

# The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature

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- See also: Australia; Christian Nature Writing; Francis of Assisi; Friends - Religious Society of (Quakers); White, Lynn - Thesis of.

Quakers - See Friends, Religious Society of

## The Qur'an

The Qur'anic approach to nature differs from that of two major approaches: the biocentric and the anthropocentric. One can most appropriately designate the Qur'anic approach as theocentric. One Qur'anic verse expresses this: "[God] is the creator of everything" (6:102). Without him the heavens and the Earth will collapse: "Surely, God holds Earth and heaven from collapsing. If they collapse, no one can hold them after Him ..." (35:41). Being the sole creator God is the center of everything; in the Qur'an all things point to him. Sovereignty belongs to God only (12:67). Among God's creatures, man is the most conscious. Although, man is the most powerful and independent of God's creatures, the Qur'an explicitly states that God is man's creator: "Lo! We create man from a drop of semen to test him; so We make him hearing, knowing" (76:2).

According to the Qur'an, nature is a mirror of God's beautiful names. The whole of creation is the reflection of God's name *al-Khaliq* (The Creator) (13:16, 15:28, 35:3, 38:71, 39:62, 40:62, and 59:24). It is not just randomly created, it is wonderfully designed: "you can see no fault in His creation" (67:3). Concerning this wonderful design, the creation of man is emphasized. According to the Qur'an, God has shaped humanity, nature, and all of his creation in the most beautiful manner (64:3). So perfectly arranged is God's creation, that everything from plants to human beings is a miraculous work of art. Therefore, there is no absurdity in nature.

The Qur'an refers to nature as a sign or verse. There are two types of signs (*ayāt*) of God. One is the Qur'anic verse. Each verse is considered an "ayah" or a statement from God. The second is nature; each part of nature is also considered an "ayah" or a "sign" of God. According to the Qur'an, there are limitless signs of God. The water which God sends down from the sky, the ordinance of the winds and clouds are signs (2:164). They are not created in vain: "We created not the Heaven and the Earth and all that is

between them in vain" (38:27). In the heavens and the Earth are signs for believers; the creation of humans is a sign, likewise the changing from night to day, and the provisions God sends from the sky, and thereby sustains the Earth, are signs, statements, or messages from God (45:3-5). Accordingly, the Qur'an speaks of nature not for the sake of itself but for the sake of its Creator. Thus, the Qur'an indicates that nature has a divine characteristic, as it is a reflection of God. The Qur'an does not detail the physical structure of natural phenomenon, but instead, focuses on the purpose of such phenomenon, which is designated by its creator. When the Qur'an talks about the sun, it does not describe it as a physics book would, but describes it as a "dazzling lamp" for humanity and thus emphasizes that the sun is a sign of God's mercy toward humanity (78:16).

The main purpose of creation, according to the Qur'an, is to serve as a sign of God and to reflect God's beautiful names. In this regard, a fly and an elephant serve the same purpose, shoulder to shoulder, and the fly is worth no less because of its smallness. In the teaching of the Qur'an an atom is no less a sign of God than a mountain, because both are his handiwork. In the Qur'an over 99 names of God are mentioned. Chapter 59 contains over 13 names of God: the Knower of the invisible and visible, the Beneficent, the Merciful, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peace, the Keeper of Faith, the Guardian, the Majestic, the Compeller, the Superb, the Creator, and the Modeler (59:22-24). All these names at different levels are seen in the mirror of nature. For example, life is very precious in nature. The source of life is one. According to the Qur'an all living creatures reflect God's name *al-Hayy* (The Living One). (For references to *al-Hayy* see 2:255, 3:2, 20:111, 25:58, 40:65). The Qur'an frequently expresses the need for humans to recognize the beautiful names of God reflected in nature: "Lo! In the creation of the heavens and the Earth and in the difference of night and day are signs of His sovereignty for men of understanding" (3:190).

