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Nature: A Book to Contemplate

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An Islamic Approach to Nature: a book to be contemplated

Nature is a wonderfully designed masterpiece of art. As humanity is in continuous contact with nature, our relationship with it has always been significant. What does nature mean to us? Although we have a strong relationship with nature, the quality of this relationship is a matter of discussion. Some naturalist scientists accept nature as so independent that they consider it self-governing and self-creating; other scholars consider every aspect of nature as dependent upon the Master Architect of the universe.

As a result of the former view, our modern approach toward nature is often aggressive and arrogant. Until recently, people in the West viewed nature as something to be conquered and thus dominated. Humanity's resulting struggle as to conquer and tame nature was inevitable. In the 1960s, when British scholars managed to measure the top of Mount Everest, they declared that they had conquered Everest, the object of their efforts. This is a clear indication of our modern approach to nature: domination instead of harmony.

The world's great religions have significantly different approaches to nature. This article analyzes the Islamic approach by focusing on the Qur'anic understanding of nature as a book to be contemplated.

Islam and nature

Islam views nature as a book similar to the Qur'an, through which God reveals Himself. Although the Qur'an does not explicitly declare nature to be the book of God, it contains many references to nature as parts of the limitless words of God. One verse reads: Though the sea became ink for the words of my Lord, verily the sea would be used up before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even though we brought the like thereof to help (18:109). Some Islamic scholars interpret this as indicating that the sea itself is a sort of word of God. Therefore, if the sea were doubled it still could not provide enough ink to

exhaust God's words, because the ink in question is His word. Therefore, one can view every part of nature as a sentence or word in the book of nature, the author of which is God.

Accordingly, studying nature means studying the book of God. Those who believe in the Qur'an are expected to read this book in order to understand God, contemplate His creation, and maintain a dialogue with Him. Humanity is endowed with the ability to think, and thus can see God's beautiful Names reflected throughout the natural world. This idea is indicated in: In the creation of the heavens and Earth and the succession of day and night are signs for people of wisdom—those who remember God standing and sitting and lying on their sides, and who ponder over the creation of the heavens and Earth, exclaiming: "Our Lord, You have not created this in vain" (3:119).

God's beautiful Names

By contemplating nature, we inevitably realize the meanings and reflections of God's beautiful Names. As we are the only conscious creatures in the physical world, only we are required to reflect upon nature. The Islamic tradition states that God has 99 Names, some of which are reflected in the natural world.

For example, the sun with all its glory, as well as the moon and the stars, reflect the Name al-Nur (The Light). Earth, with all its living creatures, reflects al-Hayy (The Living One). The whole universe is the result and reflection of al-Khaliq (The Creator). All love in the universe, from the love of human mothers for their children to the love of animal mothers for their young (in other words all human and animal beings' inherent capacity to love) reflect al-Wadud (The Loving One). At the end of his Divine Comedy, Dante (1265-1321) indicates that God's love is "the love that moves the sun and other stars." This idea was also held by al-Jami, a famous Sufi. Many

Muslim theologians, especially Sufis, consider the sun's movement to be a result of the ecstatic love it feels for God.

Another example is the sustenance of all creatures, which is the product of al-Razzaq (The Sustainer). The capacity to see or understand reflects al-Basir (The Seeing One). The uniqueness of all living things with the variety of shapes reflects al-Musawwir (The Fashioner). All things of beauty reflect al-Jamil (The Most Beautiful One). These examples present nature's positive aspects and how they reflect God's Names. However, its negative aspects (e.g., natural disasters and death) also reflect some of His Names.

The Names and nature

The lofty reality of the relationship between God's Names and nature perhaps can be understood as similar to the relationship between an object and a mirror. The sun's manifestation and reflection appear in all small fragments of glass and droplets of water. They reflect the sun but are not the sun itself. Therefore, all creatures and the natural world reflect God but are not God. This element distinguishes Islam from pantheism, which sees nature as God.

Given that nature reflects God's Names, it was created for a purpose. From the planetary to the atomic level, nature contains no randomness or chance of accidental creation. Everything is consciously created with a measure, which engenders an inimitable art. Even the smallest items of creation are crafted artfully and in painstaking detail. Such verses as: *It is He [God] who creates and then disposes, Who measures and then guides* (87:3) and: *We have created everything with a measure* (54:49) support the idea that everything in the universe is measured and guided by God, the All-Powerful and All-Wise. Who has directly designed and created all things. Islamic scholars assert that God must design and create even the smallest thing, for if He did not there would be chaos in the world. Accordingly, the universe is not a completely closed system of cause and effect laws.

