



Human Conscience and “Cosmism” of Islam

by **Éric Geoffroy**

It is a kind of irony of history that during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the predominant view held by the positivists and “scientists” was that science and technology could satisfy humanity and solve all its problems, without creating new problems. Further, these people tried to convince us that metaphysics and religions were meaningless and should, therefore, be eliminated from that which concerns modern man. As a result of this view, modern man lost his awareness of the sacred dimension of nature and alienated himself from it. So we can’t help but notice that the current environmental crisis is a direct consequence of the loss of a relationship between humans, the natural realm and God. Only such a relationship may provide for a much-heightened sense of environmental conscience and self-discipline, both in the individual and collective fields of human life.

The Cosmism of Islam

In the Islamic view, the whole creation is endowed with life because it comes from “the Ever Living” (*al-Hayy*), which

is a major one of the divine Name. It correlates with the Islamic idea of *Dîn al-Fitra*, which is the belief that Islam is a spiritual path with a built in understanding of our true nature, and therefore designed in such a way as to enhance the lives of its practitioners. For the rationalist Mu’tazilites, this “aliveness” was quite metaphoric, but this is not the case for most of ‘*ulamâ*’ and especially Sufis. These Muslim thinkers usually refer to the celebrated verse “The earth, the seven heavens and their inhabitants celebrate God; there is nothing in the creation that does not proclaim His glory...”. Commenting on this and similar verses, al-Ghazâlî (d. 1111 C.E.) asserts that “the earth has language and life”¹, and likewise Ibn ‘Arabî (d. 1240 C.E.) states that all the realms are living and are expressed: “God can only be praised by that which is living and has a consciousness. The Prophet said in this sense that all creatures, dry or wet, are witnesses to the call of the muezzin.”² Since “all things are living and look to their Lord”, we must be respectful of all that which surrounds us.³ For the Sufi Iranian

poet Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî (d. 1273) the "aliveness" of the cosmos is something not theoretical at all but quite tangible and sensory, whereby nature speaks and sees:⁴ "Every atom of that world is living, able to understand discourse, and eloquent."⁵

We can find evidence of Islamic "cosmism" in the titles of the 114 suras of the Qur'an, which refer to all the realms of Universal Manifestation and natural phenomena:

- the astral (Star, Moon, Thunder, Storms, the Sundered Sky, the Zodiacal Constellations, the Sun...);
- the mineral (the Cave, Mont Sinai, Iron...);
- the vegetable (the Fig Tree – but in the text, the tree and the ear of wheat are the favourite parables);
- the animal (the Cattle, Bees, Ants, Spider, Elephant...);
- invisible beings (Angels, Jinns...); and of course the human realm.

We should not forget that "the cosmos itself is in fact God's first revelation, and upon the leaves of trees, the faces of mountains, the features of animals, as well as in the sounds of the winds and gently flowing brooks, are to be found the signs of God."⁶ Indeed, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's words, nature is "the theatre wherein are manifested His signs."⁷ Even in the humblest phenomenon, as the Quran asserts, "Surely Allah is not ashamed to set forth any parable such as that of a gnat."⁸ Al-Qur'an states repeatedly that the natural world is a

vast fabric into which the "signs" of the Creator are woven. Al-Qur'an and the phenomena of nature are twin manifestations of Allah: "Soon will We show them Our signs in the utmost horizons (of the universe) and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth."⁹ Both signs of natural phenomena and *âyat* (verse) of the Qur'an are means of communication from the Creator to His creatures.

A celebrated passage from the Qur'an stresses the dignity accorded to Nature in the divine economy: "Surely We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant" (33:72). Thus a first teaching that we can take from this verse is: far from being reality with no consciousness or simply inanimate objects, the skies, the earth, the land and the mountains are worthy of being God's partners.