Nature is also *Sunnat-Allah* (The Way of God). The Qur'an indicates that there is consistency in nature, which reflects the unchangeable laws of God (33:62). Only via miracles can the consistency of natural law be interrupted. The Qur'an gives examples of this, such as the miracles of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (21:69, 27:12, 5:110). Abraham was thrown into fire, but fire did not burn him. According to the Qur'an Abraham was saved because, God said "O fire, be cool and peace to Abraham" (21:64). Moses was able to turn his staff into a snake (27:12). Jesus made birds, by breathing into them to give them life (5:110). Miracles, such as these, are, according to the Qur'an, intended to present evidence of the truthfulness of God's messengers. Despite such miraculous events, which interrupt natural law, there is a consistency of cause and effect which God has enacted. Human beings are, therefore,

required to follow the laws of nature. Islamic scholars interpreting the importance of following the laws of nature say that the punishment of disobedience is urgent (it will come in this life), as well as the reward. For example, cold weather will make the person sick if the appropriate measures are not taken.

The Qur'an offers evidence that creation was purposely designed: "And verily we have beautified the world's heaven with lamps" (67:5). "He it is who appointed for you the night that ye should rest therein and the day giving sight. Lo! Herein verily are signs for a folk that heed" (5:67). According to the Qur'an, human beings are to recognize that God's creation is structured for them, and they should therefore be aware of cosmic events, such as the sunrise and the sunset: "... celebrate the praises of [their] Lord ere the rising of the sun and ere the going down thereof. And glorify Him some hours of the night and at the two ends of the day ..." (20:130).

As it is seen in the above verses, humans have great responsibility to see the signs, which are presented in nature - in other words, the meaning of the verses of nature. Accordingly, God has placed humanity at the apex of creation. Humans are to serve as vicegerents of God, and to them nature is subjugated: "He it is who hath placed you as viceroys of the Earth and hath exalted some of you in rank above others ..." (6:165). The high position of humans gives them great responsibility as the supervisors of nature and as the addressees of God's message. Although in the value pyramid of creation human beings are at the apex, sometimes because of corruption they are considered to be lower than animals (7:179). In the teaching of the Qur'an, animals do not bear the responsibilities that humanity does, because they are not given reason and consciousness. However, they have the right to be protected and are not to be abused.

The Qur'an stresses the importance of animals as a part of the natural environment and the responsibility humanity has toward them. The Qur'an even equates them with humanity in terms of creation. The following Qur'anic verse forms a paradigm as far as the human relationship with animals is concerned: "There is not an animal in the Earth nor a flying creature flying on two wings but they are communities like you" (6:38). This verse indicates that the community of animals is similar to that of people, and therefore places a heavy responsibility on humans to care for animals. Several Qur'anic chapters are named after animals. For example, there are Qur'anic chapters entitled "The Cow" (Chapter 2), "The Cattle" (Chapter 6), "The Bee" (Chapter 16), "The Ant" (Chapter 27), and "The Spider" (Chapter 29). According to the Qur'an, the provisions given by God are to be shared by man and animals (80:32). Animals are intended to benefit humanity and caring for animals is to be viewed as a way of receiving God's bounty. Therefore, the Qur'an asks people to treat animals kindly. In the story of a Qur'anic prophet, Salih, people are

required to share their water with the she-camel of the prophet, which is called "the she-camel of God" (nāqat Allah). Salih, the messenger of God, requests that the people allow her to drink, and the people deny this request and send a base man to kill the camel. Having killed an animal, without reason, the people are destroyed by lightning (17:5, 69:59, 91:11-15).

