

Theme 5 – The Role of Religious Institutions

Presentation: Qur’anic Revelation and the Environment

Presenter: Professor Mehmet S Aydin

It is interesting to note that although the great religions of the world exhibit theologies quite different from each other, their approach to nature is very much alike, especially where the question of how nature is to be used is concerned. It must be remembered that this question, when it is taken within a religious context, is primarily an ethical one.

This commonality is extremely important and it ought to be worked out as systematically as possible. In this time of ours when the ecological perspective has become very important in relation to economic and political perspectives in general, the different religions could achieve much if they could work on common projects in the light of a new global theology of the environment. To achieve this task, the holy scriptures have provided us with rich materials and enlightened directions. For example, when one reads the Qur’an attentively, especially the chapters revealed in the Meccan period, one cannot fail to see that ‘talk of nature’ becomes an essential ingredient of ‘talk of God’. In other words, nature is at the centre of the Qur’anic discourse. This is understandable, since amongst the many ‘ways to God’ the place nature occupies is paramount. This is the reason why it constitutes the real starting point in all theistic arguments for the existence of God, developed within different religious traditions under the name of ‘natural theology’ - another common element in all theistic religions. The philosophical guise of this theology may make us forget that it was originally religious consciousness which paved the way for such speculations. The rise and growth of that consciousness without which there can be no religion, owes a great deal to nature.

As we all know, Muslims believe that the Qur’an is the ‘Word of God’, and together with the adherents of many of the great faiths of the world, they also believe that the world is the ‘Work of God’. As a matter of fact, when this ‘work’ is read religiously, it too becomes the ‘Word of God’ in a different sense, since both revelation and nature lead humankind to the Ultimate Reality. The Qur’anic revelation thus uses the term ‘sign’ both in referring to its own verses as well as natural phenomena. They are each ‘signs of God’ (*ayat Allah*). This terminology is not accidental. It rests on the belief that ‘the same God who created nature and displayed His wisdom therein so clearly has also revealed the verses (*ayat*) of the Qur’an’.¹ In other words, both are the *logoi* of God.

It is due to this God-nature relationship, that nature possesses its createdness and contingency, as well as its rationality, orderliness, and purposefulness. It is due to the same relationship that the ecological discourse within the Islamic perspective cannot dispense with the thoroughly theistic background enunciated by the Qur’an. Human nature too exhibits analogous characteristics and this is evidently one of the reasons why the Islamic tradition terms nature itself ‘muslim’ in a symbolic or even cosmological sense. In an oft-quoted verse the Qur’an says:

He (God) said to them (the skies) and to the earth: ‘Come both of you, willingly or unwillingly!’
(To which they responded) ‘We do come in obedience.’²

It should be pointed out that ‘to come to God willingly and in obedience’ is one of the primary definitions of the Qur’anic term ‘Islam’, and it only secondarily refers to the ramified religious tradition.

This primitive meaning of ‘Islam’ seems to have stirred an extremely strong mystical emotion, especially in the hearts of the Sufis who were attached to what is usually called ‘the Yasawi School’ with which practically all Turkish Sufi orders have organic ties. These Sufis accept all creatures of God as ‘brothers in faith’, or to be more precise as ‘brothers in love’. That is why our beloved Yunus Emre, the Turkish Sufi poet of the thirteenth century says:

With the mountains and the rocks
I call you forth, my God.
With the birds as day breaks

I call you forth, my God.
With Jesus in the sky,
With Moses on Mount Sinai,
Raising my sceptre high -
I call you forth, my God.³

This whole philosophy - so to speak - of participation and interrelation finds its ultimate roots in the Qur'an which says that 'There is not a single thing but extols His limitless glory and praise, but you fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him.'⁴ Another verse asks 'Do you not see that to God bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and the earth - the sun, the moon, the stars, the hills, the trees, the animals?'⁵

Underlying all such images is the idea of a systematic teleology in the cosmos. Specifically, such Qur'anic terms as *husban* (suggesting 'mathematical computation'), *mizan* ('the balance of justice') and *qadar* or *taqdir* ('God-given role' or 'function') indicate, among many other things, the purposefulness of the creation. Of this, God says:

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that stands between them in sport, but We created them only for a serious end (*bi'l-haqq*), though most of them do not understand.⁶

This purposefulness reaches the level of self-consciousness in the life of man, who himself is an integral part of nature. One of the 'serious ends' for which nature is created is the existence of humankind as an ethical creature, that is, a being capable of self-criticism and ethical self-realisation. Nature seen in the light of the Qur'anic revelation, is thus ultimately a theatre for the moral activity of humans, 'for the purpose of confuting evil and error with truth and value'.⁷ Humankind is equipped with all the means to achieve this end. Nature for its part is created in readiness to receive the good results of the efficacious activity of humans, and to make their input successful. The man fulfilling such a function is termed by the Qur'an *muslih*, that is a 'good (*salih*) reformer' of nature and society.

