

# Religion, Secularism and the Environment

*By Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

*Editorial Note: Dr. Nasr's lecture was delivered at the Ismaili Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada, while he was attending the Sacred Web Conference in Vancouver, on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The lecture inaugurated the Ismaili Centre International Lecture Series and was the basis of an interview later broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's program, "Ideas"<sup>1</sup>.*

**M**r. Malik Talib<sup>2</sup>, Mr. Lakhani<sup>3</sup>, dear friends. This Centre belonging to the Ismaili community feels like a home to me because throughout much of my life in one way or another, as Mr. Lakhani summarized for you, I have been associated with Ismaili thought, since I was one of the friends and instructors at Harvard of, and a few years older than, the person who was going to become the Imam of the Ismaili community, someone who has been for over 50 years very close to me. His Highness Karim Aga Khan used to come to our house in Boston from time to time and eat Persian food from my mother's cuisine which he enjoyed; he is a person with whom I have enjoyed many happy and also serious moments. In the old days I used to be oftentimes consulted by him on many matters, including the questions of Islamic architecture and art. Also his quest for knowledge, especially in matters Islamic, was unending

<sup>1</sup> The CBC radio interview was conducted by "Ideas" host, Paul Kennedy, and was originally broadcast on October 23rd, 2014. A podcast of the interview is available online at <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/podcasts>.

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<sup>3</sup> Mr. M. Ali Lakhani, the editor of *Sacred Web*, had formally introduced Dr. Nasr to the capacity audience of some 250 guests, including prominent government, community and faith leaders, professionals, businesspeople, senior academicians, scholars and intellectuals.

and this thirst insatiable. It was really a divine gift which is also a gift for the Ismaili community, leading to his emphasis over all these decades upon education, whose cultivation the community has been carrying out both here and in Europe in exiled communities as well as within Pakistan, India and Africa and later on through the establishment of a major university in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union and the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, with a branch in London and many, many, other activities of that kind. I feel honored that throughout my life I have had the opportunity provided to me by God to be in a humble way associated with some of the very important efforts that the Aga Khan has carried out in these matters. But, tonight I am not going to talk about these co-operations. Rather, I am going to talk about a subject which was chosen by the people who invited me and honored me in delivering the inaugural talk of this beautiful Centre, and it is the subject of religion, secularism and the environment.

First of all, it is a remarkable fact in itself that 50 years ago not a single Islamic Centre would have ever invited a public lecturer to talk about the environment. The fact that this is now done is itself the turning of a page. Do not think that it is insignificant. There are many reasons as to why it took the Islamic world such a long time to become aware of the environmental crisis, especially by the religious scholars in the Islamic world. I shall turn to that question later in this discourse, but first the thing I want to say is that there is no issue that is more important in the world today besides, of course, the spiritual life of men and women, than the environment. I read a wonderful sign somewhere in your city that we are all guests of the environment. That is right, but we are for the most part very bad guests who are killing our hosts in the natural world left and right by just our manner of living. Modern man by just its mode of existence is destroying the natural world. A consequence of being modern is to destroy the world of nature. That is the great tragedy of the situation and so we should try to find out why.

The environmental crisis is not a marginal problem; it is the central issue of the contemporary world, a crisis that is threatening the web of life itself. It is a very great tragedy that as soon as there is an economic downturn in the main motor of the destruction of the environment which is modern civilization, immediately the environmental issue is cast aside and nearly forgotten. Here in America in times of economic difficulty it

