of reality are alluded to here in usage of the word “sign.”

knowledge.<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that one of the greatest Western Muslim writers of the modern age has considered symbolism the most important thing in existence, as well as its sole explanation.<sup>16</sup>

Within humanity's surroundings, the Sun seemingly rises from East to West; in the Northern Hemisphere, moss is typically more abundant on the northern side of trees; night and day reiterate the juxtaposed locations of Sun and Earth... With so many natural compasses in humanity's surroundings, guidance and direction seem abundantly available. They can, however, be used as instruments of guidance towards much more than just physiographic location. All such phenomena are embodiments of messages and constitute Signs of God—available to people for their pursuit of knowledge concerning reality of both physical and metaphysical domains. Such domains of reality, throughout their hierarchies, allude to God the Real (*Allāh al-Ḥaqq*) and to the many other names and characteristics of God.

In the Islamic tradition, symbolic connections are made between natural phenomena and Divine qualities, such as the moon and Divine Beauty, water and Divine Mercy, and wind and the Breath of the all-Merciful.<sup>17</sup> Nature is also permeated with the Signs of God in other ways. A single snowflake is of no threat whatsoever to a human being, but in the unity of snowflakes—a snowstorm—humans flee for shelter; in this is an allusion to the power of unity. It is always darkest before dawn; in this is an analogy to an aspect of the law of ease following difficulty. Cyclically, land dies and is revived by means of rain from the heavens, and in time it dies again and is again revived; in this is an allusion to resurrection and a portrayal of the power of God as the Giver of Life and the Bestower of Death (*Allāh al-Muḥyi al-Mumit*). All such natural phenomena are regarded as Signs of God; however, such signs can be understood in many deeper levels than those of the examples just noted.<sup>18</sup>

15. Examples of related verses: Q 2:164, 3:190, 6:99, 10:6, 10:67, 13:3–4, 16:69, 20:54, 24:44–46, 26:7–8, 27:86, 29:44, 36:33–44, 41:37–39, 42:29, 45:1–13, 51:20–23, 71:13–20.

16. Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), vii.

17. Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 8–15. The book is accessible online at <http://www.giffordlectures.org/>.

18. Of course, this should not be confused with the German tradition of phenomenology that began in the early twentieth century and which does not refer to a sacred source. In the Islamic discourse, the sacred source is the center and goal of phenomenological studies. See Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge, and James S. Cutsinger, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2007), 10.

In what is understood as a reference to a cosmic holy book, such signs within the cosmos share the same terminology as Qurʾānic verses. More specifically, the Arabic word used in reference to Qurʾānic verses, “*āyāt*,” is the very same term used in reference to signs within the cosmos and within people. Thus, the signs within nature are regarded as verses of a cosmic or natural holy book, and thus nature itself a holy book—or more specifically, the cosmic “Qurʾān of creation” (*al-Qurʾān al-takwīnī*).<sup>19</sup> Hence, with the realization that holy verses are not just available in scripture—but in nature, the cosmos, and the soul as well—it is humanity’s responsibility to approach nature with a similar attitude to that of a holy Book:

Verily, in the creation of the heavens and of the earth, and the succession of night and day: and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to man: and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and causing all manner of living creatures to multiply thereon: and in the change of the winds, and the clouds that run their appointed courses between sky and earth: [in all this] there are messages indeed for people who use their reason. (Q 2:164)<sup>20</sup>

These are just some of the many reasons of why humanity must adopt a benevolent approach to the natural environment. It is a God-given gift, a means for contemplation over the most important matters, a companion in worship, and more.

### **Islam and Science**

Important for finding a solution to the environmental crisis is a study of modern science’s role in it. Modern science, with its great capabilities for both construction and destruction, has been the means by which people today have drastically increased their negative impact on Earth. However, through specific scientific initiatives such as environmental engineering, modern science can also serve as a contributive instrument towards lessening the effects of this crisis. Therefore, specific aspects of the history of science must be studied in order to properly understand modern science’s role in the environmental crisis as both a cause of the problem and a potential instrument of lessening it.<sup>21</sup>

---

19. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc, 1997), 94–95.

20. As interpreted by Muhammad Asad.

21. The criticism in this essay of modern science is not new and has been voiced by many others before, including religious philosophers, historians of science, and scientists themselves. Examples of prominent thinkers, from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that have criticized modern science for these or similar reasons include Émile Meyerson, Alfred North Whitehead, F. Sherwood Taylor, Jacques Maritain, G.D.