The figure posited by the Qur'an as the opposite of the *muslih* is the *mufsid*, that is, the individual in the habit of corrupting both nature and society. According to the Qur'an:

Corruption has appeared on earth and sea, as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought, and so He may give them a taste of some of their deeds in order that they may return (from evil and corruption).⁸

With such corruption of the earth, man betrays the trust (*amana*) given to him by God, and abandons his vicegerency of this world (*khilafa*, an important Qur'anic concept). By doing so, he closes himself to the God-given bounty which is expressed in the Revelation by the term *taskhir*, that is, the subservience of nature to humans for the purpose of moral and aesthetic perfection, and never to be exploited for corruption.⁹ Any one familiar with the contents of the Qur'anic revelation knows well how the theme of 'corruption on the earth' (*fasad fi'l-'ard*) occurs there again and again. Muhammad Asad, the well-known Austrian convert to Islam, rightly interprets the above verse as a now verifiable prophecy:

The growing corruption and destruction of our natural environment, so awesomely - if as yet only partially - demonstrated in our time, is here predicted as "an outcome of what men's hands have wrought", i.e., that self-destructive - because utterly materialistic - inventiveness and frenzied activity which now threatens mankind with previously unimaginable ecological disasters.¹⁰

There is no doubt that the 'corrupting hands' are only the external instruments of people who are themselves inwardly, that is morally, corrupted. Corruption thus starts within man's inner life, then extends to the social and eventually the natural order. 'There is a kind of man', says the Qur'an, 'who whenever he prevails, goes about the earth spreading corruption and destroying agricultural land and offspring. But God loves not corruption.'¹¹

The Qur'an accepts all animal species as 'fellow nations', when it says, 'No creature is there crawling on the earth, no bird flying with its wings, but they are nations like yourself.'¹² This attitude towards animals has had a lasting effect on the institution of Muslim pious foundations (*waqf*, plural *awqaf*) which still play

a very significant role in Muslim communal life. In many documents of *waqf*, there are special articles related to the preservation of animal life. In many buildings owned by *waqf* foundations in Istanbul and elsewhere, we see 'bird castles' (in Turkish, *kus saraylari*) and special places to feed stray cats and dogs. The well-known French thinker Montaigne talks in his Essays about special Turkish hospitals for animals.¹³

According to the Islamic tradition, caring for animals brings reward both here and in the world to come. In one of the traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad we read the following:

Someone said, 'O Messenger of God, will we then have a reward for the good done to our animals?' 'There will definitely be a reward' he replied, 'for anyone who gives water to a being that has a tender heart'.¹⁴

The same thing is said about the person who plants a tree: 'Never does a Muslim plant trees or cultivate land,' says the Prophet Muhammad, 'and birds or men or beasts eat from them, but that is charity on his behalf'.¹⁵

In order to have an overview of the Qur'anic perspective on the environment, one should also pay attention to the frequent descriptions of Paradise (*janna*) in the Revelation. These are obviously important for anyone interested in Islamic aesthetics, but their environmental dimension should not be underestimated. The Qur'anic Paradise is 'the eternal home' and 'home of peace'¹⁶ (*dar as-salam*) for the righteous who will dwell 'in the midst of gardens and rivers'¹⁷ - rivers whose water is 'incorruptible' (*ghair-asin*).¹⁸ In it, there are companions who are 'pure and holy' (*mutahhara*).¹⁹ And again in it there is 'no vain discourse' (*laghw*), that is, no corrupt and corrupting words.²⁰

We all know that here we are not living in Paradise, but at least traditionally we maintained a sense of analogy which enabled us to entertain a proper conception of Paradise while moulding our earthly environment. How about the generations to come? What will become of them if they are to inherit a morally polluted interior landscape within a seriously polluted natural one?

¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, p.72

² *Qur'an* 41:11

³ Yunus Emre, *Selected Poems*, Trs.T Halman, Ankara, 1990, p.158

⁴ *Qur'an* 17:44

⁵ *Qur'an* 22:18

⁶ *Qur'an* 44:38

⁷ Eg. *Qur'an* 21:18

⁸ *Qur'an* 31:41

⁹ See I.R. al-Faruqi and L L al-Faruqi, *The Cultural Atlas of Islam*, New York 1986, p.314 ff.

¹⁰ M.Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, Gibraltar, 1980, p.623. Significantly the primary meaning of *fasad* is not ethical but biological degeneration, that is, putrefaction.

¹¹ *Qur'an* 2:205

¹² *Qur'an* 6:38

¹³ For further information see M Bayraktar, *Islam ve Ekoloji*, Ankara 1992, p109

¹⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari*

¹⁵ *Sahih Muslim*

¹⁶ E.g. *Qur'an* 39:73-5

¹⁷ E.g. *Qur'an* 54:54

¹⁸ *Qur'an* 47:15

¹⁹ *Qur'an* 2:25

²⁰ *Qur'an* 19:62