is hardly spoken of by politicians, even people in the Democratic Party who are supposed to be the defenders of the environment, not to talk about most conservative Republicans who think that they are living on another planet where there is no environmental crisis. But for those who realize that they are living on this planet, even for them attention to this crisis is something that is oftentimes put aside as soon as another issue that is small compared to the possible disaster and catastrophes that we are going to face arises. This is not true only of the West; it is true of nearly every country in the world. It is, however, significant to note that after the recent great disaster in Japan, causing the spread of radioactivity which is still around, for a while there were these big posters in opposition totally to Western technology and use of atomic power. The insistence of every country to try to live in a way that is totally in opposition to harmony with nature, what one calls modern life, did not prevent the protesting Japanese from hoping that their government would somehow fix the situation in one way or another, but even this protest did not even occur on a serious basis and the opposition gradually died down.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that we live in a world in which the powers that be do everything possible to prevent people from waking up to this crisis with all kinds of lullabies to keep us asleep, there is a gradual rise of awareness globally that if we do not come to understand our correct relationship with the world of nature, we are not going to be around for long. We are not going to be around to even talk about a human future. Much of the talk about solving the environmental crisis is what we call in Persian just “poetry” (*sbi’r*) in the negative sense. It is not really serious. I do not want to insult poetry, of course; I love poetry, but I am using a Persian expression. When you want to say that something is not serious, you say “it is just *sbi’r*” in the pejorative sense that it is just words without real substance. And so I think that it is essential to take every opportunity possible to come back to this most serious of present day issues.

I have spent over 50 years of my life thinking and writing and lecturing about this matter. From the days when I was a young student at MIT and Harvard I used to walk around Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts at night when there was nobody else around. I had read the classical book of Thoreau named after this pond and I meditated upon nature

and what was happening to the natural environment. Route 128, the belt highway around Boston, was just being built. It cut off the outer part of nature from the greater city of Boston through the so-called belt that is still used. Consequently animals were no longer able to cross and come into Arlington where I used to live. This event made me realize that an environmental crisis was on the horizon. From that time until now, much of my intellectual activity has been spent on this matter. I am sort of a veteran wounded in many battles that have been carried out in this domain. I gave the keynote address at the first Earth Day in Stockholm which was a very difficult task when the Soviet Union at that time and China both thought that the environmental crisis was a capitalist problem brought about by capitalism and that Communist countries had no crisis whatsoever. And I had to give the keynote address in their presence. It made me so angry when the Soviet delegation was sitting in front of me and somebody made this totally false statement about Communist countries having no environmental crisis. So I said, “I know of no more Communist a river than the Volga. It is a purely Communist river flowing from Russia to the Caspian Sea. And it pollutes the next thousand kilometers of that Sea all the way to the coast of Persia. And all of the sturgeon, being environmentalists (*sic.*), that you try to raise in the north, as soon as they are wise enough, swim and come south. That is why what is called Russian caviar is really Persian caviar. They just call it Russian caviar. The sturgeon refuse to stay up in the north.” Of course my facetious comments made the Soviets very angry, and they got up and walked out. Let us remember that the Soviet Union fell apart and as soon as it fell apart, people found out that two thirds of all of the rivers of Poland were so polluted that they could no longer be used safely. And 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, much of southern Russia and many of the eastern European countries are extremely polluted. Not that the West is much better, but at least in the West some people have come to recognize the problem while in the former Soviet bloc the realization came much more slowly and also only after the rejection of Marxism to whose philosophy the environmental crisis is anathema.

I have had the experience of speaking a great deal about the environmental crisis to many different audiences, from the highest authorities, to students, to hippies, to industrialists and the like, but

tonight this is primarily an audience that I believe is mostly Muslim and also mostly perhaps Ismaili or related somehow to Islamic civilization. And so rather than speaking only in general terms, I shall try to comment not only upon the issue in the West and the world in general but also more specifically the Islamic world.

The first question to ask concerns the beginning of the title of my talk, that is, 'religion'. What role does religion play in the environmental issues today? The answer to this question contains many contentious matters. Some may have tried to deny this role or show only its negative effect, but after I wrote *Man and Nature* and some other articles appeared, many people have come around to realize this truth, that as long as men and women, or man in the sense of *insān*, lived according to religion there was no major environmental crisis. No one can deny that fact. Saying that the goats were eating up the trees in the Middle East 2000 years ago is not the same thing as having the Hudson River polluted and all this kind of nonsense that is really irrelevant. It is not true from the point of view of science or history for that matter. There is no doubt that as long as human beings lived according to religion, we did not have an environmental crisis in the sense that we have today. This phrase did not even exist until recently.