It is also important to undergo such a study under the lenses of sacred traditions. The separation of science from sacred tradition, and thus also the loss of the sacred sciences, is a contributing factor to the human abuse of nature today, as shall be explained. Given the Islamic reverence for nature and the rich history between Islam and science, a study of both science and nature under an Islamic lens can prove constructive to an understanding of the overall subject. Such a study may provide insight to the faulty axioms taken within modern science, as well as provide a perspective on modern day humanity's latent ability to regain harmony with nature.

### **Islamic Teachings and Science**

Islam has long claimed a strong compatibility with science and an openness to the pursuit of sacred knowledge through it. The rich history of Muslim contributions to the world of science bears enough evidence to support this claim. Scientific and mathematical branches such as algebra, astronomy, and chemistry are, at least in part, made available today through the Islamic sciences of old. Works by Muslim scientists, such as Ibn al-Haytham (d. ca.433/1041), Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198), and Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī (d. 673/1274) have had great influence on the discoveries and progress within science.

Notwithstanding such compatibility, there remains a great difference between the approach of modern science and that of the traditional Islamic sciences. Unlike the usual modern scientist, a traditional Muslim scientist's work was not undergone for the sake of understanding the physical alone. It is the traditional Muslim scientist's belief that the true function of science is to discover aspects of the real.<sup>22</sup> The intention was to understand the different and higher orders of reality within the Islamic framework. This reality permeates the inherent nature of all things. It encompasses the sacred symbolism of all facts, the gnosis attainable through the study of creation, and the seemingly infinite allusions to the supreme oneness of God. Moreover, as has been noted by a contemporary Islamic scholar trained in chemistry, modern science does not claim to address the purpose of life, whereas in the Islamic world, that purpose is integral.<sup>23</sup>

---

Yarnold, Lord Northbourne, Titus Burckhardt, Frithjof Schuon, Wolfgang Smith, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, William C. Chittick, and Muzaffar Iqbal. For a diverse anthology on the subject, see Mehrdad M. Zarandi, ed., *Science and the Myth of Progress* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2003).

22. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 25.

23. Muzaffar Iqbal quoted by Dennis Overbye in "How Islam Won, and Lost, the Lead in Science," *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/30/science/how-islam-won-and-lost-the-lead-in-science.html?scp=1&sq=&pagewanted=3> (accessed September 17, 2012).

The search for sacred knowledge had been a prevalent aspect of science in Muslim lands for centuries. With this aspiration, Muslim scientists ranging from Jābir bin Hayyān (d. ca.160/777) to Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) pioneered their respective fields with studies of both the physical and metaphysical. Their studies of creation were likely conducted to better know the Creator, especially given His invitation to do so.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the Islamic sciences not only gathered information of surroundings, from earthly minerals to cosmic patterns, but also interpreted them through a sacred lens.

This Islamic outlook sheds light on an invaluable aspect of science, namely, its study of the Signs of God embodied in all phenomena. Such signs are ubiquitous in that they permeate each person's self and surroundings, all through which people may come to better know God. Thus, all phenomena are of pedagogical significance for those who seek them as such. This notion is reflected throughout the Islamic religion and is even suggested in the Arabic vocabulary. For example, there is a shared lexical root between the Arabic words for knowledge (*ʿilm*) and world (*ʿālam*). This may be understood in the context of an Islamic emphasis on knowledge, which has always been a characteristic feature of Islamic tradition and civilization.<sup>25</sup> It can thus be concluded that a great aspect of science, at least in the Islamic sense of it, is its development of people's knowledge of the world around—and within—them so that they may better know God, Who is *al-Muḥīṭ al-ʿAlīm*, the all-Encompassing the all-Knowledgeable. By studying the virtually infinite signs that symbolize His attributes, humanity can see that He is *Allah al-Khāliq al-Raḥmān*, God the Creator the Infinitely Merciful.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, science may be viewed as a process of innovatively developing the appropriate means to a God-pleasing end. With such an understanding, the use of innovative methods to maintain harmony between humanity and the God-given natural environment, is not just permissible but encouraged as well. The same applies to all creativity of good purpose and effect. This is

24. Iqbal, *Science and Islam*, 31.

25. Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 2; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islamic Pedagogy: An Interview" in *Islam & Science* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2012), 14.