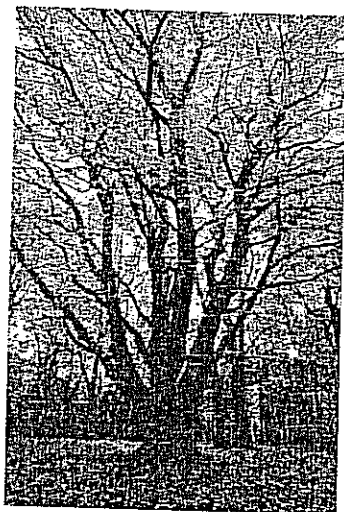
The Qur'an calls the regularity of natural phenomena and the relationship between natural causes and their effects *sunnat Allah* (God's way of acting). If one recovers from an illness by taking medicine, the Islamic understanding indicates that medicine is the apparent cause. However, the real Healer is the one who gives medicine its ability to heal. There is a subtle relationship between healing and medicine, because medicine or the process of healing itself both reflect al-Shafi (The Healer). Therefore, the search for medicine is a search for al-Shafi and something to be attained and not denied.

Likewise, you must follow the natural process if you want to produce an apple: plant a seed, wait for the tree to grow, water the tree, and see that it receives enough of the sun's heat and light. In other words, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and carbon combine in different ways to compose all plants, and God uses this process to work His Will.

Cause and effect

The process of creation is the result of this *cause and effect* relationship, out of which determinism and the famous Newtonian Mechanism are derived. The relationship between cause and effect sometimes is very strong, sometimes very subtle, and sometimes indiscernible. For example, we can calculate astronomically at which time the sun will rise 10 years from now, but we cannot calculate or know if there will be rain this time next year. The scientific explanation of rain cannot determine when it will rain until the physical signs are present. Likewise, we may know life's characteristics but not what ultimately makes something live. The Qur'anic understanding, unlike that of Newtonian

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mechanism, indicates that God is continually active in the universe's creation: *Every day He exercises universal power* (55:29).

The laws of nature proceed from God's Wisdom. Behind every cause and effect is the Cause of causes (Musabbib al-asbab): the ultimate Cause. In fact, the nature of creation indicates that the causes we see in our daily life cannot create the effects we witness. Natural

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causes, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and carbon are basically orderless, formless, blind, and unconscious, and therefore cannot create anything that is so consciously well designed. For example, the elements we receive from food are consciously distributed to the appropriate bodily organs and, in fact, neither the elements nor we are aware of this wonderfully

organized distribution. Said Nursi, a contemporary Muslim scholar, argues that: "If we deny the All Powerful One who is the Cause of causes, then we should accept that in every particular working in your eye there would have to be an eye such as that it could see every limb and part of your body as well as the entire universe with which you are connected."

As the natural world's causes depend upon the ultimate Cause, they can be suspended. The regularity of natural phenomena depends upon the command of The Most Powerful One. He can suspend all natural laws, for He is the One Who enacted them. Examples of this are the miracles that He allows the Prophets to perform. Fire's nature is to burn, but it does not burn when God does not will it to, as in: *We said: "O fire, be calm and peaceful toward Abraham"* (21:69). The miracles of Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad are other examples. To fully explore the miracles and their implications is beyond the scope of this paper.

When God wills to create something, He commands: "Be!" (kun) and it is. Natural laws obey His commands

and therefore do not act independently. This is demonstrated when His Prophets are protected through a suspension of natural law. Muslim scholars interpret apparent causes as veils that hide God's Power or Will. His Wisdom necessitates that causes veil His Majesty.

In this world, dar al-hikmah (the House of Wisdom), His Wisdom dominates. Thus the cause and effect relationship proceeds from His Wisdom. God can create a full-grown person in one day, but His Wisdom necessitates that a person be created in a way that allows him or her to have various stages of life. By working through a process in nature, God teaches people that they must follow a similar process in their deeds. Although God's Power is reflected in the universe's creation and in the natural world's process of cause and effect, its real reflection is in the Hereafter (dar al-qudrah [The House of Power]), which contains no cause or effect, but only God's power directly.

Conclusion

The Qur'anic understanding of nature encourages us to feel our ecological responsibility for the environment, because nature, being a book of God, deserves our highest respect. The Qur'an promotes love for nature, because nature is a result of the love of God as well as a letter and a helper leading to the discovery of ultimate reality. Through contemplating nature and by being more aware of the reflections of God's beautiful Names, believers see His signs and experiences His presence in his or her daily life. They also will observe, through nature, His art and the lesson He gives to humanity through His creation. □

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Footnotes

¹ Cited in Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989-1991* (USA: Harper San Francisco Press, 1990), 1:245.

² For a complete list of God's beautiful Names, see Ian S. Markham, *A World Religions Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). He also gives an excellent account of Al-Ghazali's *The Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God*, translated by David. B. Burrell and Nazih Daher.

³ Said Nursi, "The Treatise on Nature," *The Flashes Collection* (the 23rd "Flash" on nature) (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 1995), 232-54. Nursi argues that the naturalists' way is impossible, whereas the Qur'an's way is necessary. He defends this idea through parables and comparisons. In the introduction of his treatise he writes: "This treatise puts naturalistic atheism to death with no chance of resurrection, and totally shatters the foundation stones of unbelief."