Secondly, the environmental crisis started in earnest in that part of the world where most of society had decided to push religion to the side and marginalize it, not to destroy it totally. That part of the world was the West. The environmental crisis in the current sense began in the Ruhr Valley, in Lowell, Massachusetts, in Liverpool, places like that where heavy industries began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. That was when writers such as Charles Dickens began to write about the industrial monstrosities of their time. By that time the pollution was limited enough and nature large enough so that you could move to the next hill and did not have to worry about having destroyed the ecology of the valley next door. To this very day when you travel in the Midlands of England, you see this beautiful green valley and then you come up the hill, and you see the next valley that is just covered completely with black soot. You have to hold your nose to go through from pungent odors and then come to the next green valley again. In Pennsylvania you have a similar situation and also in the hilly states in the eastern part of the United States which have some of the oldest history of industrialization. So this is a historical

fact that the environmental crisis begins by that part of the human collectivity that decided to marginalize religion and secularize nature: no one can really dispute that fact. Yes, the secularists today are against what I am saying and hundreds of books have been written to say, “No, religion is at fault.” I shall come to that in a moment. But this fact that the crisis began where nature had been secularized cannot be refuted because it is historically impossible to refute.

However, at the same time, we see that today in the West the majority of people, if not all, who are very much interested in the environmental issues are secularists, although that is now gradually changing. Let me recount this story which concerns *Man and Nature*. In 1965 the University of Chicago sent a professor to Beirut where I was then teaching as the first Aga Khan professor of Islamic studies to invite me to give their Rockefeller series lectures because Mircea Eliade, the great historian of religion, who was at Chicago, was one of the very few people aware of the significance of the environmental crisis of which practically no one spoke at that time, and he knew the role of religion in it, having written major works about the religions of India and the importance of nature in them. This Romanian savant was an exceptional scholar and thinker. So they sent the professor of chemistry John Rust all the way to the Middle East to me and invited me to give the lectures on nature, which I did. The audience had both theologians and scientists in it and the series was sponsored by the Department of Science and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago together. There were also some people from the liberal arts and other disciplines.

The greatest opposition to what I had to say once the book came out came from Christian theologians. That was in the 1960's, that is, only 50 years ago. At that time you could hardly find a single well-known Christian theologian who tried to defend nature against its abuse from a Christian point of view. Why is this so? This is the same religion that had produced St. Francis of Assisi who talked to the birds and wrote that beautiful address to the sun and the moon. Why did this happen to Christianity? This is a very complex matter and I cannot go into it fully now, but suffice it to say that it was because of the Scientific Revolution and the abdication for the most part of Catholic theology from serious concern with nature while Protestantism remained almost completely acosmic in its formal theology. The fact is that the Catholic Church

burned its fingers in the Galilean trials and after that decided not to have anything more to do with the cosmos, with the world of nature. Most Christian authorities said, “We do not care if you say that the world is round or square or trapezoid. That is not our business. Ours is the way of love.” But no religion can be the way of love alone without a worldview concerning the nature of reality including cosmic reality. It has to have teaching about the world of nature, say something about the cosmos. It has to provide knowledge of this domain and sheer sentimentality will not do. Nearly three and a half centuries passed from the Galileo trial until the Catholic Church realized that it had to have a doctrine about the world of nature.

As for Protestantism, early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther himself was a keeper of the fish in a pond in Germany and loved nature; and in early Protestantism, there were thinkers who wrote in depth about the spiritual significance of nature. Up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, theologians, especially German theologians, were keenly interested in nature but this interest gradually died out and then Protestantism became a cosmic, totally indifferent to the world of nature with a few exceptions here and there. It did not produce any major thinker devoted to nature in the mainstream of Western thought with the exception of Jakob Böhme. So what happened in the West is that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when a reaction against the destruction of nature set in, especially first in Germany, and then in England and to a lesser extent in France, reaction against this new ugly modernization and industrialization that people were seeing, the reaction did not come from the Christian establishment. It came from people such as William Blake, Wordsworth or Alfred Lord Tennyson, who was learning Arabic when he was going blind at old age when he was not much interested in the Christianity of his day. Wordsworth was not writing from the Christian point of view either and Blake was considered to be a pagan, or at least the Christian church considered him to be pagan; yet he was one of the deepest religious poets of the English language who also wrote some of the deepest poetry about nature. All of you know his famous poem “Tyger! Tyger! burning bright,” poems like that which really praise the beauty and power of nature. But the mainstream religion in Europe was concerned with other issues, theology, morality, politics, all kinds of other issues. Let us not forget that at that time, Western religion began to take pride in material progress as