According to the Qur'an, animals have a sophisticated language of communication. One verse speaks of an ant that warns its fellow ants to take shelter in order to avoid being stepped on by the army of Solomon (27:18). Solomon is taught, by God, to understand the language of birds (27:16). According to the Qur'an, Solomon considered this ability to be a blessing from God and a sign of his favor. Animals also serve as the companions and mounts of humans, as the Qur'an says "We have created from them of our handiwork, the cattle ... so that some of them they have for riding ..." (36:71-72). This verse illustrates that because animals are also the creation of God, and they benefit humans, humans have a responsibility to care for and protect them. The purpose of animals and that which humans may use them for is specified in the Qur'an. Animals may be used as mounts or for food, but they are not to be abused or wasted. Islamic law, which stems from the Qur'anic teaching, prohibits cruelty toward animals, such as loading animals beyond their capacity. The prophet of Islam is said to have rebuked a person for trying to make a camel carry too heavy a burden. Also, Muhammad, following the revelations of the Qur'an, declared the holy site of Mecca to be a Haram, which can best be understood in modern terms as a National Park, in which it is criminal to kill so much as an insect or to uproot a plant. Some Muslim mystics have even been known to tie bells to their shoes, in order to warn small animals in their paths that might otherwise be crushed underfoot. This tradition is still essential in Islam, during hajj (pilgrimage). For example, Muslims are not allowed to cut grass during this time, in the area of Haram. They are not allowed to kill living creatures, including insects. If they happen to act in such a manner during hajj, they perform penance for this unlawful action.

Just as the Qur'an stresses the importance of protecting animals, it also stresses the importance of respecting other aspects of God's creation of nature. Many Qur'anic chapters take their names from natural elements, such as "Thunder" (Chapter 13), "Light" (Chapter 24), "Star" (Chapter 53), "Iron" (Chapter 57), "Date Trees" (Chapter 16), "Cave" (Chapter 18), "Sun" (Chapter 91), and "Moon" (Chapter 54). Natural elements in the Qur'an are presented in a variety of contexts. There are some natural elements, which are referred in nearly every page of the Qur'an, such as Earth, which is mentioned nearly 500 times in the Qur'an. Water, Sun, Moon, Stars, and Sky are also among the frequently mentioned elements. For example, water is presented as a gift from God or a helper sent by God from

the sky to help fruits grow in order to provide sustenance for humans (2:22, 14:32, 16:65, 20:53, 22:63). The Qur'an also refers to water as a tool of cleanliness for humanity (8:11). In a different context, water is the "ground" of God's throne (11:7). Water can also serve as a tool of punishment and destruction, as in the story of Pharaoh (29:40) and of Noah (11:40-44). Although water can be a tool to destroy life, it is also, according to the Qur'an, the source of life (21:30). Pure water is a gift to those in paradise, while contaminated water is a punishment for non-believers: "Hell is before him and he is made to drink a festering water . . ." (14:16). Similarly, Earth is also a "cradle" for humanity (20:25). At the same time, however, it is a tool of punishment that swallows non-believers, such as Korah, a wealthy man who opposed God and was consumed by the Earth because of his non-belief (29:40). Earth glorifies God, and suffers when inappropriate things are attributed to God. For example, the Qur'an indicates, "the heavens are torn and the Earth is split asunder and the mountains fall in ruins, that ye ascribe unto the Beneficent a son . . ." (19:90-91). The Earth is treated as a living creature, when the Qur'an says, "And the heaven and the Earth wept not for them [the non-believers] . . ." (44:29).

The Qur'an gives examples of the bounties of God seen in nature. There are many examples of natures' modification for the benefit of humanity. The Qur'an laments the lack of human understanding, saying,

Have they not seen how We have created for them of Our handiwork the cattle, so that they are their owners and have subdued them unto them so that some of them they have for riding, some for food? Benefits and diverse drinks have they from them. Will they not then give thanks? (36:71-73).

The following verse wonderfully illustrates the benefits of natural elements for man:

Let man consider his food. How we pour water in shower. Then split the earth in clefts. And cause the grain to grow therein. And grapes and green fodder and olive-trees and palm-trees and garden-closes of thick foliage and fruits and grasses. Provision for you and your cattle (80:24-32).

