

RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Seyyed Hossein Nasr



Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
New Delhi

**RELIGION AND THE
ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

The Views of Hinduism and Islam

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR



Indira Gandhi National Centre
for the Arts

First Published in 1993

© Seyyed Hossein Nasr

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Cover: Drawing by Vineet Kumar

Publishers

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts
Central Vista Mess, Janpath, New Delhi-110001

In arrangement with

ABHINAV PUBLICATIONS
E-37, Hauz Khas, New Delhi-110016

Laser typesetters

ITECHS
617, Sector A, Pocket C
Vasant Kunj
New Delhi-110030

CONTENTS

Foreword by Kapila Vatsyayan	7
Religion and the Environmental Crisis: The Views of Hinduism and Islam	9
Index	32

Printed in India at Print Line, New Delhi 110017

FOREWORD

In a memorable lecture delivered a few years ago, Seyyed Hossein Nasr delved deep into the causes of the environmental crisis which has gripped both the developed and the developing world.

Seyyed Hossein's piercing and sharp argument takes us through the different approaches of mankind towards nature and the manner in which pure science and technology has been used, to satisfy greed, not need.

Comparing and contrasting the world-view of medieval Europe and the changes which were brought about by Renaissance and later, the Industrial Revolution, with Asian and Indian world-views, he points at the core difference between a world-view where all life is sacralized and where the philosophy of religion rises from the higher *dicta* of revelation and illumination and those others dictated by the notion of the complete supremacy of Man.

Nasr then turns his attention to some key concepts in Hindu and Islamic thought and how these may still help humanity to meet the crisis. One amongst these is the idea of sacrifice of the *Purusa* as enunciated in the *Rgveda*: he comprehends this principle in contemporary terms as the concept of interrelatedness and interdependence and interconnection and the relation of the parts and the whole and the necessity of austerity and self-control. *Abimsa* is another positive concept for not only eschewing violence but also understanding the other. This also demands restraint and Man's resolve not to assault Earth and Nature. Similarly, Nasr reminds us that Islam also created a civilization which always lived in harmony with its natural ambience. Despite the great scientists and physicists it produced, there was no Scientific Revolution in the Western sense because for the scientists and the Man of religion alike, the phenomenon of nature never ceased to be the signs of God. He alludes to a verse in the Quran which states that "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizon and upon themselves." This Quranic verse was never forgotten nor should it be

forgotten today. "There is nothing which is only a fact; everything is a sign, a vestige, an *āyah* of God (*āyat Allah*).” Seyyed Hossein Nasr underpins the necessity to function within this world-view and not the contrary view of the Promethean or Titanic man, of the man in rebellion, having broken the chains of existence and who has declared his independence from God and the World. If there be harmony in the world and if Man is seen as the Khalifah or vicegerent of God and Nature, it is incumbent upon man to conserve nature.

The significance and validity of these concepts, as precepts for individual and collective thought and action, is clear. Nasr only reminds us of the perennial sources in Hindu and Islamic thought which if reflected and acted upon will enable Man to transform himself so that crisis of his own making can be averted.

Hossein Nasr concludes on a meditation of Quranic verse:

*"O Lord thou didst not create the cosmos
nor placed us here on earth in vain.
Our journey of life is impregnated
with meaning so rich that it inundates
not only our whole being but also the being
of Thy creatures who surround us
in our earthly journey."*

and perhaps if the journey of man on earth is to continue the inner-man must be so centered that his actions are motivated by the commitment to the world-view contained not only in these two religions, but, others also.

The text of this lecture was published in the *India International Quarterly*, Volume 18, No. 1, Spring, 1991. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has kindly revised the text of this lecture so that IGNC could print a revised edition. We are grateful to him for having given us permission to print this lecture.

KAPILA VATSYAYAN

RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

THE VIEWS OF HINDUISM AND ISLAM

The most important and significant subject at all times and climes is that which concerns the world of the Spirit for it is from that world that both man and the cosmos issue and to which they return. But on the plane of the human condition, as it exists today, there is no subject more topical and of immediate concern for the survival of the whole of the natural order including man than the issue of the environment. Not only does the environmental crisis threaten the web of life on earth, but it represents, at this late stage of human history, the external crystallization of the inner illness and malaise which has beset modern man for a long time. This outward crisis is therefore a gauge of modern man's own inner sickness and the indication of the outward signs of that inner malady which is finally manifesting itself openly with such fury, making the patient finally aware of the seriousness of his condition.