proving the superiority of Christianity over other religions, saying that progress had occurred in the West, that is modern progress, because of Christianity, and that Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism and so forth did not have the same advantages to offer and so you had the Ruhr valley in Germany, rather than in India. Many Christian writers took great pride in that fact. Needless to say, no Christian theologian would speak like that today. That day is over. But I am talking about the historical background which led to our present day impasse. So those people who criticize religion for having a role are to some extent right. But this was not the whole story about the Christian historical tradition. There were days when Christianity produced great mystical thinkers who wrote profoundly about nature.

*The Division of Nature* by Erigena is one of the greatest masterpieces in the Western languages about the world of nature. But the last three or four hundred years were marked actually by religion in the West giving up concern about the cosmic dimension of religion and the world of nature, and therefore leaving nature in the hands of two forces: a totally secularized science, that is, modern science, which has nothing to do with transcendence, a science for which the spiritual meaning of nature is totally irrelevant, being purely subjective and objectively non-existent; and of course, human greed and power over nature, concerned with how to milk the cow to give you the maximum amount of milk, and how to so-called “develop” economically,

In a certain sense this concept of development has become one of the most dangerous words in the English language for the future of humanity. By that I mean the idea of endless material economic development, because it means the expansion of something boundless within a finite reality, which means that it can only result in an ultimate explosion. Mathematically and logically it is impossible otherwise. With the idea of indefinite material development in mind most people were not really concerned with what was going on in the destruction of the natural environment. New “isms” had taken hold and those people who thought of humanity and were so-called humanistic, who thought of the future of humanity, never thought that human beings need a home with a harmonious environment in which to live. Even people who had good intentions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and fought for the poor, for the oppressed, for this and that just cause had no concern for nature, for



the home that human beings need to live on Earth. Even Karl Marx, his intentions were not always bad; he was thinking of the plight of the poor, except that he was an atheist. And he sought to destroy religion in trying to help the poor. He represents what can be called a kind of secularized charity. Although Marx was a Jew, Marxism is to a large extent a secularized Christianity, because the supreme virtue of Christianity is charity. But his was a charity without God. That is what Marxism is. And many other movements like that were created in the past two centuries including in the capitalist world.

In any case when the environmental crisis really began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western religion at first did not want to be concerned with it. It took it a great deal of time to divorce itself from taking pride in having “caused” the environmental crisis. In the name of progress of course, not saying that it favored such a crisis, but taking great pride that the West produced modern science and followers of other religions could not do it. When the Jesuits went to China to carry out missionary activity for Catholicism, what did Father Ritchie present to the Chinese? He said look at all the science that we have but that you do not have. He did not talk only about the meekness and humility of Christ; he talked mostly about Western science and later missionaries of Western technology. That is how many people are converted in Africa to Christianity today, by giving them some kind of medicine for their cows, not by just reading to them the Book of John. So this event of the environmental crisis came as a major happening that shook much of Western religion. There is little doubt about that fact. The thesis of religion being mainly responsible mainly for the environmental crisis is not true in general, but there is some truth in it as far as what happened in the West during the past few centuries is concerned.

What happened in the West was that except for some marginal figures here and there, the significance of the spiritual quality of nature became completely forgotten by the science of the day. Nature became the nature of Francis Bacon, something to be controlled, manipulated and made use of. As I wrote once in a strong language nature was turned from a wife with legitimate rights into a prostitute. And so Western man began to prostitute nature from the advent of the Industrial Revolution until the situation reached a boiling point when the environmental crisis really began in earnest and that process of course has gone from bad

to worse. I have not been to your city for 20 years and I see that half of the old city is gone. As far as trees are concerned, where did so many of the trees go? Where are all the beautiful forests that were around here and now have disappeared and buildings looking like boxes have taken their place, what we call apartment houses? This ugliness is not unique to your city, but can be seen all over the world. Vancouver is still in a better situation than most other big cities in this country and elsewhere. Tragically, there are two things in which mankind is united: one is the destruction of nature and the other the creation of an ugly atmosphere and ambiance in its place. So whether in Beijing, Vancouver, Paris or Tehran, my own city where I was born, it does not matter. Uglification can be seen everywhere albeit in different degrees. I am not trying to criticize others; so I begin by criticizing my own city of birth, the city of Tehran, but the plight of ugly urbanization and the destruction of the natural environment is more or less the same everywhere with a few exceptions. And the cause is the same everywhere, the divorce of our understanding of nature from the sacred and the spiritual.