26. This, for example, is one of the underlying themes of the works of the renowned 5th/12th century scholar, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī's (d. 505/1111): *al-Ḥikmat fī makhlūqāt Allāh* ("Wisdom in the Creations of God") and *al-Taḥakkur fī khalq Allāh* ("Contemplation of God's Creation"). The former is the 39th book of the *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* series. See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, ed. Māhir Al-Munajjid, *al-Ḥikmat fī makhlūqāt Allāh* (Damascus: Dar Al-Fikr, 1995); Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazzālī, ed. Rifāt Fawzi ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib and ʿAli ʿAbd al-Basīṭ, *al-Ḥikmat fī makhlūqāt Allāh* (Cairo: Maktabat Al-Khānjī, 2002).

reflected in the historical contributions of Muslim scientists to the realm of science, as well as the innovative works of Muslims today.

### **The Separation of Science and Sacred Tradition**

The divorce between science and sacred tradition is rooted in a number of things. In regards to Islam, it has been speculated that the decline of the Islamic sciences was tied to the decline of Islamic civilization, though it cannot be said that the observation is collectively made. It seems that causes of the declines of the Islamic sciences and Islamic civilization are a topic of debate in Western literature.<sup>27</sup> Regardless, it remains today that the “Golden Age” of Islamic civilization is far behind and the Islamic sciences of today are far from the pinnacle they had reached.

On a universal level, the loss of a public connection between science and sacred tradition seems rooted in a number of inter-connected events. In the spread of Christianity into the West, and in its dialogue with Hellenist Greeks who seemingly had a metaphysical intelligibility of nature but not of God, a movement had come about in which there was generally no transcendental approach to nature, but only one general yet particular way of understanding and reaching God based on a specific theological narrative.<sup>28</sup> As noted by the metaphysician and Perennialist,<sup>29</sup> Frithjof Schuon:

If a simple and rather summary formulation be permissible, one could say that for the Greeks truth is that which is in conformity with the nature of things; for the Christians truth is that which leads to God. This Christian attitude, to the extent that it tended to be exclusive, was bound to appear to the Greeks as “foolishness”; in the eyes of the Christians the attitude of the Greeks consisted in taking thought for an end in itself, outside of any personal relation to God; consequently it was a “wisdom according to the flesh”... it was in some respects a dispute between a love-song and a mathematical theorem. It could also be said that the Hellenists were predominantly right in principle and the Christians in fact, at least in a particular sense that can

---

27. Iqbal, *Science and Islam*, 124–129.

28. Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Deborah Casey, Mark Perry, Jean-Pierre Lafouge and James S. Cutsinger, ed. Deborah Casey (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 45–57.

29. Perennialism is a philosophy that recognizes the universal recurrence of truth existent throughout sacred traditions, epochs, and cultures. Of its most salient points is that all sacred traditions of today, from the Hindu to the Islamic to the Native-American, legitimately provide paths to God. This point is, in other words, a metaphysically inferred reference to universalism in the sacred context.

be discerned without difficulty.<sup>30</sup>

The Hellenist approach to nature was one of thought and understanding, but was restricted by limitations not unlike those of empiricism. Western Christianity saw the Hellenists' pagan-like understanding of the world as an obstacle to their potential realization of God. Thus, it seems that in lieu of intellectual perception of this world as a path to God, Western Christianity emphasized love as the path to Him. Consequently, the distinction between the natural and the supernatural became so strict that it deprived most people a proper understanding of nature's spiritual qualities.<sup>31</sup> This, coupled with the influence of doctrines like rationalism, later contributed to a European revolt against Christianity.<sup>32</sup> In turn, this aided a mentality of secularization that permeated the scientific arena and finalized the separation of science and sacred tradition. With that said, there are today diverse peripheral exceptions to this, as evidenced, for example, by speeches given at the Gifford Lectures and the beliefs of creationist scientists.

In regards to this Western Christian movement, it is important to note that it does not represent all of the Christian tradition or civilization. The movement came about as a response to a world of somewhat empiricist naturalism; however, some of the principles of the response seem at odds with the actions of others affiliated with the Christian religion. On one hand, with an array of examples quite widely ranging from Saint Francis of Assisi to the contemporary Evangelical Climate Initiative,<sup>33</sup> it seems that there have continuously been Christians who recognized a human role of stewardship towards nature. On the other hand, studies of metaphysics can be found in the writings of Western Christian figures throughout the ages, with thinkers such as Origen and Dante providing prominent examples.