For centuries modern man, who had his home first in the West and then gradually spread over other continents, went about destroying the planet in the name of progress, material success, economic development and all the other false ideals and gods of the nineteenth century. Now he can see how this process has not just depleted him inwardly and spiritually, but has also made it difficult for him to breathe the very air which sustains life on earth. In a metaphorical sense, modern man having

turned his back against heaven to gain the earth, is now losing the earth because of the very loss of heaven. That is the incredible verdict of history upon him.

Therefore, during the last few years attention is beginning to be paid in the West to the role of religion in the environmental crisis. It is true that one still has agencies in America, Western Europe, Japan and other industrialized countries – countries which are most responsible for the pollution of the globe – as well as in other lands which still see the environmental crisis in only material terms. And in these same countries, there are many people who speak about the engineering of the environment – as if the environmental crisis is merely a question of collecting garbage on a gigantic scale. Yet, fortunately, more and more people are becoming aware of the metaphysical, philosophical and religious dimensions of the environmental crisis. One telling indication is that when Earth Day was celebrated in America on the 22nd of April, 1990, in the Washington Cathedral, the whole day was dedicated to the question of religion and the environment. Also, a few months ago the first important international and so-called ecumenical conference was held in America on the religious dimensions of the relationship between man and the environment. Members of several other traditions including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, as well as leading Christian theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, participated. This meeting itself followed upon the wake of the famous gathering at Assisi in 1986. Until now, however, little attention has been paid to the Oriental view of this subject and therefore it is to this subject and more specifically the Hindu and Muslim perspectives concerning the environment that I want to turn.

Today, because I am speaking on the sacred soil of India, I shall devote myself only to the two major traditions in this country: first of all Hinduism which is, of course, the major tradition in this country; and secondly, Islam which has lived in this country for a thousand years, and which has over a hundred million followers just in India. Over the centuries these two traditions have moulded the way in which people look upon trees, treat the earth under their feet and use the water which sustains life. Despite all the misunderstandings created, both as a result of the destruction of the balance which had existed before, and the revival of a strong sense of identity, religious and communal, the Hindus and the Muslims – not to talk about the Jains, the Christians and other small minorities in this country – breathe the same air, walk upon the same land and drink the same water. Therefore, the ecological and the environmental crisis is not really a communal problem at all; it is a problem for the whole of India as on a larger scale it is the problem of every individual on earth be he or she French, Japanese or Arab.

Many of the analyses made of Christianity, the major religion of the West, during the last few years reveal the attitude of Western man towards nature to be very negative with the roots of this attitude being sunk to a large extent in Western Christian theological formulations. But the situation in the East does not seem to be much better. The Japanese, endowed with the great Shinto and Zen traditions of love for nature, are polluting the environment just as rapidly as the people in New Jersey or the Midlands of England, or the Ruhr Valley. Here in India the two great traditions which have always had very elaborate metaphysical and religious teachings concerning nature and have taught their followers to respect it, are destroying the quality of air, cutting down their

trees and polluting their waters with a speed that is not really any slower than what one finds in any other part of the world.

This is a great enigma. Is it that religion has already ceased to be significant? Certainly not. People are laying down their lives for it every day, and fighting with other religious groups as a result of limited understanding and contentious opposition to them. Therefore, it is far from dead. Why is it, then, that in fact it seems to make little difference as far as the destruction of the environment is concerned whether you consider life to be sacred or whether you have a kind of theology which excludes nature? To understand this paradox, it is necessary to go back a bit and to analyze the historical situation which has led to this impasse.

Let me first of all turn to the view of nature and the sciences developed on the basis of that view, and their application which has made the world what it is today. It is no use removing responsibility from the shoulders of those who are responsible for the environmental crisis and who yet claim that modern science has nothing to do with the technology which is used for purely economical gain and driven by human greed. All the factors from pure science to technology, its administration and application are links in a single chain which extends from a cause to an effect which itself then becomes a cause for the next effect. Every relevant element and factor is responsible and certainly modern science and technology are not the least among them.

