

The Earth's Complaint

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When the earth is shaken by a mighty shaking, and the earth yields up her burdens, and man cries out “What ails her?”—On that Day she will tell her tales, as thy Lord will have inspired her. On that Day mankind will issue, separately, to be shown their deeds. Whosoever has done an atom's weight of good will see it then, and whosoever has done an atom's weight of ill will see it then.

Quran 99:1-8

Reinforcing the implications of this short Sūra, the Prophet is reported to have said that, when the Last Day dawns, the earth herself will bear witness to everything that man has done. It might be said that we leave our fingerprints upon all that we touch, and they remain in place long after we have gone on our way. We forget so much of the past, but the past is still there and cannot be wiped out, unless God—under His Name “The Effacer” (*al-'Afu*)—chooses to erase it from our record. But how can this earth, upon which we walk so carelessly, be said to bear witness against us? The Quranic answer is that God will inspire it to reveal its secrets, but still one asks: How could this be? There are several possible answers to the question, but I will suggest only one. Among the divine Names revealed in the Quran is *al-Hayy*, the “Ever-Living” or, quite simply, “Life.” Since the Creator lends His attributes to everything that He creates, there can be nothing in existence that does not possess a kind of life, even if we do not understand in what sense to take this. Like all the other rigid distinctions which apply in this world, that between the animate and the inanimate is provisional, not absolute.

This brings me, once again, to the problem of terminology and the way in which words change their meaning. The word “psychic” has come to refer to fortune-tellers, spooks and things that go bump in the night. Yet, when it takes a suffix and becomes “psychology,” we know at once that we are dealing, not with magic but with the science of the soul as practiced by scientists who do not believe in the soul. The realm of the psyche, the “subtle realm” as it is sometimes called, is not open to sense-perception but that does not mean that it is supernatural. It is the unseen face of the natural world. For Muslims

it is also the realm of the *jinn*, those mysterious beings who form communities, as we do, and are equally capable of virtue or vice. The whole of nature has an unseen face, a “subtle” aspect of which we are generally unaware, although we speak sometimes of the “spirit” of a place without realizing that this “spirit” is just as real as the place in its physical presence. It is upon this hidden side of the natural world that we leave our ineradicable imprint.

There are no hiding places. We are, as the Quran reminds us in many different ways, surrounded by a host of witnesses, ranging from God Himself and His angels to the earth we tread. We can have no secrets from them. I have wondered sometimes if this is why the Arabs tend to be so secretive. Knowing that they are observed from every side, from above and from below, they treasure the only privacy they have, placing a discrete veil between themselves and their fellow men and women. In contrast, people in the West today eagerly confess all, not only to their friends but also on television and in the press. Believing themselves alone, self-enclosed and unobserved, they feel the need for self-exposure as a way of escaping from their isolation.

The spoor which we leave behind us on the earth is, however, only one side of the relationship we have with everything around us, a relationship of reciprocity. We are not insulated but, as it were, porous. We soak up elements from whatever we see, hear or touch, absorbing them into our substance. When we treat the natural world as an object to be exploited and conquered, we are damaging ourselves. The environmentalists are, no doubt, correct when they predict that our abuse of the earth will have disastrous consequences for humanity as a whole, but that should be the least of our worries. The consequences are on many different levels; the higher the level, the more deadly they are likely to be. The Quran commands: “Work not confusion in the earth after the fair ordering thereof.” When it says also that the earth and everything in it is created for our use, this does not imply a transfer of ownership; it is a trust delegated to us, and we are answerable to the “Owner of all things” for our stewardship. The Muslim is reminded again and again, both in the Quran and in the recorded sayings of the Prophet, that greed and wastefulness are among the major sins. We may use what is made so readily available to us for our sustenance, but that is all, and even that little is no more than theft if we have abandoned our human function and opted out of the universal prayer which carries the whole of creation back towards its source.

The Muslim is assured that the whole earth is a mosque for him. The walled buildings to which he is summoned for prayer are simply

a convenience. The fields, the forests and the desert are equally fitting as places of prayer and therefore demand the same respect that is accorded to a conventional mosque. The link with heaven can be established anywhere and everywhere (“Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God”). One of the essential features of Islam is expressed in the Arabic word *adab*, which means “manners,” “courtesy” or “correct behavior,” and it goes hand-in-hand with the dignity which the Muslim is required to demonstrate under all circumstances. God’s Viceregent on earth is, after all, no mean figure, whether he is in robes or in rags. To show good manners, not only to our fellows but also towards everything that God has created is a part of faith, for everything bears the imprint of His hand. The man or woman who stands, bows and prostrates in the midst of nature is a member of a universal congregation, joining in a universal prayer. “All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God,” says the Quran.