Again and again the Qur'an reveals the things that God has created for the benefit of humanity: "And We have given you (mankind) power in the Earth, and appointed for you therein a livelihood . . ." (7:10). Ten verses in chapter 78 are dedicated to listing the things that God has created as a gift for humanity. For example, Earth is to serve as a cradle for humans, the mountains are to serve as protections, sleeping is to provide a rest, night is to be like a covering garment, and day is to be a time of work, and the sun is to be a dazzling lamp (78:6-16). Thus, "clouds

heavy with rain" is another phenomenon that the Qur'an mentions as from God's mercy:

He it is who sends the winds as tidings heralding His mercy, till when they bear a cloud heavy with rain, We lead it to a dead land, and cause water to descend thereon and thereby bring forth fruits of every kind (7:5).

The Qur'an speaks of nature as related to the divine. That is to say, the Qur'an wants to open the veil of nature covering the hands of God, and thus make understood the ultimate reality of God, beyond cause and effect. Humanity, in turn, is expected to reflect and be thankful for all the bounties of God. This thankfulness necessitates that humanity act responsibly as God's viceroys and protect nature. Humans must utilize the bounties of God carefully and without waste, in order to express their thankfulness.

Therefore, all types of pollution are prohibited by the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an says that "the wasteful are the friends of Satan" (17:27) and "God does not like the wasteful" (10:83). Wasting includes any misuse of natural resources. The Qur'an teaches people to use resources economically; this teaching is so strong that a person may not waste water, even if he or she lives next to the ocean. Also, noise pollution is to be prevented by the Qur'anic command "Don't be arrogant in your walking on Earth. Be humble, lower your voice. The most detestable voice is that of an ass" (31:18-19). Pollution of the body, as well as of the environment, is prohibited by the Qur'an. The Qur'anic teaching of cleanliness is very compatible with the modern hygienic process of preventing disease and promoting healthcare. For example, the Qur'an asks believers to wash their faces and their hands up to the elbows, clean their hair, and to wash their feet before prayers. If people are unclean they are not to approach prayer until they purify themselves (5:6). Muslims are expected to perform the prescribed cleansing before each of the five daily prayers. According to the Qur'an, if someone comes from the water closet, they are asked to clean themselves with water (5:6). A woman at the end of her monthly period is asked to bathe, and she is to refrain from sexual intercourse during this time (2:2). Even the Qur'an itself is not to be touched but by clean people (56:79). God loves those who are clean (200:22, 9:106). The tool of cleanliness is primarily water, thus the natural element of water has a special significance in the Qur'an. The Qur'an also stresses the importance of preserving a clean environment. For example, Abraham and Ishmael are asked to clean the house of God (2:125). Humans are also directed to preserve the cleanliness of their outdoor environment. The Qur'an indicates that the natural world is to be kept from pollution, because God sends rainwater to clean the Earth: "We send water from the sky as a

cleaner for you" (25:48). Thus the Qur'an suggests a clean environment.

The Qur'anic paradigm of such environment is found in the description of paradise. The Qur'anic name for Paradise is Jannah (garden); it is filled with trees, rivers of milk, flowers, and fruits. The basic description of Paradise is a place under which rivers run. Therefore, the environment of Paradise is one of water and greenery (2:25, 3:15). Even the fruits of Paradise are eternal (9:21). There are beautiful springs (44:52). The Qur'an, by describing the beauty of Paradise, stresses the importance of environment. This description is intended to serve as a model for earthly abodes. For example, modern Islamic architecture is influenced by the Qur'anic description of Paradise, as being without a sun, or direct source of light, and having only indirect light. Modern Islamic architecture attempts to utilize indirect light, while blocking harsh direct light. The Qur'an does not give any information about the location of Paradise. It does say that Paradise is located in the world of the unseen, a realm parallel to our own. It is understood that this world can be seen after the end of this physical life. It says it is an abode of righteous people; those who do good deeds toward humans and nature. To create a paradise-like environment on Earth complements the Muslim desire for Paradise. The destruction of nature affects the Muslim's entry into the final abode of Paradise. Destruction of nature on Earth is unlawful according to Islamic tradition. This might serve as an obstacle for one's entry into Paradise. Having a paradise-like life on Earth is not an obstacle on the path to Paradise after death; on the contrary, it is a preparation for that future life. People should thus make this Earthly environment as beautiful as possible.