In order to understand this chain of causes and effects, we have to study the periods before the Industrial Revolution and even before the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century to analyze what happened in

the West. What contributed to the world-view which now makes it so easy to destroy the whole Amazon forest in ten years rather than in five hundred or a thousand years as happened with the forests in Europe? To answer this question one has to go back really a long time, and look from the metaphysical and religious points of view upon the history of the West where the environmental crisis first developed.

Medieval European man possessed a civilization which was not very different from that of, let us say, Islam, India, the Buddhist world, or Confucian China, in the sense that everything in life was sacralized by the presence of the "tradition", which in the case of the West was Christianity. However, as this civilization began to develop in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, one of its consequences was that the consideration of nature as being part of the sacrosanct environment of man and related to his salvation was gradually cast aside and nearly forgotten. The major theological thrust of the West at that time helped indirectly and gradually in the secularization of the cosmos. The Copernican Revolution could not have happened without the heavens having become reduced to elements of a secularized universe. Therefore, in a sense, the background was laid not by modern science but by certain elements in the theological transformations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which can be traced back to the excessive Aristotelianization of Christian theology.

It was with the Cartesian Revolution that a new chapter began in philosophy but this was now a philosophy severed from religion, based on a reason divorced from both the *dicta* of revelation and illumination by the higher intellect. It is against this background that modern science arose. The first persons who cultivated modern science

came from very different temperaments and tendencies. The three major figures of this time – Galileo, Kepler and Newton – were three very different types of human beings. Galileo was, theologically speaking, a kind of maverick, a person devoted to experimental science with very keen experimental powers of observation but also having an aggressive anti-theological outlook, which is only now being fully analyzed after some four centuries. Kepler, his contemporary, was a Pythagorean whose book containing the description of the movements of the heavens was called the *Harmony of the World*. The third, Sir Isaac Newton, spent only a part of his life studying physics, and much of his time practising alchemy and writing commentaries on the *Book of Daniel* – writing all those pages which lie hidden in the libraries of Oxford University and elsewhere because for three hundred years British and American scholarship has been too embarrassed to deal with these writings of the most famous scientist ever produced in Britain. This goes to show how the point of view that wins always revises history.

Nevertheless, these three men of very different temperaments created, on the basis of an already segmented reality, a science which no longer had to deal with nature as being at all sacred, and they succeeded because nature had already more or less ceased to be sacred for the European mind. Sacredness was pulled and culled out of nature though it remained peripherally in certain areas such as botany where a man like John Ray still went into the fields to observe the *vestigia Dei*, the vestiges of God – the *ayat Allah* as one would say in Arabic. The science based on the sacred quality of nature, however, remained peripheral. The mainstream of European science categorically divorced nature from the domain of the sacred.

The second important development that took place which made possible this total domination and destruction of nature was the type of man who emerged from the Renaissance. Medieval Christian man was half "god"-half man, half angel-half terrestrial being – one who still felt a responsibility towards Heaven and who was torn between the two poles of Heaven and earth. The Renaissance revived a great deal of ancient thought but no longer in the bosom of the Christian tradition. The result was not a Christian or even a "Platonic" humanism but an earthly and ultimately skeptical and agnostic humanism which made man a totally terrestrial being. Henceforth this type of man felt no responsibility towards anything nor anyone beyond the human realm or recognized any divine authority above himself. Of course, there were major exceptions, but here I am speaking about the main thrust of this new chapter in Western civilization. The European man who set out to conquer the globe was the product of this worldly humanism and felt no responsibility for either nature or other peoples it conquered as can be seen by the destiny of the native peoples of much of the Americas.

There have been many other conquests in human history before and since then, and one cannot assert that only the Europeans conquered the world. The Persians conquered the Indians, the Mongols, the Chinese and the Arabs. Subjugation is certainly not a prerogative or a special monopoly of the West, and the Orientals should not criticize the West for having conquered land; this has always been done. What is unique in human history, as far as the Western conquests are concerned, are the consequences of these acts of vandalism. Modern man embarked on a course of obliterating whole civilizations, and along with them their natural ambience on the basis of belief in the primacy of the kingdom of

man instead of the kingdom of God even if it still spoke of Christianity which it tried to import wherever it went. And the kingdom of man as thus conceived was exclusive of the world of nature. Many of the European conquerors were humanly speaking charitable and some loved nature. But for most of them their supreme duty to "God and country" was to bring by any and all means possible wealth from the New World to Spain or from Asia and Africa to England to make life better in London — entirely forgetting what would happen to life in Bombay, what would happen to the Incas in Peru and the Aztecs and their natural habitat. It was essentially a world whose concern was for a particular section of humanity as an island, separated at once from other peoples, nature and the God of nature. God came to be viewed simply as the God of a particular humanity to the extent that people still believed in Him and His relation to nature was at best that of the clockmaker of the Deists.