All the realms are summoned to universal consciousness, for they are united in cosmic worship:

"And whoever is in the heavens and the earth makes obeisance to Allah only, willingly and unwillingly, and their shadows too at morn and eve" (Qur'an 13:15). "Do you not see that Allah is He, Whom obeys whoever is in the heavens and whoever is in the earth, and the sun and the moon and the stars, and the mountains and the trees, and the animals..." (22:18). "And whatever creature that is in the heavens and that is in the earth makes obeisance to Allah (only), and the angels (too) and they do not show



pride" (16:49). "Do you not see that Allah is He Whom do glorify all those who are in the heavens and the earth, and the (very) birds with extended wings?" (24:41). "And the thunder declares His glory with His praise" (13:13).

This cosmic worship comes from *Fitra*, "pure primordial nature", whereby all creatures know God immediately because they come from the divine world.¹⁰ Clearly, primordial nature not only concerns Muslims, since *all* human souls have agreed to the Pact (*mîthâq*) with God in the spiritual world, before incarnation.¹¹ As Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) points out, "*Fitra* is the absolute permanence of the knowledge of God" in man, who is thus devoted to worshiping God innately but

often unknowingly.¹² This topic of a-dogmatic or pre-dogmatic primordial "tradition" is strongly linked with the Islamic conscience that "the whole nature is *muslim*."¹³ Nature works according to divine laws and according to the way God designed and created it. The Qur'an therefore applies the term *islâm* to the entire universe insofar as it ineluctably obeys God's will: "Do they, then, seek an obedience other than that to God, while it is to Him that everyone in the heavens and the earth submits (*aslama*)?"¹⁴

The Prophet was very responsive to the living universal consciousness, because he experienced it every day, in his relations, for instance, with the *mineral* realm. He tells that the stones greeted him during the period before

the first Qur'anic revelation, and he heard the stones invoke God. "That mountain loves us, and we love it", he said of Mount Uhud. As for the *vegetable* realm, there is the episode of the moaning palm trunk, which is celebrated because it was heard by the onlookers: the trunk began to moan when the Prophet ceased to lean on it to turn to address his followers; the Prophet then comforted the trunk and the moaning ceased. The order was then given that the trunk was to be buried in the right and proper way, as if it were human. Animals are greatly respected in classic Islam because like man they have a soul-consciousness (*rūh*), albeit to a lesser degree than man of course, although the Qur'an specifies that human beings can fall to a degree of consciousness lower than that of an animal. According to Islam, all animals know pleasure and suffering – few Muslims are aware of this – and they will be judged and resurrected, naturally in their own ways. This is not so surprising, considering that God made a "revelation" to the bees (Qur'an 16:68) with the same Arabic term used for the revelation made to the Prophet.

About the nobility of the mineral realm, Ibn 'Arabî clearly claims that the highest quality in man is the *mineral*. In fact the mineral is totally subject to God. It is ontologically transparent: if you let a stone fall, it makes no resistance, as man might. It never cheats. Thus the Kaaba at Mecca, a stone cube, although empty inside, is the "House of God". As Ibn 'Arabî points out, the mineral knows God and speaks through



Him. In the Qur'an the mountain fears God (59:21), the rock crumbles out of fear of God (2:74), etc. This is not only a vision pertaining to Sufism: the Syrian theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) claims that "minerals were created to praise God in a language which no one can comprehend other than He who bestowed it upon them."¹⁵

The divine is thus not outside the cosmos, because *Rahma*, Mercy, "encompasses all things" (Qur'an 7:156). This *solidarity* between God and his creation clearly implies the same solidarity between all creatures: "the whole Creation is the family of God's family". In Islam the experience of Unicity (*Tawhîd*) impedes any division between spirit and matter – precisely that dualism from which the modern environmental crisis has arisen.