According to the Qur'an, nature is not eternal. The end of nature is a kind of punishment for humankind, but is also an appointed time, which God has promised to bring. The end will be in the form of a natural disaster described in the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an says, in a chapter entitled "Earthquake," that "the Earth will be shaken with her final earthquake" (100:1). The sky will be torn away and mountains will become like discarded wool (81:11). The hills will move, the sun will cease to shine, and the stars will fall (81:1, 2). The planets will disperse and the moon will split (82:2, 54:1). Seas will be poured forth and will rise (81:6, 82:3). According to the Qur'an, the Earth will be replaced with another "Earth" different from this one (14:48). This will be a transformation from the transient world to the eternal world. It is understood, from Qur'anic verses, that all of these things will occur because of the corruption of humans. By polluting the Earth and wasting the bounties of God, humans hasten the Earth's end. However, another Qur'anic verse offers hope if God's creation is respected and protected by humanity: "If they do right, they will not be punished" (11:117). There is an Islamic tradition (8:33; 17:15) which indicates that as long

as people are obedient to God, this system that God created in the universe will continue. In this way there would be no destruction. It is believed that the destruction of pre-Islamic nations resulted from their disobedience toward God. If they had obeyed God, then the result would have been different; there would have been no destruction. This is a general principle, understood from an overall picture of the Qur'an. However, there are also several verses which discuss the appointed time for the end of this worldly life. This is not because it is a terrible fate to expect; it is instead referring to the end of the period of the test. This life is a test, and when this period ends, people will be either rewarded or punished. The reward will come in the afterlife. Muslim traditions, when speaking of the end of this life, say that God will take the lives of all believers in him, in an easy and beautiful way, in order not to destroy the Earth upon them. They will not have to face the destruction of the Earth. When they are resurrected, they will find themselves in a changed, eternal place. The destruction is not a punishment; it simply serves to end one period, while ushering in the beginning of a new, eternal life. To clarify further, according to Qur'anic traditions, the Earth has been created as a house for humanity. Humans are responsible for the upkeep of this house. It is a ship which takes humanity to the land of eternity. Humanity is in a perpetual state of motion and travel. The ship, then, is well protected in the ocean of space. If the Earth is ever destroyed so too will the lives of humans be destroyed. Life on Earth is a test for humanity. The Qur'an mentions a huge earthquake, but it is not meant to be a punishment for humanity. There is an element of irony here. A Qur'anic verse indicates that the end of time will occur during a time of human corruption. Although this happened because of human free will, God knew beforehand that this would occur. There are several matters intertwined, namely human free will, God's destiny and the destruction of the Earth. This change is apparently a punishment which occurs as a result of corruption. For real believers, however, it is symbolic of a change to a better reality. God is thought to act with wisdom, according to various laws and principles. In the world to come, God's name al-Qadir will be dominant. As a result of this, everything will occur simultaneously. According to the Qur'an, there are signs for the final Hour (47:18), as there is prophetic tradition (Muslim, al-Fitan, 39-40). Where ten signs of the Hour are listed, the final of these signs is the rising of the sun from the west. This marks the end of the test, with a positive change occurring for those who pass. The Qur'an describes this end in the following verses: "And the garden (Jannah) will be brought nigh to the righteous and hell (al-Jaheem) will appear plainly to the erring" (26:90-91).

*Zeki Saritoprak*

Further Reading

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See also: Animals in the Bible and Qur'an; Dogs in the Islamic Tradition; Islam (various); Muhammad - The Prophet of Islam; Sufism.