This is such a constant theme in the Quranic revelation that one can only be astonished by the fact that so many Muslims—unless they are Sufis—ignore it.

Have you not seen that all who are in the heavens and the earth glorify God, and the birds in their flight? Indeed He knows the worship and the praise of each, and God is aware of what they do.

Moreover He “disdains not to coin the similitude even of a gnat.” How much greater the similitude of a lion or a swan, a mountain or a tree. Again, “See! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day . . . and the water which God sends down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of animals therein, and the ordering of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: (in these) are signs for people who have sense.” Whatsoever He has created in the earth “of different colors” conveys a message to us. So: “Look therefore upon the imprints of God’s mercy.” They are everywhere.

The earth’s beauties—its “ornaments”—are, the Quran tells us, a “reminder to mankind,” a reminder to those who are disposed to remember their origin and their end. For such as these, the natural world sparkles with light, but it would be dark if unperceived by man as the central being in creation, that is to say the link between what is above and what is below. Here again there is reciprocity. This world is not some chance agglomeration of material atoms, unrelated to our innermost being. It gives and it receives. We receive and we give. There is intercourse and mutuality; the objective world and human

subjectivity might be compared to two circles which intersect rather than float, separate and divided, quite independent of each other. This is already implicit also in the word “cosmos” (as opposed to universe a neutral term that implies nothing). The cosmos is, by definition, an ordered whole, organized and harmonious, in which the parts are inter-dependent. As such it has meaning and, as the English word “cosmetics” suggests, it is beautiful.

But to perceive, even dimly, the “signs of God” around us—those signs to which the Quran refers repeatedly—requires a child’s eye preserved in maturity. The Prophet is said to have prayed: “Lord, increase me in marveling!” This is how a child sees the world, fresh from the hand of God and full of marvels but, with the passage of the years and the passing anxieties which time imposes, the vision fades; yet, in the words of the Quran, “It is not the eyes that grow blind, but the hearts within the breasts that grow blind.” Imbued with faith, the heart may still regain its sight, its insight. After the Call to Prayer, when Muslims have assembled in tightly packed ranks behind their Imam, their prayer leader, they are required to spend a few moments divesting themselves of the day’s cares and all those urgent matters which had seized their attention, turning to face their Creator and address Him. It sometimes happens that the Imam turns to advise them: “Pray as if this is your last prayer!” So it will be for those fated to die before the next prayer is called, but one might equally say: “Pray as if this is your first prayer!” Every time we turn to God is a new beginning, a rebirth, and so it should be when we look, with awakened hearts, upon the world around us.

In doing so we have to remember that nothing is what it seems, or rather nothing is only what it seems. As with the verses of the Quran (the same Arabic word is used both for these verses and for the “signs” in nature), there is a literal meaning and, at the same time, a deeper meaning. The verses are sacred, and so are the “signs.” It is here that we come to one of the most dangerous symptoms of alienation; the loss of the sense of the sacred in the modern world, a loss—a deprivation—which affects the Muslim *Umma* as it does the West. The Quran condemns those who separate that which God has joined, and the fragmentation which we see today is an obvious example of this severing of connections. The French critic of our technological civilization, Jacques Ellul, has pointed out that, in the past, man’s deepest experience of the sacred was his immediate contact with the natural world. It is almost impossible fully to comprehend religion as such—or the great myths that bore witness to the unity of the cosmos—when

nature has become remote and wholly “other.” As Ellul says, the sense of the sacred withers when it is no longer rejuvenated by experience. The city dweller’s awareness dries up for lack of support in his new experience with the artificial world of urban technology.

The loss of harmony between man and his natural environment is but an aspect of the loss of harmony between man and his Creator. Those who turn their backs on their Creator and forget Him can no longer feel at home in creation. They assume the role of bacteria which ultimately destroy the body they have invaded. “God’s Viceregent on earth” is then no longer the custodian of nature and, having lost his function, he is a stranger who cannot recognize the landmarks or conform to the customs of this place; alienated—in the literal sense of “having become an alien”—he can see it only as raw material to be exploited. He may find riches and comfort in exploitation, but not happiness. He can never hope to sing with the Persian poet, Sa’di:

I am joyous with the cosmos,
For the cosmos receives its joy from Him:
I love the world,
For the world belongs to Him.