The Responsibility of Man

As God's representative on Earth (*khalīfat Allāh fi'ard*)¹⁶, man has a crucial responsibility in the management of the planet. Yet, the "God" of the Qur'an himself is pessimistic at the prospect: in the same *sura* (chapter), the angels, although obedient to God, question the wisdom of entrusting this mission to man: "What! Wilt Thou place in it [the Earth] such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood, and we celebrate Thy praise and extol Thy holiness?" The verse ends, however, with God's reply to the angels: "I know what you do not know." We find the same paradox and the same ambiguous position of man on earth in this qur'anic passage as in the verse 33:72: "Surely We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth

and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant". Qur'an interpreters failed to agree on the meaning of "trust" (or "deposit"). Does it refer to faith, knowledge, universal consciousness and the collective responsibility in managing the planet? In any case this trust must be given back in the best condition, clean and completely intact, since man is only a tenant of the earth and the whole of creation will return to the original primordial Oneness.

If we remain fixed on the axis of the "horizontal", God knows man is not capable of doing what is asked of him. On a horizontal level, therefore, there is no solution, and that is what we are experiencing at the moment. Only a "vertical" kind of consciousness – which doesn't separate transcendence from immanence – may, in the qur'anic view, bring a solution. For the time being, however, this is beyond us. Here we find the test of the "voluntary submission to God", the approximate translation of the term *islām*. There is a divine design for man that is beyond his ordinary or current consciousness, and we don't know what future touches God may add to this. The picture described by the Qur'an is thus, for the time being, dramatic and mysterious.

So we should not forget that, before being God's representatives on Earth, we are servants of God (*'abd Allāh*), and custodians of the entire natural world. We have the right to practice this representation - or vicegerency – only on the condition that we remain



God's servants and obey His will and His laws. There is a due measure (*qadr*) to things, and a balance (*mîzân*) in the cosmos, and humanity is committed not to disturb or violate this *qadr* or *mîzân*: the fulfilment of this commitment is the fundamental moral imperative of humanity.

Moreover, we can't dodge the issue of the dominion of nature entrusted by God to man in the monotheistic religions. This has become a very common concept in certain quarters, and especially in Western Europe. In fact, as in other monotheistic religions, in Islam God gives the dominion of the creation to man (*al-taskhîr*). See, for example, the following verse: "And He has made subservient to you (*sakhkhara lakum*) whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, all, from Himself; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect" (45:13). But this clearly does not mean that nature is subject to man's unbridled, exploitative powers, for it is God's command (*amr*), not that of human beings, that nature obeys! Commenting on the qur'anic verses concerning *taskhîr*, Ibn Taymiyya writes: "In considering all these verses it must be remembered that God in His wisdom created these creatures for reasons other than serving man, because in these verses He explains only the benefits of these creatures to man."¹⁷ We must be aware that the cosmos is God's dominion, not man's dominion, as Seyyed Hoseein Nasr writes, "We cannot take away the *haqq* [right, due] of various creatures given to them by God...but must pay each being its due

(*haqq*) in accordance with the nature of this creature"... "In Islam there are no human rights without human responsibilities. Rights follow and do not precede responsibilities."¹⁸

Although human beings are considered in Islam the noblest of creatures (*ashraf al-makhluqât*), the Qur'an humbles humanity in such a verse as: "Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is greater than the creation of human beings. Yet most people understand not!"¹⁹

Further, what kind of "man" does God give this power to? To today's degenerated humanity? In this case the Qur'an admits the angels are right: "Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought..." (30:41). No, we are talking about primordial Adam, about the "Perfect" or "Completed man" (*al-insân al-kâmil*) which the *principial* Islam would seem to aspire to fashion at the end of the cycle that we live in and naturally with the aid of other spiritualities. In their condition of ordinary consciousness, men, as the Sufis stress, live in a state of perpetual distraction. This is illustrated in verse 17:44, which ends as follows: "The seven heavens declare His glory and the earth too, and those who are in them; and there is not a single thing but glorifies Him with His praise, *but you [men] do not understand their glorification...*" Ibn 'Arabî, for instance, clearly states that "the beasts possess skills which God has set in them [and to which man has no access]"²⁰, and Rûmî often reminds us that the God-given instinct of animals is not



obscured, as is ours, by intellect and false imaginings: they follow, intuitively and without confusion, the motive force of the universe, which is Love.²¹ Furthermore, all the realms of nature observe and remember the deeds of humankind, in order to act, as it is said in the Qur'an itself, as witness on the Day of Judgment.²²