In his book *Man and Nature*, Nasr emphasized the need for Christians to return to a theology of nature as understood in the "intellectual light of the early Church Fathers, the Christian metaphysicians of the Middle Age, such as Erigena and Eckhardt, or in the sense of the theosophy of Jacob Böhme."<sup>34</sup> He also stressed the need to learn from Oriental traditions that still studied metaphysics.<sup>35</sup> These are contributive steps towards a stronger reestablishment of the Christian understanding of the metaphysical domain of reality, as well

30. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 47.

31. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 55.

32. *Ibid.*, 51-75.

33. Evangelical Climate Initiative, "A Christian Call to Action on Climate," <http://christiansandclimate.org/> (accessed September, 15 2012).

34. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 37.

35. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

as the early Christian recognition of the sacred connection between humanity and the rest of God's creation.

### **An Islamic Perspective on the Trouble with Modern Science**

Science is defined today as “the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.”<sup>36</sup> In some sense, this definition may contribute towards compatibility between modern science and the traditional Islamic pursuit of knowledge, but with important caveats. While modern science has the ability to provide certain kinds of information, it denies itself the interpretation of that information on any level other than that of the physical.<sup>37</sup> The *physical and natural world* to which this definition of science refers is Islamically known to embody sacred meanings. Therefore, study of the physical and natural world is welcomed in Islamic circles, but it must also be interpreted on higher ground.

Modern science's denial of metaphysics may be seen as the basis for much difference between the outlook of the Islamic tradition and that of modern science. This difference boils down to the great disparity between Islam's recognition of a sacredness in nature and modern science's denial of it. The secular approach of modern science to nature has removed virtually all understanding of the sacred qualities behind it. Unlike modern scientists, traditional scientists had integrated theology into a holistic approach to the study of nature and thus regarded the study of such sacred qualities as essential to their work. Before this modern desacralization of nature, a “vision of God in nature” seemed the norm of viewing the world.<sup>38</sup> The grave ramifications of this change in approach are evident in the world today, and especially so in the environmental crisis.

Since the divorce of science and sacred tradition, the need to know God no longer served as the impetus to scientific studies. Before this divorce, the philosophy of science was that of oneness (*tawhīd*).<sup>39</sup> The traditional sciences of all sacred traditions were unified on certain fundamental principles, and one

---

36. *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, “Definition of science—science, philosophy and formal subject” [http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m\\_en\\_us1287825#m\\_en\\_us12878](http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1287825#m_en_us12878) (accessed September 15, 2012).

37. Lord Northbourne, “Pictures of the Universe” in *Tomorrow* (Autumn 1964): 275.

38. F. Sherwood Taylor, *The Fourfold Vision: A Study of the Relations of Science and Religion* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1945), 91.

39. Mawil Izzi Dien, “Islam and the Environment: Theory and Practice” in Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azzizan Baharuddin, eds., *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge: Harvard Center For The Study Of World Religions, 2003), 107–108.

such principle was the recognition of a hierarchy of reality.<sup>40</sup> All such levels of hierarchy alluded to the reality of God as the Real, as well as His supreme and ultimate oneness as the One (*al-Wāḥid*). In the separation of science and sacred tradition, there was a transformation of ideology from the assertion of oneness to the making of many (*takthīr*)—the very antithesis of *tawḥīd*.<sup>41</sup> Everything that was seen for its reference to the supreme oneness of God became a separate entity and a “god” of its own. Rather than journeying towards the One God of mercy, justice, and sustenance, these very features of God became individualized and regarded as entities of their own. No longer was there a single center, orientation, goal, or purpose, nor was there recognition of just a single “god”; people worshipped whatever “gods” appealed to them.<sup>42</sup>

Worry has also been expressed regarding the “neutrality” of science. Although modern science may initially seem neutral in its study of facts, it nonetheless sets the stage and plants the seeds for havoc when in the hands of the ignorant or ill-intended. As an example of the latter, modern science enables people to lavishly and greedily exploit the natural world’s resources for materialistic purposes. Regarding the ignorant, the issue today is that most people lack sufficient knowledge of existence to be able to integrate the facts of science into a proper view of the world.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, modern science begets significant negative impact on one’s self and surroundings through the person’s use of modern products, but without the person even knowing of the negative impact.

The traditionalist Muslim perspective on modern technology is that it is inevitably harmful regardless of whose hands it is in. Specific aspects of modern “technological culture” are inherently against the “soul of the human being as an immortal being” and against the “fabric of all traditional societies which are based on the spiritual relationship between the human being and the objects he or she creates.” An example of this may be found in the modernist line of distinction between art and technology that did not exist as such in traditional communities, in which art played an integral role in the mundane lives of people in many ways, including their technologies.<sup>44</sup>

---

40. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need For a Sacred Science* (London: State University of New York Press, 1993), 97.