We are, according to the Quran, “the poor” in relation to God, needy from the moment of birth till the end of our lives, and another of His Quranic Names is *al-Kāfi*, “the Satisfier of all needs.” The Source of this hunger, inherent in our substance as human beings, is the need for Him, however it may be disguised or sidetracked by worldly desires. Since He is the only ultimate satisfier of desire it follows that, when we turn our backs and walk away, we will be perpetually unsatisfied and, still seeking to assuage our hungers, exceed all bounds. Until the development of technology this may have harmed only the perpetrator, but it did little harm to the earth. Our range has now been extended immeasurably, and we have become the great destroyers. One of the Buddhist hells is inhabited by huge creatures who were once men and women, ravaged by greed, but now their mouths are no bigger than a pin-head. Surrounded by a feast of nourishment, they can take in only the tiniest crumbs.

Today, whether we are Muslims or Christians, we seem to have lost the key to the language of “signs,” God’s language. It has become both incomprehensible and irrelevant. This is particularly dangerous for the Muslim for whom the Quran must eventually become a partially closed book if the constant references to the natural world as a tissue of “signs” no longer coincide with his experience or touch his heart.

That world, when seen through the window of a motor car or from a height of 30,000 feet, has nothing to say to us, even if it presents a pretty picture. Moreover, since everything has to be spelled out nowadays, it is typical of the modern mindset to ask: What exactly do these “signs” mean? If they could be expressed in words they would be redundant. They touch us at a deeper level than articulate speech, but this is already so with the Quran which, when it is recited to those who have no knowledge of Arabic, still moves their hearts though they understand nothing in terms of human language. So God has at His disposal two languages, the one composed of words and the other of “signs,” although it could also be said that, in practice, He has three means of communication, the third being our personal destinies. These too contain messages for us if we are prepared to understand, and even the most arid skeptic, when struck down by bitter misfortune, asks: “Why? Why me?” He is not supposed to believe that life has any meaning, but he believes none the less, or rather he knows in his heart what his mind denies.

To speak of the natural world is to speak of beauty. Since “God is beautiful,” beauty must in some sense be universally present since He is everywhere present. The common saying that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is one of those half-truths which can either enlighten or deceive us according to our disposition. A particular individual or a particular culture will find the sacred in places where it is hidden from others who, in their turn, will discover it elsewhere. The same applies to the perception of what is beautiful. This does not make it any less real, any less objective. But the prophetic saying that “God is beautiful, He loves beauty” is a statement about the nature of Reality, and it indicates something very important. Just as good and evil are on different levels—the former closer to the Real than the latter—so beauty and ugliness belong to different orders. Ugliness is not one of a pair, like hot and cold, black and white. It represents the spoiling of beauty, the unmaking of what has been well made. It might be compared to a stain on the fabric and belongs to that class of things which, the Quran tells us, last for but a short while and are then extinguished. This is why the Muslim, when he encounters things that are ugly or unseemly, tends to look away, not because he wishes to deny their existence but because not everything that exists is worth his attention. There is a story of Jesus in the Islamic tradition which makes this point. He was walking with his disciples when they passed a dead dog. “How it stinks!”, said his companions. Jesus replied: “How white its teeth are!”

What is the beauty of nature if not an act of adoration, in that it reflects the divine Beauty? “Do you not see,” asks the Quran, “that everything in the heavens and all that is in the earth pays adoration to God, as do the sun and the moon and the stars, the hills and the trees and the beasts . . . ?” There is a Turkish story of a spiritual teacher who sent his pupils to gather flowers for the house. All but one returned with the finest blooms they could find. One, however, was gone for a long time and, when he returned, held in his hand only a single, faded flower. “When I went out to pick the flowers,” he said, “I found them all singing the praises of their Creator and I dared not interrupt them. Finally I saw one that had finished her song, and this is the one that I have brought you.” It would be a mistake to regard this little story as a poetic fancy. The blood that courses through our bodies may lend itself to poetry and to myth, but the fact remains that it has a very important practical function. When the Quran speaks of this perpetual and universal adoration it is doing neither more nor less than telling us what happens, the down-to-earth reality of the situation. Our subjective awareness—or unawareness—cannot alter the facts.