It would thus appear that only spiritually awake and regenerated humans are effectively able to manage the planet: "Allah has promised to those of you who believe and do good that He will most certainly make them rulers in the earth."²³ In the Islamic vision, man occupies a broad spectre: once he is "completed" or "perfect", he will be superior to the highest angels

and archangels, but he is inferior to the beasts when he is in his most fallen state. "Unlike animals, trees and mountains, human beings must consciously uphold God's trust. Humans are entitled to feel privileged, but arrogance is a great folly and, indeed, a form of idolatry."²⁴ It was in this sense that although Emir 'Abd al-Qâdir al-Jazâ'irî (Abdelkader, d. 1883) supported the technical progress made by the Europeans in the mid-19th century (he campaigned to convince the Near East peoples to open up the Suez Canal), he also warned them that the "Heavens would close up again" above them.

Hereof we also understand why, according to Rûmî, Man carries in himself the life of all realms. Listen to



what he has to say: "He [Man] came first into the realm of inorganic things, and from the realm of inorganic things he passed into the vegetable realm but did not remember his previous condition. And when he passed into the animal state, he did not remember his state as a vegetable, save only for the inclination which he has towards that state, especially in the season of spring – like the inclination of babies towards their mothers: they do not know the secret of their desire for the maternal breast, or the novice's like inclination towards his spiritual master. The disciple's particular intelligence is derived from that Universal Intelligence. Then Man comes into the human state; he does not remember at all his earlier

souls and he will be changed again starting from his present soul."²⁵ Thus far from being in opposition to cosmic reality and Nature, the human not only incorporates the various realms of Nature, but goes beyond them by going beyond himself, according to a principle of infinite evolution across the various worlds.

Some Practical Aspects

Out of respect for life, and in line with the moral project of "pursuing the middle way," the Qur'an mentions economic concerns and the rejection of wastefulness: "Surely the squanderers are the fellows of the *Shaitans* [evil spirits]" (17:27); "Eat and drink and be not extravagant; surely He does

not love the extravagant" (7:31). All Muslims know the famous *hadīth*: "The earth has been created for me as a pure mosque [or here: temple]". The mosque is primarily a meeting place for men, but the ultimate temple is Nature, or rather the whole cosmos, raising the issue of which direction Muslims will have to pray in once they are on the Moon or Mars. And when Muslims perform their ablutions, they should bear in mind the Prophet's words when recommending using water sparingly, even on a river bank. What is highlighted in this case is primarily ethics, a conduct that can be passed on by generations.

"No fish is caught and no bird trapped without some of the glory of God leaving this world." It is as if the Prophet were warning us that the divine protection and blessing (*baraka*) would gradually dwindle as the animal species became rarer. And that is what we are experiencing in our own age. Since the various realms are interdependent, the *baraka* flows between them. "The ant in its hole and the fish in the sea", he continues "call down grace on he who teaches good to men."

The cultural decay of so-called Muslim societies has led to the Islam faithful almost completely forgetting these matters. You only have to travel in these societies to realize how far their cultural practice is removed from essential Islamic teaching. Nowadays, the religious obsession with laws and ritual and the concern of many people to meet their immediate needs, combined with the utilitarian relationship with nature created by rampant globalization, has dimmed

any universalist environmental form of consciousness in these societies. Muslim experts, thinkers, and some sections of the general public, have only recently rediscovered this founding environmental lesson and now wish to place the emphasis on the essential rather than on secondary matters.

