

Islam and the Density of Man^{1*}

By *Mohammed Rustom*

I would like to begin with an autobiographical account which takes us back to the fall of 2000, when I was a second-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. Like many of my classmates in philosophy, I had a fairly naïve understanding of what I was doing studying this discipline. I would eventually come to learn that there were different kinds of traditions of philosophy, and where one would end up focusing really had to do with a number of factors, not least one's interests, predilections, and ultimate concerns. But, in the fall of 2000, as I sat in a very popular course on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, such things were not entirely clear to me. I signed up for the course, to be honest, because the two authors who were its focus had names that sounded “cool.” The course description promised to give students a sense of the important and enduring themes in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche's writings—themes which, in one way or another, helped define a number of pressing problems in several contemporary forms of philosophy. Little did I know that the course would be a catalyst for something else.

One day, through the lens of Nietzsche, the professor was passive-aggressively emphasizing how there is no such thing as truth, how everything is an interpretation largely governed by contexts and received canons of understanding, etc. I recall sitting in that class completely disagreeing with what was being said, but unable to respond. Leaving the class with my head down in shame and terrified by the thought

¹ * This article is based on a lecture delivered at Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions in April 2015. Thanks to Munjed Murad for his invitation and feedback on the materials presented here. Parts of this paper appeared in a section of a previously-published article: “Actionless Action,” in *Door of Mercy: Kenan Rifai and Sufism Today* (Istanbul: Nefes Yayinevi, 2017), 1:122-128.

that “this was it,” I found myself on a bench in one of the more scenic parts of the campus. Suddenly, the sun shone through the clouds, and its rays illuminated the leaves on the ground. The picture was perfect, the moment both in time and outside of time. I was beholding something that I could not understand, but which I understood by virtue of the very act of beholding it. In effect, *that* was the response to the professor which I had been seeking. It occurred to me at that moment that the beauty of nature was both a poetic reality and something that possessed its own razor-sharp logic, with the net effect that it was seen as a crystallization of the mysterious rhythm and flow of life itself.

From there onwards, things progressed rather naturally (no pun intended), and before long I came across the works of some of the major authors who belonged to the classical Islamic intellectual tradition. These writers could not but see nature and its beauty as signs which point to ultimate reality itself. What, then, are the principles which inform their thinking on nature? And, how would their vision speak to us today, being as we are people who live in a world that has a very different kind of interaction with nature and for whom nature in turn behaves quite differently?

In an attempt to answer these two questions, I will here present a poem on Islam and nature along with a commentary upon the poem. There are two reasons for this kind of an undertaking. First, these media have always been effective pedagogical forms in Islamic civilization, and for which we have some contemporary examples.² Second, communicating the principles of nature primarily by way of a didactic poem (albeit in the style of *le vers libre*) has the ability to present, by virtue of its very structure, something of the poetic and logical dimensions embedded in nature on the one hand, and the aforementioned Islamic metaphysicians’ understanding of it on the other. The commentary upon the poem will draw on the central sources of Sufism, namely the Quran,³ sayings of the blessed Prophet, and the writings of some of the tradition’s foremost sages.

² For a recent English-language contribution, see Mohammed Rustom, “The End of Islamic Philosophy,” *Sacred Web* 40 (2017): 131-167.

³ Translations from the Quran are taken from *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

Islam and the Density of Man

Pen inscribed upon Tablet, and nature was realized.
Behold the symbol, pointing to the Symbolized.
Nature is manifestation, the Absolute its Principle—
fleeting phenomena arising from a realm invincible.
Its garment is woven of geometry and music sublime.
Yin and yang unite, meaning and form combine.
The world is a mosque, its rugs laid out for prostration.
Every creature *hymns His praise* in constant adoration.
Through the seasons witness life's cycle in every breath.
First is birth, then youth, then maturity, then death.
Now nature has become obscure, like its custodian,
blind to the signs on the horizons, and deep within.
The book of nature is he given in trust.
But he casts it aside, covering it in dust.
Devouring nature with fervour and intensity,
he becomes sluggish, trapped by his own density.
Alas! If man lives his days, content to consume,
how will he the divine qualities assume?
As for God's vicegerent, with soul subtle and pure,
he emerges from this quagmire, heralding the cure.
Looking upon nature with crystal clarity,
he dissolves both sides of a false polarity.
Since subject and object, I and thou are but illusion,
he rends the veil of forms, escaping all confusion.
Yet in the mirror of forms he sees beauty divine,
for it reflects that Face beyond all space and time.
That Face is his Face, through intimate with-ness.
Is God not of all things the supreme Witness?