Now we come to another aspect of the reality of secularism and ask the question as to whether it had a role in the environmental crisis. The answer is that it had a very major role. Secularism as we understand it today was really born after the Middle Ages in Europe, and then spread step by step. It was not that everything in the West became immediately secularized. There were many villages until a few years ago in Italy, before the advent of television, that felt like medieval villages. In such places even in Europe people were still living in a religious world, in a sacred world. It must therefore be emphasized that secularism did not occur immediately, but spread gradually. But the important point to recall is that it became the dominating paradigm. It took over Western universities and then the general educational system. Therefore children were trained, no matter what their parents taught them at home, in a secularized view of the world of nature. Even those who were Christian and went to church on Sunday, from Monday until Saturday they lived mostly in a secularized world. Very little challenge came from the Christian side to what was happening to God's creation resulting from the secularization of the Western worldview. Secularism, therefore, must be considered a most powerful force, and many of the so-called new social sciences along with the natural sciences came to be cultivated in a secular ambience.

Look at political science in which Simon Fraser University has a big department. Two thirds of all the world's political problems today involve religion. But few ever teach religion in political science departments. It is almost taboo as if it did not exist. It is like writing about Vancouver without writing about rain. How can one teach political science or government in a place such as Harvard University, or Columbia, these major American universities, as if religion did not matter, whereas most of the problems in the world today, such as what is happening far away in Burma with the massacre of Muslims, have something to do with religion? Not only the Palestinian-Israeli question or all the other conflicts going on inside the Islamic world, but also outside the Islamic world, between Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists, and all kind of conflicts in Africa, everywhere you see the presence of the religious factor not always as cause but as means of creating group identity and cohesion. In fact there are few conflicts today that do not involve religion. Sometimes when conflict takes place that seems only political, there is a hidden religious factor that is not usually mentioned or emphasized like what is happening in Ukraine now. One of the most important problems there is the difference between Russian Orthodox or Ukrainian Orthodox Christians and Catholics who are on the side of the West. And this problem goes back to medieval history. I have rarely seen a discussion about this issue in the American press, but it is there in almost every conflict today.

In a sense religion came back to the middle of the historical scene in the 20<sup>th</sup> century although secularization had tried to marginalize it for so long. Various aspects of life in the modern world as well as intellectual discipline had become more or less secularized until finally the study of religion itself came to be studied from a secular point of view. What is expected now in American and Canadian universities in which religion is taught is that it should be taught on the condition that one does not believe in it. It is like teaching music on the condition that one be musically deaf. Such a thing is done only in the field of religion, not in any other field. Of course there are other possibilities and some do try to study religion from the religious point of view, but the above view is the prevalent idea. So in so many circles, everywhere we look, we see the secularist point of view. Western philosophy became secularized as did Western sociology, psychology and various other disciplines, and it

was quite obvious therefore when the environmental crisis occurred, it could not be seen by mainstream modern thought as a crisis resulting from secularism until the crisis began to threaten human life when at least some realized that not to accept the sacred quality of nature, it becomes destroyed and nothing of spiritual significance remains. Many came to see that otherwise only deals with outward symptoms while the harmony of nature is being destroyed and human life itself that even secularists value becomes threatened, until whole ecosystems become threatened with collapse.