To this factor was added a third important element in the seventeenth century, with the British philosopher Sir Francis Bacon — so different from the other Bacon. No two persons could present a greater contrast in the history of thought. The first, Roger Bacon, who was an illuminationist, a Platonist, who used to wear the dress of an *illuminati*, that is the garb of the Persian philosophers of Illumination (*isbrāq*) when he taught Islamic philosophy. He tried to introduce to Christian thought an illuminative knowledge of nature, a knowledge which was at once of nature and based upon the metaphysical perception of nature. Francis Bacon's message was in contrast that science is power. This is the essence of the Baconian message and this type of science found support among the merchants and "industrialists" who were just coming to the fore, the so-called bourgeois class that was rising; but also among

the rulers and the aristocracy, the kings and the ministers in various countries including England, Germany and France. The reason that the Scientific Revolution found such a support was precisely due to the fact that modern science was associated from the beginning with power and the domination of nature and therefore displayed economic and political advantages. This change in the nature of knowledge has been very difficult for most Orientals to understand whether they be Arabs, Persians, or Indians — because it implies the divorce between knowledge and deliverance in contrast to that union between knowledge and spiritual freedom which lies at the heart of the Indian tradition as well as Islam.

Henceforth, knowledge became the source of worldly power which is altogether different from what traditional civilizations have always taught. And it was with the combination of these elements and factors at work that the very virile and energetic European civilization set out to conquer the globe — not only from the human point of view, to create a global colony, but also from a natural and ecological point of view. It was also on this basis that the Industrial Revolution followed with a total disregard for the environment which now became something to be simply manipulated and raped. Even the small resistance of the natural philosophers in Germany and the Romantics in England during the nineteenth century, men and women who tried to write about the significance of the beauty of nature, was relegated, precisely, to poetry and art and not considered to be serious for the sciences of nature.

It is interesting that in Arabic and in Persian (my mother tongue), as well as in Urdu, the word for poetry is *shī'r*, which is related to the root meaning awareness, consciousness, knowledge. Ultimately poetry is inseparable

from knowledge. The nexus was, however, totally destroyed in the modern West precisely because knowledge was no longer meant to deliver but to dominate, to make possible the domination of nature to quench unbridled human passions.

To say the least, during the Industrial Revolution human nature did not improve. The idea of the nature of human beings becoming better and better – the great falsehood perpetuated in the nineteenth century – did not materialize. Human beings did not progress as a collectivity. Needless to say, after the horrendous experiences of this century, as exemplified by the devastations brought about in the former Soviet Union upon both the human and the natural environment, all these ideas of the evolution of man to higher stages of ethical perfection and so forth through progress appear to us today to be total nonsense. I will even not argue here that humanity has degenerated, although much evidence could be provided to prove such a thesis. But there is no doubt that this humanity, including not only the West but also the rest of the globe as it has become affected by modernism, certainly did not become better ethically, to say the least, while it increased its ever greater domination over nature. It is true that the rhinoceros was also attacked by the Kenyans a thousand years ago as it was in 1990; but the last black rhinoceros died in Kenya and the whole species disappeared only during the past few months and not a thousand years ago. I am not even claiming that man's aggressive nature has increased although I do believe this to be the case, but there is no doubt that the means by which the aggression expresses itself has certainly increased in proficiency in ways that were totally unforeseen until even a few decades ago.

Now we are ourselves at the threshold of becoming the extinct species. Man who has prided himself in conquering not only the earth but the moon and who has declared his independence of Heaven has become, in fact, one of the most endangered of all species and the sooner we become aware of this the better. We might not be able to save things; *Kāla* (Time) might have other plans for us. But putting aside the religious interpretation of what is happening and speaking from a purely "human" and scientific point of view, we have to consider the danger of modern civilization to the continued existence of human beings despite the fact that they are growing so rapidly.