* * *

Commentary

v. 1

**Pen inscribed upon Tablet, and nature was realized.
Behold the symbol, pointing to the Symbolized.**

v. 2

**Nature is manifestation, the Absolute its Principle—
fleeting phenomena arising from a realm invincible.**

v. 3

**Its garment is woven of geometry and music sublime.
Yin and yang unite, meaning and form combine.**

The opening lines of the poem introduce two key cosmogonic principles, namely the **Pen** and the **Tablet**.⁴ The Pen is taken from a reference in Q 68:1 and the Tablet derives from Q 85:22, where the verse speaks of the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*). Along with the reference to the Pen in Q 68:1, the verse begins with the Arabic letter *n n* (ن). Since this letter is shaped like a bowl open from the top with a dot in the middle of it, it is commonplace in Islamic metaphysics for authors to state that the dot symbolizes the divine ink or knowledge and its container a divine inkwell or God's "mind."⁵ The Pen then dips into the inkwell and writes upon the Tablet, which symbolizes the Universal Soul or the cosmic script of the universe.

In Islamic philosophy, the Pen is seen as symbolizing the First Intellect (*al-'aql al-awwal*) of Neoplatonic Islamic cosmology and the inner reality of the Prophet (*al-baqiqat al-Mubammadiyya*), which is identical to the Logos.⁶ God's knowledge is thus passed on to the First Principle that emerges from Him and that Principle then carries out the task of existentiation by conferring its nature onto the blank slate of the cosmos, allowing for the order of time and change and all that it contains to come about.

There are multiple vantage points through which the Pen-Tablet relationship can be conceived. What is important to keep in mind at this stage is that the Pen, in its act of conferring and writing, is always seen as the active pole of the cosmogonic process and the Tablet its

⁴ A detailed treatment of the Pen and the Tablet can be found in Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 12-13, 153-158, 162-167. See also the pertinent text in William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-Arabi's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 153; henceforth, "SDG."

⁵ See Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 153-154, and the commentary upon Q 68:1 in Nasr et al. (eds.), *Study Quran*, 1401.

⁶ See Rustom, *The Triumph of Mercy: Philosophy and Scripture in Mulla Sadra* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 68-70.

passive pole.⁷ In Islamic cosmological teachings the Pen is a masculine principle and the Tablet is a feminine principle. This is also configured in the very “shape” of these two symbols, since the Pen and the Tablet resemble the male and female members respectively. And, just as when the male and female come together and the process of insemination takes place with life resulting from this union, so too does the order of nature arise when the Pen confers its ink upon the Tablet.⁸

The feminine and masculine aspects of nature or the wedding of **yin** and **yang** point us to nature’s poetic and logical dimensions. Since in Islamic thought the cosmos is nothing other than a manifestation of God’s beauty (*jamal*)—corresponding to divine immanence or the yin element in things, and God’s majesty (*jalal*)—corresponding to divine transcendence or the yang element in things, we can say that nature is a reflection of the interplay between these two “faces” of God.⁹ We thus have the logical, mathematically precise, and transcendent dimension of nature, which corresponds to its masculine or active element; and the poetic, musical, and immanent aspect of nature, which corresponds to its feminine and passive element. This is why nature is a fusion of both **geometry and music sublime**, as it proceeds from God, who “is at once the supreme geometer, and one might say, musician and poet.”¹⁰

Now, the verse also tells us that the **symbol** points to the **Symbolized**, which is one way of speaking of the standard relationship between **form**

⁷ The Pen can also be passive, that is, to God; and the Tablet can be active, that is, in relation to the things that emerge from it. See Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 162-163.

⁸ A related point can be found in Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 153.

⁹ See the points made in Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 8-10, 162-163. It can be noted here that yin and yang were also the terms used by Chinese Muslim intellectuals when describing the feminine and masculine poles of cosmic reality. Consider this statement by the important Chinese Muslim sage Liu Zhi: “The original vital-energy is that vast sediment of the majestic ongoing flow. All the abundant things contained in its midst are the surplus of nature and wisdom in the midst of the Great Mandate of the Former Heaven. The root of differentiation into yin and yang is that, when the surplus of nature and wisdom is obtained, the two become differentiated. . . . Of the surpluses of nature and wisdom, one moves and one does not move. Hence in their midst there is an image that is differentiated into two. The one that moves is called “yang” and the one that does not move is called “yin.” This is why one vital-energy transforms and becomes differentiated into two”; cited from Murata, Chittick, and Tu Weiming, *The Sage Learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic Thought in Confucian Terms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 236.

¹⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 92

(*sura*) and **meaning** (*ma'na*).¹¹ What this means is that, in the order of nature, arising as it does from the divine realm itself, everything in it is a symbol which points to something beyond that thing itself. The Arab poet Abu'l 'Atahiya summarizes this point in an oft-cited verse:

In each thing is a sign
indicating that He is one.¹²

This perspective is, of course, based on the Quranic notion that everything we see around us, including ourselves, are signs which point us back to God, who is the source of all things. Q 3:190-191 calls attention to the natural world and some of its mighty phenomena as possessing signs¹³ for people who are truly intelligent, and who constantly remember God:

*Truly in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variation of the night and the day are signs for the possessors of intellect, who remember God standing, sitting, and lying upon their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth, "Our Lord, Thou hast not created this in vain. Glory be to Thee! Shield us from the punishment of the Fire."*¹⁴

Note how this verse underscores the fact that natural phenomena take us back to their transcendent source *and* that the order of nature, contemplated in the right way, itself points to a *telos* or ultimate purpose behind its creation.