That awareness arose gradually in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the very word ecology entered into the English language with a new meaning. We now speak of environmental studies but before it was called ecological studies. Soon environmentalists became active but for the most part their perspective was dominated by secularism. There is no doubt about the fact that the study of the environment in the West begins from a secularist point of view, if one excludes the works of Philip Sherrard, myself and a few others. And yet many of the people who first propagated the environmental movement in America opposed many of the founding assumptions of their own civilization, which was based on industrialization and rapid destruction of the environment and which acted as model for most other nations. These young people came to be known as propagators of the counter-culture or hippies in the 1960's. Many were really quite remarkable young men and women, most of them from well-to-do families. They did not accept the classical theories of economists and sociologists that all human misery came from material poverty. This is of course nonsense. Real misery comes from the loss of the meaning in life. These young people came from families which did not suffer from lack of material means but they no longer found meaning in life and so they rejected the modern Western worldview and turned to alternatives including the Native American tradition with their love of nature, or to Asian religions and so forth. All kinds of forgotten ideas came to the fore. And that gradually brought religion back upon the scene in the West along with an awareness at least for some of the spiritual significance of nature.

Paradoxically, as we sit here right now, the New Age religions so-called, which are not serious religions but man-made constructs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are taking little bits here from Buddhism, there from

Islam and Hinduism or some other religion and putting them together; but nevertheless, the people that follow these perspectives are much more interested in the environment than most devout Christians in America. Unfortunately, in most cases the more devout people are in their Christianity, the less are they interested in the environment, like for example the Southern Baptists, who are called Fundamentalists, Protestant Fundamentalists who never miss going to church every Sunday. They have been for the most part the group most opposed to seriously environmental concerns in the United States. And the same is true for many Catholics, especially those who are old-style Catholics. Many devout Christians think that if the world comes to an end, so much the better, for then Christ will come back. It is for the most part only some modernized Catholics and so-called liberal Protestants who are interested seriously in the environmental issues. So Christianity in the West has had a problem in how to come to terms with the environmental crisis at a time when so many of its devout followers have not shown much interest in this issue.

Now, the case of other religions of the world is totally different. I wish I had time here to talk about Hinduism and Buddhism but I do not. Therefore, I am going to turn right to the case of Islam.

We Muslims are criticized oftentimes in the West for lack of attention to the environmental crisis. Why is it that let us say from 50 years ago when attention began among religious circles in the West to the environmental crisis, such was not the case among Muslims? That is a good question, the answer to which is complex. First of all, Islamic thought was never secularized as was Christian thought in the West. Or one could say that at least Islamic thought was not secularized in the same way, although in the 18<sup>th</sup> century there began the so-called reformist movements leading to Wahhabism, Salafism and the like that externalized and whittled down the reality of religion but did not secularize it completely. The consequence of course was to leave a void that facilitated the spread of non-Islamic and secular elements into many aspects of Muslim life. Just to cite a prosaic example drawn from culinary culture that affects everyday life as far as the eclipse of Islamic traditional culture is concerned, in Jeddah today, you can hardly find an Arabic restaurant; it is all Applebee's or McDonald's marking the presence of non-Islamic culture at the heart of the Islamic

world. At the same time the Ka'bah is just a few miles down the road. This is the unbelievable paradox of Wahhabism. There are very devout Muslims around but the latest Western technology is also everywhere. There is practically nothing left of Islamic culture in that center of the Islamic world. But that is very different from producing secularist thought and such ideologies as Marxism or Western style philosophical materialism. That is a very different matter. The Islamic worldview was never challenged from within in the way that the Christian world was. Once a Christian friend of mine said, "You know, the difference between you and us is that in the West there are many people who do not hear the voice of God any more. I have met Muslims who do not heed the voice of God but I have never met a Muslim who does not believe that His voice is ever present." This comment was made to me by a French Catholic philosopher and is quite profound. What it means is Muslims did not lose their faith in the same way that happened in the Christian West. So one sees a very different dynamic in the West and in the Islamic world in coming to deal with not only religion but also the religious and spiritual significance of nature.

Now, since all of these major events which are helping in the destruction of nature and the environment were taking place in the West, the Islamic world, like the rest of the world, was simply trying to catch up with the environmental errors of the West without realizing the erroneous nature of the models they were trying to emulate. Of course they would never put it that way, but say that they were trying to catch up period—, but catch up with what? With either the leftovers of the breadcrumbs of the Western table or with the errors that the West was making? So if in the West rivers were being polluted, we would pollute the same way and claim that the West would find a solution. Such words are spoken in Egypt, Pakistan, India and elsewhere, not only in my own country, Iran. The ordinary view in the Islamic world is that the West has caused these problems; however, their "omnipotence" will enable them to find a solution. Then we shall copy it from them. That is the attitude of a people with an inferiority complex, which includes almost all the East with a few exceptions here and there. And that is why, in fact, the Muslim minorities in the West can play such an important role in the future in environmental issues for the rest of the Islamic world. But I will not get into that matter here.