Unfortunately, Oriental people have very little awareness of the immensity of the danger facing the very life of the human species because while for at least two hundred years we fought the West on the political level, we always trusted them to know what they were doing. This attitude has not changed even now. Many people in the Orient still feel that the West will solve the environmental crisis through some kind of clever and "Magical" technological innovation. There are, strangely enough, more people in America, England, France and Germany who are sceptical about the possibilities of modern civilization and the ability of modern science and technology to solve the present crisis than people in the East. I have always maintained that the greatest defenders of Western civilization are still to be found today among modernized Asians.

There is this belief among us that somehow the West knows what it is doing, that it will pull some magic trick out of the hat and everything will be fine. Such an attitude is unfortunately nothing more than a dream; and the sooner we wake up from this chimera, especially

as far as the people who still belong to the great living civilizations of the East are concerned, the better, because the West does not actually have a formula for solving the environmental crisis for whose creation it is first and foremost responsible although non-Western societies have now come to join the West to an ever greater degree in this destruction. In fact, many people claim that the only way that the West can solve its environmental problems is by reviving another view of nature; and the only way to do this is to go back to the traditional and metaphysical teachings concerning the role of nature and its sacredness which still survive in still half traditional societies such as that of India despite the fact that in such societies cars pollute the air in the worst manner and governments remain nearly totally impervious to the consequences of modern technology.

We, the people of the East, will not find some all-knowing Western philosopher or scientist to solve our problems for us. We have to go back to our own traditional sources – the Hindus to Hinduism, Muslims to Islam and so forth. Here, I will mention briefly what I feel is really at the heart of the Hindu and Islamic views about nature and why it is so important to revive them. First of all there is the question of sacrifice. Of course, Hinduism is a religion that is based to a great extent upon sacrifice, but I do not mean here only the ritual Vedic sacrifice. I mean the Hindu doctrine according to which the cosmos itself is the result of a sacrifice – the sacrifice of *Puruṣa* who corresponds in Islamic parlance to the universal man, or perhaps in a certain sense to the *Logos* in Christian doctrine. The profound passage of Chapter 10, Verse 90 of the *Ṛg Veda* where the sacrifice of *Puruṣa* is mentioned must be read anew for it allows the perceptive Hindu reader to regain a view of nature as being related to the very source of the sacred:

Thousand-beaded was the Puruṣa, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. He embraced the earth on all sides, and stood beyond the breadth of ten fingers.

The Puruṣa is this all, that which was and which shall be. He is Lord of immortality, which he grows beyond through (sacrificial) food.

Such is his greatness, and still greater than that is the Puruṣa. One fourth of him is all beings. The three fourths of him is the immortal in Heaven.

Three fourths on high rose the Puruṣa. One fourth of him arose again here (on the earth). Thence in all directions he spread abroad, as that which eats and that which eats not.

From him Viraj was born, from Viraj the Puruṣa. He when born reached beyond the earth behind as well as before.

When the Gods spread out the sacrifice with the Puruṣa as oblation, spring was its ghee, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.

As the sacrifice on the strewn grass they besprinkled the Puruṣa, born in the beginning. With him the Gods sacrificed, the Sādhyas and the sages.

From that sacrifice completely offered was the sprinkled ghee collected. He made it the beasts of the air, of the forest, and those of the village.

From that sacrifice completely offered were born the Verses (Ṛg Veda) and the Saman-melodies (Sāma

Veda). The metres were born from it. From it was born the Sacrificial formula (Yajur Veda).

From it were born horses, and they that have two rows of teeth. Cattle were born from it. From it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided the Puruṣa, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are his thighs and feet called?

The brāhmin was his mouth, his two arms were made the rājanya (warrior), his two thighs the vaiśya (trader and agriculturist), from his feet the śūdra (servile class) was born.

The moon was born from his spirit (manas), from his eye was born the sun, from his mouth Indra and Agni, from his breath Vāyu (wind) was born.

From his navel arose the middle sky, from his head the heaven originated, from his feet the earth, the quarters from his ear. Thus did they fashion the worlds.