As each thing is a symbol, a symbol in and of itself can only serve as an effective window into the nature of the Symbolized, but it can never account for all of its reality. This point is essentially a reformulation of the ancient doctrine which maintains that the symbol never fully accounts for the Symbolized. Since another way of referring to the symbol and

¹¹ See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 19-20.

¹² Cited, with a slight modification, from Chittick, *SDG*, 23.

¹³ We shall return to the Quranic notion of God's "signs" in the commentary upon v. 6.

¹⁴ See also Q 2:156: *Indeed in the creation of the heavens and the earth; and the variation of the night and the day; and the ships that run upon the sea with what benefits mankind; and the water God sends down from the sky whereby He revives the earth after its death, scattering all manner of beast therein; and the shifting of the winds; and the clouds subdued between the sky and the earth are surely signs for a people who understand.*

the Symbolized is to speak of **manifestation** (*zibur*) or divine self-disclosure (*tajalli*) and the **Absolute** (*al-mutlaq*), this is tantamount to saying that manifestation never exhausts the Absolute, since the realm of manifestation and its contents proceed from the Absolute just as the rays of the sun proceed from the sun. And, just as each ray of the sun can take us back to the sun, so too can the different aspects of cosmic manifestation take us back to God who is the Absolute as such.

Thus, nature as manifestation (characterized by **fleeting phenomena**) is nothing other than the Absolute (characterized by **a realm invincible**¹⁵) in so many different garbs. As Rūmī puts it,

We and our existence are non-existent.

You are Absolute Being, appearing as the evanescent.¹⁶

An important point to note is that one of the words in Arabic for environment is *mubit*, namely that which surrounds or encompasses something¹⁷ (this is why *mubit* denotes an ocean, for it is an expansive and all-surrounding body of water). Interestingly, in the Quran God Himself figures as the surrounder or encompasser.¹⁸ Thus, God is our environment because He surrounds us.¹⁹ Such a standpoint lends full support to the idea that nature is sacred. That is, the environment is nothing other than where God is to be found, but in His manifold modes of manifestation and not as He is in Himself.

*

v. 4

The world is a mosque, its rugs laid out for prostration.

Every creature hymns His praise in constant adoration.

¹⁵ This “realm invincible” in Islamic cosmology is technically referred to as *al-jabarut* or “the Invincibility.” For its function in Islamic cosmological texts, see, for example, Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 163–164.

¹⁶ Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi-yi ma'nawi*, edited and translated by R. A. Nicholson as *The Mathnawi of Jalal'uddin Rumi* (London: Luzac 1925-1940), line 1, verse 605 (the translation is my own).

¹⁷ Chittick, *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, edited by Mohammed Rustom, Atif Khalil, and Kazuyo Murata (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 292; henceforth, “*SLH*.”

¹⁸ See the astute remark in Chittick, *SLH*, 292.

¹⁹ Chittick, *SLH*, 292.

There are some basic allusions here to the primary sources of Islam. With respect to the first hemistich, the teaching that **the world is a mosque** or a *masjid* comes from a well-known saying of the Prophet which tells us that the entire earth is a place of prostration (*masjid*). Since God qua **manifestation (v. 1)** is everywhere, all of the earth is sacred and holy. And if all of the earth is sacred and holy and the Muslim is someone who loves and pursues the sacred and the holy, this is actualized through the act of prostration—a time when, as the Prophet said, the servant is the closest to his Lord.

In Islamic thought the term *muslim* or “one who submits” extends to all things in existence. In this view, everything is a *muslim*, not in the sense of being believers who follow the revealed religion of Islam, but in the sense that everything, whether it likes it or not, is, in its essence, totally dependent upon God’s grace at every moment of its survival and is therefore in a state of utter ontological poverty before the King who is infinitely Rich.²⁰ This calls to mind a number of pertinent Quranic verses, two of which shall be cited here: *And unto God prostrates whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, as do their shadows in the morning and the evening (Q 13:15); The seven heavens, and the earth, and whosoever is in them glorify Him. And there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise. Truly He is Clement, Forgiving (Q 17:44).*²¹

What distinguishes the prostration of human beings from other creatures is that human beings, although from one perspective completely submitted to God by their very nature, can from another perspective nevertheless choose not to prostrate to God by virtue of their free will.²² By contrast, all other sentient beings do not have the freedom to turn away from God and therefore are always aligned in the prayer rows of the *masjid* of existence, **in constant adoration**. This is why Ibn ‘Arabi says that God “made everything prostrate itself to Him, since He discloses Himself to everything, and He revealed to everything through

²⁰ Allusion is being made here of course to Q 47:38, *God is the Rich, and you are the poor*. For the manner in which human beings are forever in need of God, see Rustom, “End of Islamic Philosophy,” 137–139.