Until recently in the Islamic world the environmental crisis did not seem to be a real problem. When I was living in Tehran as a boy the population of Tehran was 300,000 and you could see Mount Damavand, the highest peak in Western Asia at 19,000 feet, the beautiful Mount Damavand, from the roof of our house. Now, you cannot even see your cousin's house a few blocks away because of the pollution, not to speak of Mount Damavand. And at that time nobody realized what was about to occur. Waking up to this crisis has been much slower within the Islamic world than in the West. There have been exceptions; for example, Shaykh Ahmad Kiftaru who was the grand mufti of Syria, before this great tragedy befell this wonderful country, and died a few years ago, was a real environmentalist. His views were amazing considering that he was a grand mufti. He was a good friend of mine but I am not a mufti, nor a religious figure in that sense, and so have a lot of freedom to say things. But he was the Grand Mufti of Syria, was a person who spoke forcefully about the environmental crisis, and he wanted the mullahs on Fridays to preach about the environment in mosques. Yet his example was not and still is not followed widely in various Islamic countries although consciousness of the crisis has arisen in recent years in several Islamic lands.

Here it is necessary to add that a great problem exists in the Islamic world that the West does not have. And that is that in almost every Islamic country, what the preachers preach on Friday is ordered by the government, controlled by the government. In a major Islamic country such as Egypt in the time of Mubarak or for that matter now, nobody had or has the complete freedom to preach whatever he wanted or wants. Going out of line could cause exile to Kuwait or somewhere like that. Even in a place like Malaysia, it is not like 30 or 40 years ago. The Friday sermons are closely watched and controlled. Now, one of the things these governments do not like is anything that would stultify what they believe to be economic progress. And so there is very strong opposition government-wise in Islamic countries—that does not exist in the United States—to bringing up environmental issues seriously except advising people not to throw their garbage in the street. I am not saying that this is 100% the case, but this aversion to discussing the real issues of the environmental crisis is much stronger in the Islamic world than in the West. What I mean is that a minister preaching on Sunday morning,

even in North Carolina, if he gets up and talks about how God does not want you to destroy His nature, he might be opposed by some, but he is not going to be put in prison, whereas someone saying that in some Islamic countries might have delivered his last sermon. So there is this problem, this practical problem, which is important because although many Muslim governments do not really care whether there is economic progress or not and want just to remain in power, they know that to remain in power they have to talk about economic progress. And so anyone who tries to stop so-called material development and economic progress is considered to be opposed politically to the state.

But on a deeper level, the Islamic world has a much easier path to follow than does the contemporary West with its Christian background in dealing with the environmental crisis. First of all the Islamic world has not had 400 years of secularization. Secondly, classical Islamic thought is more impregnated by philosophies of nature. Islamic poetry, Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Sindhi, all these different languages, are full of nature poetry which are not, however, nature poetry as understood in English, because most nature poetry in English today deals with a secularized nature whereas Islamic nature poetry is also religious. Many of you come from India; if you knew some Muslim languages such as Gujarati, Sindhi and Bengali you would find numerous poems on the spiritual significance of nature in the literature in those and other eastern languages. As an example, there is a very famous poem by the celebrated poet Sa'di that I shall quote for you.

I am joyful with the world, for the world belongs to Him.  
I love the world [of nature] for the world belongs to Him.

Similar beautiful poems exist in Arabic and Turkish. Our culture was impregnated from the beginning by a unitary perspective that refused to separate nature and supernature. This radical separation was one of the weaknesses of classical Christian theology which made the secularization of nature so easy in the West.