Seven were his sticks that enclose (the fire), thrice seven were made the faggots. When the Gods spread out the sacrifice, they bound the Puruṣa as a victim.

With the sacrifice the Gods sacrificed the sacrifice.

These were the first ordinances. These great powers reached to the firmament, where are the ancient Śādhyaś, the Gods.

And so the beings of the world, according to this beautiful text, "are" in reality *Puruṣa*. They are the sacrifice of that which is most sacred in the Hindu tradition. I also quote another beautiful verse from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* concerning the same principle:

*The light that lives in the sun,
Lighting all the world,
The light of the moon,
The light that is in fire:*

Know that light to be mine.

*My energy enters the earth,
Sustaining all that lives:*

*I become the moon,
Giver of water and sap,
To feed the plants and the trees.*

*Flame of life in all,
I consume the many foods,
Turning them into strength
That upholds the body.*

*I am in all hearts,
I give and take away
Knowledge and memory:
I am all that the Vedas tell,
I am the teacher,
The knower of Vedānta.*

It is, of course, easy to read these verses and then continue to pollute the environment. It is, therefore, not

enough to read these lines; they have been read for years and years. Now we must go back to them in order to draw from them a philosophy of nature, a renewal of an attitude towards the natural world.

In addition to this metaphysical doctrine of sacrifice, which is at the foundation and origin of the Vedic religion and also the cosmology that issues from the Vedas, there is the basic Hindu idea of the sacredness of all life. Everyone talks about Hinduism being a religion in which all life is sacred and where so many of the animals have specific sacred functions of one kind or another, starting with the cow, the monkey, certain birds, snakes, etc. It is, therefore, strange that today in a civilization, one of the world's major spiritual and artistic civilizations, in which life is so sacred, the animals do not die by being taken to the slaughter house but by just breathing the air or drinking poisoned water.

Obviously there are many ways of destroying life. One need not do so only by shooting animals; it can also be done by creating an ambience in which life can no longer survive. I must mention here a dangerous interpretation of Oriental doctrines, especially Hinduism, which is prevalent in the West and also amongst certain Westernized Indians who have learnt their religion through Western sources. Those who have fallen victim to this error claim that the world is *māyā* in the sense of illusion, and therefore it does not matter whether one has polluted or unpolluted *māyā*. This is indulging in day dreaming of the worst kind possible. Had this really been the case, there would not have been so much preaching by the greatest sages of this land including the Buddha and the ancient *rishis* about the sacredness of life and nature.

Another major principle of Hinduism which is of the utmost significance for the attitude towards the natural environment is *ahimsā* or non-violence made globally famous by Mahatma Gandhi. This principle, however, is not limited to the social environment alone but concerns the world of nature as well. Man must treat and respect nature as it is and try not to impose his own norms upon it violently. He must see the forms of nature as the *loci* of Divine Energy with which he must live at peace and non-violently. One must meditate once again upon the principle of *ahimsā* not only as it concerns other men and women or social and political institutions, but also as it involves animals and plants, the forest and the sea, the mountains and the rivers with all of which one should seek to live in a non-violent manner.

Let me now turn to the case of Islam. Here I need to mention first of all a salient fact. For many Western Orientalists all religions are classified as being either Western or Eastern. Eastern religions are supposed to consist of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and a number of smaller religions of eastern Asia. Western religions are supposed to be primarily Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And since the blame has come to be put on the shoulder of Christianity for having caused the environmental crisis as we see for example in the writings of A. Toynbee, Islam too is coming in for its share of the blame. It is hardly ever praised for anything positive in the West. Now an attack is being made against Islam as being also responsible along with the other monotheistic religions for the environmental crisis. Therefore, it is important to bring out the Islamic view of the environment not only to provide an answer for such a charge but more importantly to provide a remedy for the destruction of the environment in Muslim countries where the situation is little different from India or else-

where except for areas which have sparse populations. The environmental crisis in the Islamic world is due as in Buddhist Japan or Hindu India not to Islam itself but to other political, economic and technological factors which have come to eclipse the influence of the religious view of nature.