²¹ See also Q 57:1: *Whatsoever is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God, and He is the Mighty, the Wise*.

²² We shall deal with the question of human freedom as it pertains to man’s interaction with nature in the commentary upon v. 9.

His addressing it.... So His revelation includes all things. However, there remain those who obey and those who do not obey”²³

*

v. 5

**Through the seasons witness life’s cycle in every breath.
First is birth, then youth, then maturity, then death.**

Returning to the point on cosmogenesis, a normal feature of Sufi metaphysics is to speak of the universe as proceeding from God’s breath or what is technically known as the “Breath of the All-Merciful” (*nafas al-rahman*).²⁴ Based on a statement of the Prophet,²⁵ the doctrine derived from this saying is arguably the single most important of all cosmogonic teachings in Islamic thought. It accounts for the manner in which all things proceed from mercy, are themselves instantiations of mercy, and eventually return to mercy.²⁶

The universe proceeds from what is contained “within” the All-Merciful, a procession which Ibn ‘Arabi likens to the release of an inner constriction, just as someone who holds her breath will eventually release it in order to relieve the constriction in her chest. So, that which comes from the All-Merciful occurs *essentially*, or by nature. When the All-Merciful’s breath is released, it gives rise to all of the different shapes and sounds which are articulated under its breath, much like the contents of speech are formed, bit-by-bit, under the breath of a human speaker.²⁷ The point to keep in mind is that breath, which is the principle of life and consciousness itself, pervades the cosmic order and is itself the basis for all of the life and consciousness contained within it.²⁸ When the All-Merciful inhales or breaths back in, all things, issuing from mercy and being mired in mercy, end up returning back to their source in mercy once again.

²³ Cited in Chittick, *SDG*, 285.

²⁴ For the Breath of the All-Merciful, see Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 127-132; henceforth, “*SPK*.”

²⁵ See Chittick, *SPK*, 127 and 398, n. 8.

²⁶ An extended analysis of these ideas can be found in Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, chs. 6-7.

²⁷ Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, 24-25. For this point and its multifaceted cosmological implications, see Chittick, *SDG*, xxviii-xxxv.

²⁸ See the penetrating analysis in Chittick, *SLH*, ch. 21.

Naturally, such a cosmogonic doctrine will have its “response” from the human side of the divine-human equation. If God’s breath pervades the cosmos and all things eventually return back to God by virtue of God’s taking His breath back in, the act of human breathing is of central significance, since, on a microcosmic level, this is something human beings do at every moment of their lives. They can thus witness the emergence and return of the cosmic order in every instance of their waking state. Of course, this is not something that is natural to most people. Herein lies the importance the Sufis place upon the invocation of the name of God (*dhikr*), since it is through the invocation that this “situation” of the cosmos is realized.

For someone whose soul is rooted in the remembrance of God, his interaction with nature becomes a different kind of experience altogether. Forming the basic background for the human comportment with nature, the four **seasons** are, for the one realized in the remembrance of God and whose each and **every breath** mimics the Breath of the All-Merciful, a means to **witness life’s cycle** itself, in its constant ebb and flow, emerging from mercy and returning to mercy, moment-by-moment. Such an individual understands the meaning of the four seasons *all of the time*. First is **birth**, namely spring, when all forms of life begin to emerge. Then comes **youth** or summer, which carries with it the relative care-free exuberance of adolescence and the early stages of adulthood. **Maturity** or autumn shortly follows the youthful summer. At this stage the lush greenery of the summer and its heat (symbolizing the human passions) begin to disappear—the leaves on the trees change colour and fall, and the weather itself becomes cooler. Finally there comes **death** or winter, typified by the season’s cold and lifeless atmosphere.

The vision of a person who is characterized by this awareness of the four seasons at every moment is transformed; for the Presence of God amidst the constant flow of the cycle of life is seen as the only and real foundation of all things. This point is beautifully captured by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his poem “Thou Art for All Seasons”:

As the seasons pass, so does my life.
Where is the stable foundation, where the firm bedrock?
The seasons return, but my life moves on,

Like an arrow shot from the Master's bow,
Racing to the target inevitable which is death, meeting with Thee.
But in this earthly life through which the seasons flow,
Where do I find that permanence for which I yearn?
Where do I stand to observe the seasons' march,
A march from year to year until life's own season ends?
The answer resides in Thy never interrupted Presence.²⁹

*

v. 6

**Now nature has become obscure, like its custodian,
blind to the signs on the horizons, and deep within.**

v. 7

**The book of nature is he given in trust.
But he casts it aside, covering it in dust.**

v. 8

**Devouring nature with fervour and intensity,
he becomes sluggish, trapped by his own density.**

V. 6 calls our attention to a key Quranic theme, namely the custodianship given to man over nature (*taskbir*). It is figured in such passages as Q 22:65, *Hast thou not considered that God has made whatsoever is on the earth subservient unto you?*; and Q 31:20, *Have you not considered that God has made whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth subservient unto you and has poured His blessings upon you, both outwardly and inwardly?* That nature is subservient to man, and that he is its **custodian**, has never been understood to mean that he can or should exploit it to no end, and for his own selfish purposes. In the instances in Islamic history when the true nature of man's custodianship over nature was lost upon him, the Muslims did not remain silent. This is best-evidenced in the historically influential