41. William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 12–16.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 27–28.

44. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal* (Kuala Lumpur: IBT, 2007), 95–96.

It is not just modern science's narrow view of the material and physical world that Muslim philosophers have protested, but more so its dominant claim for recognition as the only acceptable science of nature.<sup>45</sup> The enactment of such a bold statement has had radical and grave results. It has reduced other sciences, primarily those dealing with the studies of metaphysics and the sacred, to a seemingly inadequate view of the world and something along the lines of superstition—or rather it became regarded as such by the scientific world and public at large.<sup>46</sup> In effect, there has been a loss of sacred symbolism linked to natural phenomena. This has worried Islamic scholars because of their recognition that without symbolic intelligibility science becomes vain and harmful.<sup>47</sup> The current environmental crisis bears enough evidence to justify such concern. In the modern age, Muslim voices such as those of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Titus Burckhardt have expressed great unease with the movement from the traditional sciences to modern science alone. Through this move, modern science's vulgarized presentation of nature—as an entity void of any symbolic or spiritual meaning—has become the axiom through which the public and scientific communities at large see nature. Anything to the contrary, or anything that provides significantly more substance to the perception of nature than already provided by modern science, is largely seen as sentimental or superstitious and is given little to no credibility in scientific circles, and, hence, the public as well.

Through the secularization of nature, symbols within it became mere facts and were thus divorced from other orders of reality. The cosmos remained interestingly mysterious, but was regarded spiritually meaningless. A traditional science such as alchemy was “reduced to a chemistry in which the substances had lost all their sacramental character.”<sup>48</sup> Hence, traditional sciences' study of relatively high orders of reality was exchanged for the mere study of the manipulation of matter in its own plane.<sup>49</sup> In other words, science regressed into a strictly empirical and amoral study of only the superficial aspects of the physical. Thus, the symbolism used by Native Americans in their understanding of their natural environment, the symbolism used by Babylonians in their studies of the cosmos, the symbolism used by alchemists in their experiments of alchemical substances—all were substituted for a shallow perception that now helps fuel the superficial and materialist mentality prevalent in the world today. The natural environment lost its symbolic

---

45. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 21–31.

46. *Ibid.*, 23.

47. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 88.

48. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 21.

49. Titus Burckhardt, “Cosmology and Modern Science,” *Tomorrow* (Summer 1964): 186.

significance in the eyes of the prevailing majority in science, and so became regarded as physical property available for not much more than empirical study, consumption, and use as pleasant scenery. In other words, humanity loses a supernatural understanding of the natural in substitute for a virtually never-ending attempt to satiate worldly desires. The practical significance of this is that a tree today can be used for the production of paper, pancake syrup, furniture, and other consumer goods, but it is generally no longer an instrument of enlightenment and transcendence, at least not to the masses.

Despite Islamic criticisms of modern science, Muslim governments of the East have openly welcomed it into their countries with great expectations. Given certain factors within this reception, regardless of such high expectations, they can ultimately only achieve bittersweet—and mostly bitter—results. This is so because Eastern governments have accepted modern science with a mentality dangerously shaped by colonialism.<sup>50</sup> More specifically, due to the technological advancements of the West, all that is produced from the East is popularly considered—by both those in East and West—as inferior to Western products.<sup>51</sup> It is evident in the Western “developer’s” approach to “third world” countries. Traditional or practical knowledge is substituted for modern technological knowledge that is considered far superior, albeit results that say different.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Western products, such as modern science, are welcomed to the East without much question, replacing whatever was there previously. This is well-symbolized by the presence of the new towers in Makkah, located immediately outside of the Grand Mosque. The explicit and obtrusive presence of such architecture in the Islamic holy land represents the importation of Western products into Muslim lands, as well as Western modernist philosophies into Eastern minds. This, as well as the replacement of many historical and religious sites in the sacrosanct land with large commercial projects, may be taken to symbolize the acceptance of modernism over traditionalism in much of the modern Muslim world.

The issue is not only in the loss of traditional knowledge, but also in the latent negative environmental impact of the specific act. Since the science itself is implemented without much question, its potential negative effect generally also goes unquestioned. Therefore, the East suffers from the negative impacts of modern science without having taken the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the West and thus having acted accordingly. This is all evident in the environmental problems of Muslim countries today. From the air pollution

---

50. Iqbal, *Science and Islam*, 187–188.

51. Nasr and Iqbal, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology*, 102.

52. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New York: Yale University Press, 1999), 304–306.

of Cairo to the deforestation of many areas in Indonesia, the Muslim world today seems far from reflecting the harmonious and peaceful spirit of Islam that can be found in traditional Islamic gardens and architecture. In fact, the Muslim world's current approach to the environment seems far from Islamic.