Islam created a civilization which always lived in harmony with its natural ambience. Because of the great scientists and physicists it produced, many people think that the Scientific Revolution should have begun in the Islamic world. In fact it did not; and the reason it did not was because for Muslims the phenomena of nature never ceased to be the signs (*āyāt*) of God. There is a verse in the Quran which states that "We shall show them Our signs upon the horizon and upon themselves". This Quranic verse was never forgotten; so phenomena never became mere facts. The Arabic language has no word for fact, nor does Persian and their speakers have lived for a long time without having to take recourse to the concept of fact. This truth is very revealing because it means that for speakers of these languages a fact is never merely a fact. There is nothing which is only a fact; everything is a sign, a vestige, an *āyah* of God (*āyāt Allāh*). It is precisely this perspective which prevented a purely secular science from coming into being among Muslims.

Islam refused to see nature as anything other than the vestiges of God. Great Muslim scientists from al-Bīrūnī and Khayyām, down to poets, philosophers and theologians, have all shared in this world-view. As a humble student of Islamic science, I do not know of a single major Islamic scientist who did not function within that world-view including the great physicians whose teachings are still followed. For them also, in this field

of medicine which has remained alive in the land of India till now, the world of nature both within and without the body was related to the sense of the sacred.

Secondly, Islam never allowed the development of the idea of the Promethean man, that is, the man freed from any responsibility to a world beyond himself, to the sacred, to God who is the Ultimate Reality and to nature. This is the man who is his own master, who runs the world and who dominates the world as he wills. I have called such a person Promethean man because of the myth of Prometheus which has a far reaching negative aspect, one which is very important for us to realize. Prometheus was the man who stole fire from the heavens despite the gods; in a sense he rebelled against Heaven and was punished for his transgression. This idea of Promethean man was never allowed to develop in Islam. In Islam the central idea of man is that of the *khalīfah*, that is, the vicegerent of God who is always surrendered to His Will. Therefore, Muslim men and women, if they are aware of the realities of religion – because there are those in Islam who are no more aware of their religion than are Hindus aware of theirs – always remain aware of this vicegerency.

What Islam avoided at all costs is the idea of the Promethean or Titanic man, of the man in rebellion, having broken the chains of existence and declared his independence from God and the world. One could not have imagined, let us say, the David of Michaelangelo being produced in Khorasan. It is unimaginable not because there was no sculpture in the Islamic world but because of the humanistic rebellion reflected in this famous work. This piece of sculpture which was the product of the late Renaissance was very different from the subtle poetry of Michaelangelo and represented that Prometheanism

which came to dominate the European world at that time.

Thirdly, there existed a harmony between the Islamic man seen as the *khalifah* or vicegerent of God and nature. This is strikingly clear in the text of the Quran and can be clearly seen in the civilization which grew out of the Quranic message. The Quran refers constantly to the world of nature and the Quranic revelation is even addressed to both man and the cosmos which form a bi-unity in the Islamic perspective.

It is remarkable that some of the greatest manifestations of not Hindu but also Islamic civilization are found in India. Of course, the greatest Hindu architecture is located in India; that is obvious. However, some of the greatest Islamic architecture is also to be found here in India, not in Arabia or other places but right here in this land. No two architectures could be more different from a certain point of view. The great classical Hindu temple is like a living forest where all forms grow, where life is breathed from within into the architecture. Islamic architecture stands at the other antipode; it is the crystalline world where all forms are reduced in a sense to their geometric essentiality. Yet, despite this visual contrast both of them have a very profound relationship with the world of nature.

Hindu architecture is totally integrated into the primal forms of life in India. Islamic architecture brings back the harmony of virgin nature within the context and space of the city without which there would be no need of Islamic sacred architecture. Islamic sacred architecture is nothing more or less than the bringing of the harmony of nature into the artificial ambience created by man and that is why if one is out in the country in the bosom

of nature, one does not need a mosque in which to pray. The whole of nature is the mosque for the Muslim. One can put down one's carpet in the middle of the desert or forest and pray, and one can even dispense with a carpet if the ground is clean.

One can see in the architecture of these two traditions a kind of visual reminiscence of the harmony between man and nature which existed in these two worlds and which needs to be resuscitated before everything else. The message of the harmony between man and nature, although forgotten by so many contemporary Hindus and Muslims, is still reflected in the sacred architecture which the faithful of both communities visit regularly but often impervious to this aspect of the message of the edifices created for the worship of the Divinity.