²⁹ Nasr, *The Pilgrimage of Life and the Wisdom of Rumi* (Oakton, VA: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 2007), 43 (the entire poem runs from pp. 41-43). See also pp. 44-45 of the same volume for another profound, season-centered poem entitled "Autumn is the Spring of the Gnostics."

tenth-century text by the fraternity of philosophers and mystics known as the Ikhwan al-Safa' (Brethren of Purity). Surely one of the earliest treatises on animal rights, the Brethren of Purity give a creative account of a lengthy complaint launched by members of the animal kingdom against human beings. Here, the human claim to superiority over other animals is called into question, as human beings are taken to task for disrupting the correct balance between the human and animal kingdoms on account of the human mistreatment of animals.³⁰

The meaning behind the reference to nature becoming obscure is an allusion to the environmental crisis in all of its dimensions.³¹ Man, who is the custodian of nature, has become as obscure as the very environment which houses him, and this because the balance and equilibrium with his natural surroundings have been thrown off, thanks to his own actions. Q 30:41 alludes to this very phenomenon: *Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of that which men's hands have earned, so that He may let them taste some of that which they have done, that haply they might return.*³² Yet this verse also implies a sense of hope as it seems to indicate that if people are given a small window into the kinds of catastrophes against nature that they themselves have initiated, it is possible that they will take heed and change their ways.

³⁰ For a translation of this work, see *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn*, trans. Lenn Goodman and Richard McGregor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). This work was available in Hebrew and Latin as early as the fourteenth century. A wonderful children's version of the Hebrew adaption of the tale is now available: Alexis York Lumbard, *When the Animals Saved the Earth: An Eco-Fable* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2015).

³¹ That I understand the environmental crisis as a primarily spiritual problem should be clear by this point. In doing so I follow Nasr's ground-breaking book, reprinted from its 1968 original as *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International, 1997). See also his *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), chs. 8-9 and *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For a recent contribution which also draws on Nasr's work, see Munjed Murad's excellent study, "Inner and Outer Nature: An Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," *Islam & Science* 10, no. 2 (2012): 117-137. A fine anthology of spiritual views on nature and the environment can be found in Camille Helminski (ed.), *The Book of Nature: A Sourcebook of Spiritual Perspectives on Nature and the Environment* (Watsonville, CA: The Book Foundation, 2006).

³² Consider also the question asked to God by the angels when He announced to them that He will create man: "Will Thou place therein one who will work corruption therein, and shed blood ...?" (Q 2:30). We will return to this point in the commentary upon v. 10, when we discuss the relationship between human freedom and the responsibility placed upon man's shoulders by God.

One of the surest ways humans can begin to rectify their distance from and obscure relationship with nature is by first coming to understand themselves. This will only happen when they awaken from their state of being **blind** and then read **the signs on the horizons, and deep within**. The second hemistich of **v. 6** directly alludes to a well-known Quranic verse which sets up the basic picture of the man-nature relationship: *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth* (Q 41:53).³³ Thus, the more one comes to know himself, the more he comes to know the book of nature, namely the cosmos. And the more he comes to know the book of nature, the more he comes to know himself.

At the same time, if one remains ignorant of his true state, if he consumes nature by **devouring it with fervour and intensity**, his soul will remain distant from God. In Islamic metaphysical teachings, the closer one is to the transcendent source, the more characterized he is by luminosity, subtlety, and “spirituality.” On the other hand, the further one is from the transcendent source, the more he is characterized by darkness, **density**, and “materiality.” This central idea is summarized by William Chittick as follows:

Muslim cosmologists see the universe as bi-directional, eternally coming forth from the Real and eternally receding back into the Real. It is at once centrifugal and centripetal. The Real is Absolute, Infinite, and Unchanging, and everything else is moving, altering, and transmuting. All movement is either toward the Real or away from it. The direction of movement is judged in terms of the increasing or decreasing intensity of the signs and traces of the Real that appear in things.³⁴

That is to say, the more realized one becomes in the signs that lead back to God, the more intense is his awareness in accordance with his ascent in the levels of being, which is graded by nature, proceeding from most intense and undifferentiated to least intense and most differentiated. The further one falls away from God’s signs, the less aware he becomes on the scale of being. Put differently, the more dense he becomes, the more “heavy” his nature and the less likely he is to participate in higher

³³ See also Q 51:20–21: *Upon the earth are signs for those possessing certainty, and within your souls. Do you not then behold?*

³⁴ Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 141.

grades of awareness. These points are alluded to in the very title of this poem, *Islam and the Density of Man*, which is a play on the title of the late Gai Eaton's famous book, *Islam and the Destiny of Man*.³⁵ That is, we are confronted with a choice between *Islam*—submission to God, and hence to the realization of God's signs in ourselves and the natural order—or *density*, and hence the failure to realize God's signs in ourselves and in the natural order.