In summary, modern science's empirical approach is compatible with some aspects of the Islamic approach to knowledge, since the study of the physical world alone is, to a degree, a legitimate one. However, other orders of reality are not ignored within Islamic circles. While modern science views natural phenomena as facts alone, the traditional Islamic approach is to understand them as alluding to greater orders of reality, and ultimately to God. According to the Islamic tradition, every object and all phenomena, both the extraordinary and the mundane included, encompass metaphysical qualities and meanings, as well as sacred references. Hence, traditionalist Islamic philosophers take issue with modern science's claim for recognition as the only science of nature, for there is immensely more to study than just the physical. This dominant claim by science has fueled today's environmental crisis by stripping away the sacred aspect of nature from the eyes of many. When stripped of the metaphysical, all that is left is the physical, and thus a tree is viewed as nothing more than a resource for physical use alone; that is the issue with the environmental crisis today.

### **A Solution**

The solution to the environmental crisis does not lie in the use of environmental engineering alone.<sup>53</sup> Regardless of the feats of modern science in "green" technologies and in its reductions of carbon emissions, humanity is likely to continue its mistreatment of nature in one way or another until nature is properly seen for its sacred qualities. That is because the heart of the environmental crisis is a spiritual one. The work of many environmentalists in cutting off the branches of the crisis may be commendable, but in order to avoid continuous manifestations of it, one must uproot the whole of the crisis from its roots through the making of peace with mankind's surroundings, its own self, and, most importantly, God.<sup>54</sup>

Of great importance to note regarding this "making of peace with God" is that He is the God of all peoples of sacred tradition, despite differences

---

53. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 3–4.

54. Regarding specific points that may be practically implemented in the Islamic world as part of an important solution to the environmental crisis, see the subsection titled "What Is to Be Done?" in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Contemporary Islamic World and the Environmental Crisis," *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2007-2008), 28–33.

in the paths to Him.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the environmental crisis and the spiritual crisis are issues that affect those of all religions. Thus, the establishment of the proper mindset and performance of the proper practice are key steps to take regardless of one's religious affiliation. Such a mindset and practice can be catered and customized to the thought and observance of any sacred tradition, since the principles behind them are universal. In this regard, Confucianism can play a role in the provision of environmental solutions, and so can Christianity.

With that noted, the Islamic tradition is uniquely positioned as a bridge between all sacred traditions given its divinely asserted designation as a *middle nation* (Q 2:143).<sup>56</sup> Perhaps of the most pertinent aspects of Islam in this regard are the universality and universalism of the religion. The former is noted in regards to the religion's applicable substance to peoples around the world and so also to the near-ubiquitous presence of Muslims in the world today. The latter is noted in regards to the formal Islamic recognition of other sacred traditions—which is necessarily a character of Islam as a final revelation whose messenger had received the knowledge bestowed to all other messengers in a synthesized manner that is only fitting for he who bears the finalizing seal of the prophetic cycle.<sup>57</sup> All of this contributes to the notion that Islam, similar to the time it served as a bridge between the Greek sciences and the world then, is well-situated today to provide the midmost and most encompassing lens for the world to view the contemporary environmental crisis through.

### **The Proper Mindset**

The environmental crisis is not so much a disease in and of itself, but rather a symptom of another. The outer environmental crisis is but a reflection of the inner spiritual crisis. To properly solve this, the proper mindset must be established. This necessarily involves the affirmation of nature's sacred qualities; however, while it may be an important step, much of mankind today cannot take it directly; its situation implies the need for another step prior to this one. Specifically, before individuals adopt a lastingly peaceful approach to

---

55. Such differences are of course necessary, for it is a metaphysical principle that the manifestation of Truth in a world of multiplicity begets multiple and different manifestations, as it were the projection of light into a prism, which begets many colors. Thus, both kinds of traditions deliver, those that emphasize God as Immanent and those that emphasize Him as Transcendent, as well as those that shed light on both—for Divinity Itself is both.

56. Fritjhof Schuon, *Understanding Islam: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, trans. Mark Perry and Jean-Pierre Lafouge (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2011), 56-57f.

57. William C. Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005), 11.

nature as a sacred entity, they must first make their way to God.