If there is nothing in existence that is only and exclusively what it seems to be, then everything has its own particular significance. I can imagine someone saying: “This is too much! Women’s rights, animal rights, even plant rights, and now you talk about the rights of sticks and stones! Where will it end?” It has no end. That is the only possible answer. We did not make the world, we do not own it. You cannot, the Quran reminds us, create even a fly. This vast picture-book, filled with the “signs” of God, is what it is. Appearances, as we are so often told, are deceptive and, if we float only on the surface of our world, then we are indeed deceived. There is always more to it than that, then more and then still more, until you have plumbed the depths and found—behind the “seventy-thousand veils of light and darkness”—the Face of God. The modern age is frequently condemned for its “materialism.” Perhaps it is not materialistic enough, that is to say it no longer seeks, beyond the shifting surface of material objects—these clouds that constantly form and re-form—what it is that they both veil and reveal.

Two further Names by which God has defined Himself in the Quran are *al-Muhīt*, the “All-Embracing” or the “All-Surrounding” and *al-Zāhir*, which means “the Outward.” It follows that, ultimately and behind all the appearances, He is our “environment” and there is no other. But that is an intellectual statement which might seem to rob the things we see and touch of their due measure of reality. While we

are in this life, situated amidst the “veils,” they are the only reality we know, reflecting after their fashion the greater realities which remain hidden, too bright for our perception. It is their meaning rather than their material structure that should be our prime concern. The mechanism of a clock may be of practical interest, but the purpose of the clock is to tell the time.

The very sounds of nature may add to this universe of meaning, this flood of communication between Creator and creation. I remember a certain Shaykh who was about to deliver his sermon when the thunder sounded, rolling on and on. He fell silent and kept silent even after the heavens had spoken. What could he have added? But we must be very patient and very attentive to catch, through hearing as through sight, that note of universal praise. When the Muslim is at prayer in the early hours of the day or in the act of remembering God, bird-song, the ocean’s roar or the drumming of rain do not disturb him, on the contrary they contribute to his remembrance. But the noise of cars or machinery introduces into the harmony of his worship a discord against which he is obliged to struggle.

Prayer and contemplation, supported by a cosmic environment which, in a sense, cries out to be seen, heard and understood are central to the religious life. But there is also involvement, but for which we are still situated at a distance from the natural world. There are children in Europe and America who are not even aware of the fact that the packaged meat on supermarket shelves is the flesh of living creatures or that the vegetables from which every grain of earth has been washed once grew in open fields and took their time to grow. The patience of the agriculturist is unimaginable to an increasingly impatient generation. Their needs are satisfied in relation to the moving hands of a clock, not by the seasons or by the discipline imposed by the weather. They are “out of touch,” and this phrase can have a profound significance. It represents remoteness, separation and—once again—alienation. In towns and cities the stars are blotted out by street lighting, their brightness hidden and their message dimmed. Here too it is not only contemplation but also involvement that has been lost. “He it is,” says the Quran, “who has set for you the stars that you may guide your course by them amidst the darkness of the land and the sea.” We no longer need them. They can be left to the specialists who talk in terms of light years and have nothing to offer that would help us on our way through the darkness that has penetrated within our breasts and within our minds.

This, of course, is “progress,” and it is certainly convenience, although one of the ironies of the situation is that our contemporaries in the West, freed from the labor once required of them in their encounter with the natural world and their dependence upon it, now have to work harder than ever as ciphers in the industrial or bureaucratic machine to afford the lifestyle to which they have a “right.” This work offers no spiritual nourishment. It is not expected to do so. It provides no contact with reality on any level and no involvement with the “signs” that point our way and remind us of who we are. An almost superhuman effort would be required for us to remember that we are God’s “Viceregens,” responsible for our province just as the farmer is responsible for his stock and his crops. We keep the wheels turning, but they turn to no purpose except to keep the speeding train on tracks which lead nowhere. Eventually it will hit the buffers, the invisible limits which frame our worldly existence.

The Muslim tries to live within the limits of the *Sharī‘ah*, the road or path which leads safely to the watering place and so, beyond all limits, to Paradise and the ultimate satisfaction of all needs. Being human, we are free to wander from the road. The rest of creation does not have this freedom. In terms of the Islamic perspective, the animals and the plants, the mountains and the oceans have, each of them, their own *Sharī‘ah*. They are bound inescapably to the function decreed for them. They cannot be other than they are meant to be and there is, in this, a lesson for mankind. Our environment obeys God and encourages us to do the same. The rocks and the rivers are subject to the “laws of nature,” the animals follow their “instincts”; this is but one way of describing the divine Decree which governs their existence. They cannot sin, they cannot break bounds, and this exposes the absurdity of the remark frequently addressed to vicious criminals by a learned Judge: “You are no better than an animal!” As human creatures we can be better than the animals or worse than them; we cannot, however, exist on their level since we are not subject to the laws which direct and enclose their lives. “There is not an animal on earth,” says the Quran, “nor a bird flying on two wings but they are communities like you” (or “in your likeness”), and the verse ends: “And unto their Lord they will be gathered.” It is not open to us to join one or other of their communities but we can, if we depart from the *Sharī‘ah* laid down for us, become not only subhuman but sub-animal. There is great confusion in the Western mind concerning the animal species. Hardly a day passes that one does not hear someone say: “After all, we’re only animals.” This is not an opinion but an ideo-