To enter into this state of Islam a third book must be brought into the discussion, namely the Quran. In Sufi metaphysics, the Quran is understood to be the “book of being”³⁶ on the logic that whatever is contained in the cosmos is also contained in the Quran. In the verse from Q 41:53 just cited, the word for “signs” is *ayat* (pl. of *aya*). What is astounding is that this is the very same word used for the “verses” of the Quran. That is, the passages in the Quran, organized into over 6200 units or verses, are referred to by the Quran itself and the Islamic tradition as “signs”—namely God's signs. So, the signs that are found in the revealed book (the Quran) are also to be found in the book of nature and the book of the self.

This correspondence between the three great books neatly ties into the points made in v. 1 and v. 5 to the effect that the cosmos is the result of the cosmogonic acts of writing and speech respectively. Here is how the Persian sage Mahmud Shabistari introduces this same idea in his poem *The Rosegarden of Mystery (Gulshan-i raz)*:

When a person's soul receives God's self-disclosure
he sees the whole cosmos as the Book of the Real.
Accidents are vowel marks, the substances letters,
and the levels of being like verses and stops.
Each of the worlds is like a specific chapter,
One like the *Fatiba*, another like *Ikblas*.³⁷

³⁵ Gai Eaton, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

³⁶ See the discussion in Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, ch. 1.

³⁷ Cited, with slight modifications, from Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 227–228. *Fatiba* and *Ikblas* refer to chapters 1 and 112 of the Quran respectively. See also the words of 'Aziz al-Din Nasafi: “When God created the existent things, He called this the “cosmos,” since the existent things are a mark of His existence and His knowledge, will, and power.... The existent things are in one respect a mark, and in another respect a writing. In respect of being a writing, God called the cosmos a “book.” Then He said, “Whoever reads this book will recognize Me and My knowledge, will, and power”” (cited in Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 45).

Since the self “in here” and the cosmos “out there” are two sides of the same coin, if man harms what is out there he is really harming himself. The key is thus contained in becoming literate such that one can properly read all three books. When this happens, the book of nature will not be cast **aside** and covered **in dust**, thereby safeguarding man and the cosmos at large. This is tantamount to saying that, so long as man keeps his end of the bargain as the custodian of nature, there is hope that things can get relatively better. This custodianship or **trust** conferred upon people derives from Q 33:72: *Truly We offered the Trust unto the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were wary of it—yet man bore it; truly he has proved himself an ignorant wrongdoer.*³⁸ We shall shortly return to this point, when we treat the reason behind man’s custodianship over nature in greater detail.

*

v. 9

**Alas! If man lives his days, content to consume,
how will he the divine qualities assume?**

v. 10

**As for God’s vicegerent, with soul subtle and pure,
he emerges from this quagmire, heralding the cure.**

v. 11

**Looking upon nature with crystal clarity,
he dissolves both sides of a false polarity.**

v. 12

**Since subject and object, I and thou are but illusion,
he rends the veil of forms, escaping all confusion.**

³⁸ Although we will only be considering the Trust here insofar as it relates to man’s being the vicegerent of God (see the commentary on **v. 10**), the Trust is often associated with the primordial Covenant mentioned in Q 7:172. For the relationship between the Trust and the Covenant specifically, see Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 43–53.

It has already been seen that man is the custodian of nature. But why was this trust placed upon his shoulders? The answer is alluded to in **v. 10**, which speaks of **God's vicegerent**. In Q 2:30, God tells the angels that He will place a vicegerent (*khalifa*) on the earth.³⁹ A vicegerent is technically someone who stands in place of another, carrying out the function that the latter has assigned to him. Thus, on earth, man is God's representative, meaning he is to carry out the charge and duty of God's will. Rashid al-Din Maybudi explains that, when God announced His will to the angels concerning Adam,

He was laying the foundation of Adam's exaltation and tremendousness. He was not asking for help, but spreading the carpet of Adam's dignity. He was saying, "The ruling property of My severity has acted. I have commanded the pen of generosity to write out a script from the beginning of the world's ledger to its end. This resolution is written for the inhabitants of both worlds, from the top of the Throne to the bottom of the Carpet: 'The dust-dwelling Adam is granted chieftainship over all the empires. His exalted breast will be bright with the light of recognition. In him the subtleties of My generosity and the artifacts of My bounteousness will become apparent.'"⁴⁰

This passage speaks of Adam's dignity, which seems to allude to Q 17:70, *We have indeed honored the Children of Adam*. Maybudi also emphasizes here that God's announcing man as His vicegerent signals a great responsibility for him as he essentially stands as the pontiff between heaven and earth.⁴¹ Yet if the treatment of nature today is any measure of man's success in being God's vicegerent on earth, then he is certainly doing a very poor job. This is why any talk in Islamic thought of man as God's vicegerent really refers to man as the *potential*

³⁹ See also Q 6:165 and Q 35:39.