In people's realization of holiness, they realize the presence of the Holy; before one can attribute sacredness to creation, one must recognize that all sacredness stems from one Source. With this realization, individuals may see that all holiness within nature is but a reflection of God the Holy. Thus, in order to make a proper and lasting peace with nature, one must first make peace with the Lord of nature. In doing this, individuals may make peace with their selves as servants of God and with the rest of creation as servants of God as well.

If the masses call for a sacred peace with creation and not with the Creator, they embark on what is likely to be a short-lived journey.<sup>58</sup> The very act of doing so is oxymoronic. Through it, they may attribute sacred qualities to nature, but not recognize a source of such sacredness, which in and of itself is something not of the physical plane, and so undoubtedly implies the existence of a higher level of reality. Nonetheless, it has happened before and the journey was in fact short-lived. Had the Hippie movement of the 1960s based its revolt on something more substantial than a love for nature and others, their original purpose of rebelling against modern day greed might have lasted for more than just a decade or so. What is needed is the rooting of one's self in devotion to Creator rather than just creation. The fault of the Hippie movement was that its enactors based it on "peace and love",<sup>59</sup> but not God the Loving, Who may have directed them towards the attainment of peace and towards the taking of love far past the short-term alone. Thus, the Hippie movement proved to be not much more than a phase. This is evident today, not just in the ridicule of hippies in popular culture, but also in the continued destructive practices of the corporate world that hippies protested against. Therefore, a making of peace with God the Guide the Sustainer is needed in order to achieve a sustaining peace with nature.

### **The Proper Practice**

Taking into consideration that the proper mindset needed to effectively solve the environmental crisis involves a turn to God, the religious establishments of today must be at the forefront of the solution. Followers of all sacred traditions must turn to their respective religions to answer the call to environmental trusteeship. This call is a universal one and is embedded in the origins of the sacred traditions of today.<sup>60</sup> In doing so, people of faith can address the

---

58. This of course does not include followers of "non-theistic" Eastern traditions that, rather than refer to a Transcendent Creator, emphasize what can be considered Divine Immanence.

59. Timothy Miller, *The Hippies and American Values* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 104–106.

60. There is probably no single book in the English language that better

environmental crisis in manners catered by and customized towards their own respective religions. Doing so shall benefit not only the environmental cause, but also the followers of the religion itself. Through this, they may involve themselves in an important part of their tradition that has probably been overlooked or underrated in the public sphere for far too long. This is especially so for the Abrahamic religions of today whose mention in public usually lacks any substantial connotation to the natural world, when in reality their traditions involve much of it. Simply, followers of religious traditions must come to know that the environmental crisis is not just a new age fad, but first and foremost a religious issue, which necessarily involves religious responsibility.<sup>61</sup>

In the Muslim world, groups are taking initiative. Examples, ranging from grassroots groups to private entrepreneurs to Islamic schools, include the Green Muslims of Washington, DC, the Naqa'a Environmental Enterprise group of Saudi Arabia, the Ilmu Giri Pesantren Islamic environmental boarding school of Indonesia, and more. An example of a collective Muslim response to the environmental issues of today is the Muslim Seven Year Action Plan on Climate Change. It is endorsed by Muslim leaders, scholars, and civil society members from around the world, including prominent religious figures, such as the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Mufti of Palestine.<sup>62</sup> The plan encompasses a number of goals intended to lessen Muslims' impact on the environment, including the development of a "green" Hajj, in which the annual pilgrimage would be made an eco-friendly one.

---

addresses features of each major sacred tradition's portrayal of cosmology and the natural world, or of things related, than Nasr's *Religion and the Order of Nature*. It addresses sacred traditions ranging from the Shamanic to the Islamic in a manner that reflects sincere appreciation and a deep understanding of the underlying essence of all these traditions and their respective cosmologies. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). Another valuable resource is the Religions of the World and Ecology book series published from a series of conferences held at Harvard University between 1996 and 1998 on the topic. Each volume consists of essays on a sacred tradition, and by scholars within the field of study of that tradition. For the volume on Islam and ecology, see Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin, *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Cambridge: Harvard Center For The Study Of World Religions, 2003).

61. Adi Setia, "The Inner Dimension of Going Green: Articulating an Islamic Deep-Ecology," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 2 (Winter 2007), 150. The point is addressed here in the Islamic context specifically.

62. Alliance of Religions and Conservation, "Historic Istanbul Declaration of the Muslim 7 Year Action Plan on Climate Change," <http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=334> (accessed September 16, 2012).