We do not even have this distinction in Islamic languages between sacred and secular, and the words often used now for secular are recent inventions. Also, if you read classical Islamic texts, you see there is no distinction between nature and supernature in the sense that you find in European texts. So the Islamic world has a much more easy task



intellectually and culturally in re-establishing a sacred view of nature. Our literature in the form of poetry, prose, history, etc. is replete with reminders of the cosmic dimension of Islam, and that truth goes back to the Quran that addresses not only human beings but also the cosmos. Of all the sacred scriptures of the world, with the exception of the *Tao te Ching*, the sacred scripture of Taoism, none speaks as much about nature. If you take all the verses in the New Testament there are few references to nature. And if you take the references in Genesis and other books of the Old Testament and add them all up together, they constitute just a small amount compared to all of these verses in the Quran. Of the 6,000 some verses of the Quran, over a third are directly or indirectly related to nature or speak about nature in one way or another. Even God swears by natural things, by the pomegranate, by the sun and the moon, etc. There is a verse for example that states that the sun and moon prostrate themselves before God. There is a very strong sense in the Quran that Islam is not only for human beings, but for the whole cosmic reality. In a sense creatures participate in Islam. This teachings is so strong and powerful in the Islamic tradition that if Muslims really come to themselves, it is much easier for them to be able to develop an environmental philosophy which would not be incongruent with the religion or artificial and contrived for the sake of expediency than it is for present day Christianity. Care for nature is part and parcel of the Islamic worldview. That is why for centuries many missionaries accused Muslims of being naturalistic and Islam of being a naturalistic religion. Even the great Sufis and mystics were called by some natural mystics in the West, whereas Christians were called supernatural mystics. Let me add, however, that all this kind of misunderstanding is now disappearing, even among Catholic writers who first spoke of natural mysticism. But until a few years ago, such people as the famous Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, used to harp on this theory of natural and supernatural mysticism, and as I said many Christians when they were attacking Islam in centuries past branded Islam as being naturalistic or a natural religion, as if it did not come from God. What appeared to enemies of Islam at that time as being simply naturalistic shows in fact the power of Islam to integrate the natural and the supernatural which are therefore not separated from each other, but are intertwined.

The title that is used for this wonderful journal *Sacred Web* is really a

Quranic concept. Deep down metaphysically, there is a web that connects us all to God and that is not only human beings but all creatures. “All things hymn the praise of God,” the Quran asserts. It is not only us, but all beings who hymn the praise of God. There is this sacred and intertwined community that we share with all creatures. Birds are called communities in the Quran. It is not only the community in Vancouver or Toronto of human beings, but everything from birds to fish has its own community. And it is the total community that constitutes the total creation of God. Nothing is left outside it. Therefore, it is easy to develop an authentic Islamic philosophy of the environment to which task Muslims must dedicate themselves. I have done my humble share and I am not going to be writing any more about these matters, but *insbā’a’Llah* other people better than I will come along and complete what I have been doing for many decades. We must revive in a contemporary language this rich tradition to be able to revive an authentic Islamic philosophy of nature that is needed more than ever. Otherwise we shall observe more and more the degradation of the natural environment especially in our cities leading to a form of suicide. We can no longer read the Quran and then pollute the stream next door, throw all the garbage in the running water, like many of us do in all parts of the Middle East or make the air practically unbreathable. The Islamic world can no longer afford it nor can anyone else.

Let me conclude because I want to give you a chance to ask some questions and also I have spoken enough. The environmental crisis itself, for those who really have eyes to see and have the perspicacity, is both the proof of God’s transcendence and the proof of the interconnectedness of all beings. John Donne wrote, “No man is an island.” We human beings are not an island unto ourselves. We cannot be happy without the happiness of the rest of creation. We have killed enough, massacred enough of God’s other creatures. Now is the time to pay our debt back to nature. And God will judge us in the future while our present actions will decide whether we are able to live in harmony and peace with the rest of His creation or commit suicide. There is no other choice. It is a great work that lies before us. I hope and pray that the Muslims as a whole, and especially groups like the Ismaili community which have such a long history of very profound treatments of an authentic philosophy of nature, going back to the early Islamic centuries,

will step forward and provide the leadership and guidance, not only for other Muslims but perhaps for the whole world.

*wa'LLāhu a'lamu bi'l-ṣawāb*