Are there possible solutions? What do the Muslim thinkers, the '*ulamā*', suggest? They mainly propose reintroducing an essential notion, a medieval Islamic discipline, that may be translated by the "ultimate aims of Sharī'a" (*maqâsid al-Sharī'a*). This is not the Sharia as depicted in the Western media. The Sharī'a is a cosmic code of law. It is the equivalent of the Hindu term *Dharma*. But what is the ultimate aim of the Sharī'a? It is human happiness. Five principles of respect are stated: respect for human life, religion, reason, procreation and private property. The contemporary '*ulamā*' propose using, what is technically speaking, a science to promote the protection of life in all forms. They have reinstated this science to respond to the current situation of the planet and humanity. Personally I feel that this is not enough, because it is still a "horizontal" type reform. I believe that the solution must be *vertical and horizontal* and therefore will rely on what I call the spiritual revolution, now ongoing here and there in Islam and also outside Islam. This spiritual revolution appears especially in Islamic liberation theology, which borrowed from Christian theology but gave it a much more metaphysical meaning: only the worship of the One, the single God, will free man from all kinds of

idolatry like consumerism, nationalism, politics, and an ideological use of religion itself.²⁶

"If one of you holds a sapling [palm tree] and hears the Hour [of the Last Judgment] sound, he should rush to plant it in the ground!" I was recently told that this wise saying of the Prophet has anticipated what is now called sustainable development. Whatever the case, it gives hope a grounding and suggests that life on Earth will continue, with or without humanity. In several passages in the Qur'an, indeed, we find that God could easily make humanity as we know it disappear

and replace it with other forms of life – human or otherwise. For example: "Do you not see that Allah created the heavens and the earth with truth? If He please He will take you off and bring a new creation" (14:19). Moreover, the Islamic tradition – the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings – teaches us that there is an extraterrestrial and extra-human life.

Notes

- 1 Al-Ghazâlî, *The Jewels of the Qur'an*, translation Abul Quasem, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1977, p. 57.
- 2 *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, dâr Sâdir,

Beyrouth, I, 147.

3 *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, Chap. 357.

4 See *Mathnawî*, 1.3279-82, 3.1019, 4.2403...

5 Ibid.

6 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis", in *Islam and Ecology – A Bestowed Trust*, eds. R. Foltz, F.M. Denny and A. Baharuddin, Harvard University Press, 2003, p.95.

7 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Man and Nature: Beyond Current Alternatives", *International Seminar on Islamic Philosophy and Science*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, p.3.

8 Qur'an, 2:26.

9 Qur'an, 41:53.

10 "Surely we are Allah's and to Him we shall surely return" (2:156).

11 Cf. Qur'an 7:172: "And [remember] when your Lord brought forth from the children of Adam, from their backs, their descendants, and made them bear witness against their own souls [by asking them]: Am I not your Lord? They said: Yes! We bear witness. Lest you should say on the day of resurrection: surely we were heedless of this."

12 See Geneviève Gobillot, *La conception originelle – Ses interprétations et fonctions chez les penseurs musulmans*, IFAO, Cairo, 2000, p.62.

13 Qur'an 30:30.

14 Qur'an 3:83.

15 On the *Fitra*, see his *Letters from Prison*.

16 Qur'an 2:30.

17 *Majmû' al-fatâwâ*, quoted by Mawil Yousuf Izzi Deen, "Islamic Environmental Ethics", in *Ethics of Environment and Development*, ed. J.R. Engel and J.G. Engel, Tucson, 1990, p. 190.



- 18 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis", *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- 19 Qur'an 40:57.
- 20 *Al-Futûhât al-makkiyya*, III, 489.
- 21 See for instance *Mathnawi* 2.387-389 and 5.2008.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 4.2421.
- 23 Qur'an 24:55.
- 24 Abdul Aziz Said and Nathan Funk, "Peace in Islam: An Ecology of the Spirit", in *Islam and Ecology – A Bestowed Trust*, eds. R. Foltz, F.M. Denny and A. Baharuddin, *op. cit.*, p.163.
- 25 *Mathnawi*, 4.3637.
- 26 See Eric Geoffroy, *L'islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2009, to be published soon in Arabic, English and Turkish languages.