⁴⁰ Cited in Chittick, *Divine Love*, 56.

⁴¹ On the concept of man as the pontiff between Heaven and earth, see Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by William Chittick (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), ch. 17.

vicegerent of God on earth.⁴²

How, then, does one realize this vicegerency? As v. 9 indicates, it has everything to do with the assumption of **divine qualities**. This statement is in accordance with the famous injunction (commonly ascribed to the Prophet) to “Take on the character traits of God” (*takballaqu bi-akblaq Allah*). As Ibn ‘Arabi and others have seen it, the goal of human life is “theosis” or becoming God-like (*al-tashabbu bi'l-bari*). Every virtue that a human being can take on is only a possibility because that virtue already belongs to God in its full actuality and goodness. Thus, human beings can, to the measure allowed by the human condition, only be merciful in imitation of the All-Merciful (*al-rabman*), loving in imitation of the Lover (*al-wadud*), etc. This teaching has some very important implications for the ontological (and hence objective) roots of ethical categories, but the main point to come away with here is that the Sufis of the past have seen the human project as a totally worthwhile one only insofar as man attempts to conform to the divine Norm.

As for “where” these qualities are, the sages tell us that they are already contained within man, in accordance with the saying of the Prophet (which echoes Genesis 1:27), “God created Adam in His form” (*kbalaga Allah Adam ‘ala suratibi*).⁴³ One key insight to be gleaned from this teaching in the context of man’s relationship to nature is that whereas in man the divine names are undifferentiated, in the cosmic order, which discloses God qua manifestation, they are also to be found, but in a differentiated manner.⁴⁴

Thus, if man is only **content to consume**, then his act of squandering

⁴² The following statement is most apt in this context: “The Koranic message then is clear: Man can be the vicegerent of God, ruling over creation on his behalf, only on the condition of submitting his own will to God’s will. If man fails to surrender to God’s guidance as transmitted by the prophets, he will not be able to function as a true vicegerent. Instead of establishing peace and equilibrium, he will work corruption. More specifically, the role of Islam is precisely to establish peace and equilibrium between heaven and earth with a view toward man’s ultimate good. Given the hierarchical nature of reality, it is only natural that peace with the Surrounders of our first and our last environment is a prerequisite for peace with our immediate environment. That is to say, we cannot live in harmony with the cosmos until we live in harmony with God. Man as God’s vicegerent can only rule the subjects that have been entrusted to him on the condition that he accept God’s rule over himself. But if he rebels against God, the creatures will rebel against him. This explains why contemporary man is on the verge of being destroyed by the very creatures entrusted to his care” (Chittick, *SLH*, 298–297).

⁴³ For this statement, see Chittick, *SPK*, 399–400, n. 4

⁴⁴ Chittick, *SPK*, 17.

his own self and the natural environment will result in his inability to actualize the divine qualities potentially contained within himself and within nature, resulting in an even greater divide between himself and the natural order. It can indeed be asked why human beings have the potential to actually harm nature. Why not, in other words, simply be created in such a way that this harmonious balance would always exist and everyone could then be God's vicegerent on earth? The answer has to do with God's divine qualities that are already configured in man. Since one of God's qualities is will, human beings, who derive their positive qualities from God's positive qualities, must have the real freedom to choose things for themselves. As Chittick puts it, "[O]nly a being created in God's image could have the ability to deny Him. By sharing in God's knowledge and free will, man can set himself up as a little god."⁴⁵ What results in seeing oneself as "a little god" is an ever-increasing view of things in which **subject and object** are distinct. Such a view can result in a highly reified and overly-scientized vision of things that pushes the world into the realm of pure exigency and human control, thus further widening the gap between subject and object. This then naturally results in an inconsequentialist view of nature whereby the harm done to the object "out there" is not seen as in any way affecting the subject "in here."

If man takes on the divine qualities he will simply be bidding his own nature; to the extent that this happens, the world of nature (being the same as his self) will also be brought into harmony with the divine order. The **quagmire** from which God's true representative **emerges** is of course the aforementioned stark, dualistic conception of nature. The **cure** to which God's representative calls derives from his having actualized the divine qualities. This is the result of a sacred vision of the cosmos and one which is naturally punctuated by a proper, ritual-oriented view of nature. For, "a ritual always re-establishes balance with the cosmic order."⁴⁶

Such a person can then view **nature with crystal clarity**, since the subject-object dichotomy which typifies the human interaction with the natural world is nothing **but illusion**, characterized as are all things by

⁴⁵ Chittick, *SLH*, 294.

⁴⁶ Nasr, *Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, 35. See also the comments in the following paragraph which explain that the religious rites are essential for nature, which is "hungry for our prayers" because of the light and spiritual influence which comes from up above to down below by virtue of the function of pontifical man.

the veil of forms which surround them. For the self-realized person, the divine qualities to be found within the cosmos are brought about in an undifferentiated form, and this parallels the actualized undifferentiated form of the divine qualities that are already configured in his own soul. We can call this “sympathy” with nature, which denotes the mutual convergence of one with the other to the point that they are no longer on opposing ends of the spectrum, or two parts **of a false polarity**.