Potentially contributive to an effective solution are also responses from writers in the religious sciences, academia, and the general public. Religious thinkers may help provide the impetus behind hands-on environmental stewardship by informing and educating people on the environmental aspects of their respective religions. In the Muslim world, writers such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, writing since the 1960s, have set the foundations for others to explore and continuously develop a proper Muslim response to the current environmental crisis. Other writers with published material in the twenty-first century, such as Mawil Izzi Dien and Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, have shed further light on the Islamic outlook and approach to nature. Shaykh Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, has contributed significantly to the development of an environmental consciousness among people, and so serves as an example to other religious leaders.<sup>63</sup> Reviving old texts with a message of pertinence to our condition today may as well prove beneficial. An example of this is the story, “The Animals’ Lawsuit Against Humanity,” timely published as a book by Fons Vitae.<sup>64</sup> Also quite important is the focus on such subjects in academic journals. To this end, journals like *Islam & Science* and *Sophia* have contributed immensely to academic literature. Others share the same atavistic message as writers previously referenced in this essay, though through different and innovative ways. The Internet has served as a platform in which Muslims from around the world have come to voice their opinions, through various blogs and otherwise.<sup>65</sup> More initiatives like this should be made, both online and offline, to highlight and encourage Islamic environmental efforts.

Much has to be done to, moreover, lessen the environmentally-related paradoxes of the Muslim world. Muslim countries like Iran have great reverence for Islamic gardens, but simultaneously project critically high levels of air pollution in their capital cities. It may thus be said that the Muslim world today is not Islamic enough, at least not if the natural environment is used as a reflection. To solve this, perhaps the Muslim world can revise its current values and the consequences of its actions in the light of Qur’anic and prophetic teachings. From such sources, Muslims may derive that they must walk on the earth gently, avoid the waste of resources, affirm sacredness to nature, and work towards lessening the environmental problems of today.

There is also a need for a sacred science. The loss of the metaphysical

---

63. Moshe Terdiman, “The Grand Green Mufti of Egypt.” *Green Prophet*, <http://www.greenprophet.com/2011/11/sheikh-ali-gomaa-green-muft/> (accessed September 23, 2012).

64. See Ikhwan Al-Safa, *The Animals’ Lawsuit Against Humanity*, trans. Rabbi Anson Laytner (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005).

65. Arwa Aburawa, “A World of Green Muslims,” <http://aworldofgreenmuslims.wordpress.com/> (accessed September 16, 2012).

sciences, and hence the loss of the study of sacred meanings symbolized by natural phenomena as well, has contributed greatly to the vulgarized view of nature today, which in turn has allowed for the ill treatment of it. Since modern science sees nothing more than the physical in nature, it cannot but treat it as a physical resource alone. Thus, an affirmation of the sacredness in nature from the scientific community is needed. Given the current state of modern science, this goal might seem overly ambitious; however, it remains to be the reality of the situation.

If modern science continues in its determination to study and collect information on only the physical, then it must at least let go of its claim to singularity and allow others to interpret such studies and information on a higher level. A revitalization of traditional and sacred sciences such as metaphysical cosmology and alchemy can help to give back nature its sacredness in the eyes of mankind. It is up to those with an understanding or appreciation of the sacred sciences to help revitalize these fields in the public sphere. This may help break the cycle of modern humanity's continuous mistreatment of the natural environment.

Regarding eco-friendly initiatives of modern science, even though modern science has inflicted much harm on nature, it has developed ways of lessening that harm. This is found, for example, in today's conservational efforts and environmental engineering initiatives. These efforts are better supported than ignored. They constitute an important part to the potential amelioration of the environmental situation as it is today.

With an understanding of different approaches to the environmental crisis, including the religious, communal, academic, and scientific, it is important to not take the methodologies associated with them in an individualistic manner. Rather, they must be addressed holistically. The best methodology sustainable for long-term results in lessening the environmental crisis is likely a holistic and interdisciplinary one that integrates the many contributory approaches.

In brief, in order to better understand the natural environment and know it for more than just its physical properties, modern humanity must turn to nature's sacred qualities. However, before the environmental crisis around us can be solved, we must solve the spiritual crisis inside ourselves, and in order to do so we must search both outwardly and inwardly for the Signs of God. In seeing the presence of God all around us, we recognize the sacredness of our surroundings. Thus, for ultimate peace, we must reconcile with nature, our selves, all forms of phenomena, and, most importantly, God.