Let me conclude with a short meditation upon a verse of the Quran which is related to the theme of the natural environment. The verse of the Quran in question is as follows:

*Verily in the creation of the heavens and the earth
and the alterations of day and night,
there are indeed signs for men of understanding.
Men who invoke God standing,
sitting and lying down on their sides
and contemplate the creation
of the heavens and the earth;
our Lord thou didst not create this in vain.*

Meditation upon this verse with which I will conclude is as follows:

O Lord thou didst not create the cosmos

nor placed us here on earth in vain.
 Our journey of life is impregnated
 with meaning so rich that it inundates
 not only our whole being but also the being
 of Thy creatures who surround us
 in our earthly journey.

It is true that we are travellers in this world,
 passing like members of a caravan for fleeting
 moments
 on this beautiful earth between the gates of life
 and death.

But this enchanted nature which surrounds us
 in our earthly journey is not simply
 the background for the trajectory of our life.
 Nature is above all a reflection
 of the paradise whose memories we still bear
 in the depth of our soul,
 and whose beatitude in Thy proximity we seek
 at the end of our journey of many nights and
 days.

That is why only those whose inner being
 belongs to the paradisaal abode can see
 Thy creation crowned in its paradisaal aura,
 while those who have abandoned thee and so
 reside in that hell,
 which is none other than separation from Thee,
 turn thy Creation into an inferno.

Thou hast set upon us the responsibility
 of not only caring for creation but also of acting
 as the channel of Thy grace for the creatures
 who surround us in the journey of life.

We thereby affect their state of being as they, in
 turn,
 aid us in bearing testimony to Thy wisdom and
 beauty
 in the face of Thy presence.

And so did Thy last Prophet utter:
 'O Lord, show us things as they really are',
 for to be shown things as they really are
 is to see them not as brute facts or opaque objects,
 but as the sign of Thy ubiquitous presence.

Help us to remain always aware
 of the spiritual face of the created order
 and to rest in the remembrance of the basic truth
 uttered in Thy sacred book — 'whithersoever
 you turn there is the face of God'.

Indeed all things in Thy virginal creation
 are reflections of Thy face which we defile
 at the cost of the greatest peril
 to our immortal soul as well as to our earthly life.

Save us, therefore, from ourselves
 and all that prevents us from seeing Thy presence
 in the lofty mountains and the sparkling springs,
 in the starry heavens and the abandoned song of
 the bird,
 in the never-ending waves of the sea
 and the innocent glance of the newly born.

Verily Thou didst not create the heavens and the
 earth in vain.

INDEX

- Agri* 22
Abinsā 7, 25
 Al-Birūnī 26
 Amazon forest 13
 America 10, 15
 Arabia 28
 Aristotelianization 13
Ayab 26
Ayat Allāh 8, 14, 26
 Buddha 24
 Buddhism 13, 25
Bhagavad-Gītā 23
 Bacon, Sir Francis 16
 Bacon, Roger 16
 Cartesian Revolution 13
 China 13
 Christianity 11, 13, 16, 25
 Confucianism 25
 Copernican Revolution 13
 Dalai Lama 10
 Galileo 14
 Gandhi, Mahatma 25
 Hinduism 11, 20, 24, 25
 India 11, 20, 27, 28
 Indra 22
 Industrial Revolution 12, 17, 18
Isbrāq 16
 Islam 11, 20, 25, 26, 27
 Japan 10
 Judaism 25
Kālā 19
 Kenya 18
 Kepler 14
Khalīfab 8, 27, 28
 Khayyām 26
Logos 20
Manas 22
Māyā 24
 Michaelangelo 27
 Newton 14
 Orient 17, 19, 20
 Prometheus 27
Puruṣa 7, 20, 21, 22, 23
 Quran 7, 26, 28, 29
 Ray, John 14
 Renaissance 15, 27
Rg Veda 7, 20, 21
Risbis 24
Sādhyas 22
Sāma Veda 21
 Scientific Revolution 12, 17, 26
Sbi'r 17
 Shinto 11
 Soviet Union 18
 Taoism 25
 Toynbee, A. 25
Vāyu 22
 Vedas 24
 Western Europe 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20
Yajur Veda 22
 Zen 11