*

v. 13

**Yet in the mirror of forms he sees beauty divine,
for it reflects that Face beyond all space and time.**

v. 14

**That Face is his Face, through intimate with-ness.
Is God not of all things the supreme Witness?**

There is a saying of the Prophet to the effect that “The believer is the mirror of the believer.” This is normally understood to mean that what a Muslim sees of the good or bad in his brother is also a reflection of what is in himself. Yet, as Ibn ‘Arabi and others like to remind us, “believer” is also a name of God (*al-mu’min*). It was established earlier (see commentary on v. 4) that everything in the cosmos prostrates to God, meaning that everything in the cosmos is a believer. If the believer is a mirror of God, who is the Believer, then the cosmos and all that it contains is **a mirror of forms** in which God sees Himself.

The Prophet also said that “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” This explains why the cosmos is beautiful, because it is a mirror of **beauty divine**. The teaching that God’s **Face**—which is beautiful of course—is everywhere is to be found in Q 2:115: *To God belong the East and the West. Wheresoever you turn, there is the Face of God. God is All-Encompassing, Knowing.*⁴⁷ Since God’s Face is everywhere, it is reflected in the mirror of the cosmos, which is nothing but a display for

⁴⁷ See also Q 55:26-27: *All that is upon it passes away. And there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessed of Majesty and Bounty;* and Q 28:88: *There is no god but He! All things perish, save His Face. Judgment belongs to Him, and unto Him will you be returned.*

the traces of God's beauty. Having transcended the forms themselves (see commentary on v. 12), God's true vicegerent can see beyond them, moving with great ease from the symbol to the Symbolized (see v. 1) without negating the symbol as such. Rather, he sees the very Face of the Beloved *in* the symbol, which is **beyond all space and time**. Such a person becomes so enraptured by the beauty in the cosmos that all that he sees is God. Paraphrasing Ibn 'Arabi, Mulla Sadra frames the point in this way:

The entire cosmos is of the utmost beauty because it is a mirror for the Real. This is why the knowers become enraptured by it and the verifiers realize love for it. For He is the object of gaze in every eye, the beloved in every form of love, the object of worship in every act of worship, and the Final Goal in both the unseen and the seen. The entire cosmos prays to Him, praises Him, and glorifies Him.⁴⁸

Since such a person who sees through God cannot be described as a separate "he" over and against the cosmic order, **his Face** can be said to be **God's Face**. This station in Sufi texts is referred to by many names, amongst which are union (*jam'*), proximity (*qurb*), and **witness** (*ma'iyya*). Yet *who* is doing the witnessing at this stage? In order to answer this question, let us turn to Q 41:53, a part of which we had the opportunity to cite in our commentary upon v. 5. In its entirety, the verse reads as follows: *We shall show them Our signs upon the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the truth. Does it not suffice that thy Lord is Witness over all things?*⁴⁹ The last hemistich of v. 14 is a summary in a sense of the last lines of this Quranic verse—*Does it not suffice that thy Lord is Witness over all things?* As 'Ayn al-Qudat puts it, since there is only one being, there is only one ground of perception: "There is no more than one being, and that one being is God. Therefore, His perception is through Himself."⁵⁰ In the realm of cosmic manifestation, we can say that it is God Himself who sees Himself in the myriad forms of creation, as these forms act as loci for His own Self-seeing. God is thus sufficient as a witness since He

⁴⁸ Cited from Rustom, *Triumph of Mercy*, 82-83.

⁴⁹ See also Q 3:18: *God bears witness that there is no god but He*.

⁵⁰ Cited in Rustom, *Inrushes of the Heart: The Mystical Theology of 'Ayn al-Qudat* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming), chapter 7.

is **the supreme Witness of all things**, each of which in turn testifies to His oneness and beauty.⁵¹

The person whose Face is now God's Face thus beholds God in everything. The implications of such a person being God's vicegerent here become clear: such an individual will not harm nature since it is all *witnessed* as sacred to him, reflecting as it does his own Face, which is nothing other than the divine Face in whose contemplation he is annihilated and in which he subsists. There is thus nothing for him to aspire towards and no gain to receive from nature, since nature itself is God's gift to him, and thereby presents him with all that he loves.

We can do no better than to close with a saying of Ibn 'Ata' Allah. Although framed in a different context, his statement very much applies to the discussion at hand: "He who knows the Real witnesses Him in everything. He who is annihilated by Him is absent from everything. And he who loves Him prefers nothing to Him."⁵²

⁵¹ God is thus His own greatest "proof." For a lucid exposition of this point, which was first made by Ibn Sina, see Ibrahim Kalin, *Mulla Sadra* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 76.

⁵² Cited, with some modifications, from Ibn 'Ata' Allah, *The Book of Wisdom*, translated by Victor Danner (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 88.