logical statement regarding the origin and status of the human being. It proclaims an unquestioning adherence to the Darwinian theory and often sounds like a political slogan. The curious thing is that its implications are ignored. At least for the time being—although this may change—men and women are treated quite differently from animals. It does not occur to us to bring a pig to Court, as sometimes happened in the Middle Ages, and charge it with a crime. The owner of an animal that is mortally sick is blamed for not having it “put down”; the same person will be tried for murder if he or she “puts down” a terminally ill patient. Most people believe that we are neither more nor less than clever primates (or so they are told), but they are horrified if human beings are treated as if they were apes.

It seems to me that there is also confusion, although of a different kind, in the Muslim mind. No religion lays greater stress on the good treatment of animals than does Islam, yet Muslims have in general a bad reputation in this regard (as did Christians until very recently). If we represent a religion—any traditional religion—as a circle or a sphere, then it is likely that its adherents will absorb and practice only a segment of the whole. They will also emphasize this segment, as though to fill the empty space, so that they are blinded to all that they have ignored. Their religion, one might say, is too big for them. You cannot pour the ocean into a pint pot. The fact that people of the same Faith may choose different segments for their exclusive attention is one of the reasons for conflicts within the religion, not least within the Islamic *Umma*.

The good Muslim's life is lived in imitation of the Prophet's example, followed as faithfully as circumstances permit. It is in this example, the acts and the sayings of God's Messenger, that we find the most uncompromising references to animal welfare. If they are taken seriously—and how can the Muslim not take them seriously?—they have very grave implications for all who fall short in their care for the animals in their charge. Not only are there the famous stories of the woman sent to hell for shutting up a cat till it died of hunger and of the prostitute forgiven all her sins because she gave water to a dog that was dying of thirst, but there are also a number of small incidents in the record which emphasize the same principle. When the Prophet saw a donkey that had been branded on the face he cried out: “God curse the one who branded it.” A man who was about to slaughter a goat for food was severely reproached for allowing the animal to see him sharpening his knife. A prophet of earlier times was scolded by God Himself for burning an ant's nest because an ant had stung

him—"You have destroyed a community that glorified Me"—and there is, according to another saying, a reward in Paradise for whoever shows kindness to a creature possessed of "a living heart." The law books instruct us as to what to do if we find a poisonous snake in our garden. It is to be warned to leave. If it returns a second time, it is to be warned again, but if it makes a third visit it may be killed.

The Quran tells us: "Your Lord inspired the bee, saying: Choose dwellings in the hills and in the trees and in what is built; then eat all manner of fruit and follow humbly the ways of your Lord made smooth"; in other words, follow your *Shari'ah*, for that is your path and your destiny. This again brings out the Islamic view that each of the diverse non-human "communities" has a particular relationship with its Lord, but the Lord is one; ours as well as theirs. The relationships differ and so the paths differ, but the goal is the same. It is the harmonious interaction of all the components of the cosmos, both animate and inanimate, which reflects in countless different ways the unity of the Real. The killing of an animal except for food, and then only the permitted minimum, and even the unnecessary cutting down of a tree or uprooting of a plant goes, as it were, against the grain. It exceeds, from motives of greed, the bounds laid down for humankind. There is no place here, no excuse, for the luxuries of modern civilization.

Were it not for the divine Mercy, scattered like rain throughout creation, and God's readiness to forgive all sins if they are followed by sincere repentance, we would be in a bad way, but what matters most is to keep these principles always in mind, and that is possible only if we observe what might aptly be called the Prime Directive of Islam: the constant "remembrance of God." All that we need to know and all that we are required to do is encompassed in this remembrance; it is the shield against temptation and the spur to keep us on the "straight path" made smooth for us. In choosing to follow it, we are in step with the animals, the plants and the earth itself which, then and only then, has no cause for complaint.

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Features in

The Essential Sophia

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edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr & Katherine O'Brien

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