

Perceiving Nature

Rūmī on Human Purpose and Cosmic Prayer

Munjed M. Murad

All particles of the world in their inwardness,
addressing you, say all day and night:
“We have hearing and sight and are happy;
but with you, O strangers, we are mute.”¹



1 Introduction

How do we perceive the natural world?² According to the famous Persian Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) the answer to this question tells us not only

- 1 Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Mathnawī-yi maʿnawī*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson, iii, Tehran: Intishārāt-i Amīr Kabīr, 1960, 1019–1024 (= book 3, verses 1019–1024). Citations from the *Mathnawī* refer to Nicholson’s edition and translations for the most part have been taken, with occasional slight modifications, from Aavani, Gholamreza, *Rumi: A philosophical study*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2016, 73, 376, which is often based on Nicholson’s translation. When a translator is not identified, the translations are my own.
- 2 This chapter is based upon a presentation that I delivered at the “Green Theology” conference that was hosted by Cambridge Muslim College, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, University of St Andrews, and St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological Institute at Trinity Hall of Cambridge University in March of 2019—although, as I mentioned in that conference, Rūmī is not a “theologian” in that he is not a *mutakallīm* but a gnostic, a metaphysician, or an *ʿarīf bi-Llāh* (lit. “knower through God”). This present chapter is a revised and corrected version of one that bears the same title and that was published in Lejla Demiri, Mujaddad Zaman, and Tim Winter (eds.), *Green theology: Embracing 21st-century Muslim and Christian discourses on ecology*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024. The main correction that I have made, among other edits, is to remove mention of love as being an esoteric matter and as being largely undetectable in human beings. Rather, love is a universal reality that *is* detectable in human beings and is not only an esoteric matter. I am grateful to the editors of *Green theology* and to the editors of the present Festschrift. I am also grateful to Dr. Nicholas Boylston for his invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

something about nature but also something about our own humanity. A crucial component of his thought on this matter centers upon the tension between, on the one hand, the scriptural portrayal of all of nature as worshipping God and, on the other hand, the human phenomenological experience of the inanimate parts of the natural world as being lifeless. The Quran portrays creation as praising God, and the Prophetic biography includes episodes of non-human creatures—including stones—venerating the Prophet.³ Both imply the consciousness of non-human creatures. Most human beings, however, seem not to perceive stones as alive, let alone as conscious and as being in pious devotion. Rūmī offers a reconciliation of this tension in his treatment of human nature, informing us implicitly that the fact that most human beings do not see the inner life of the inanimate in nature is telling of the nature of humanity, of the world outside of humanity, and of spiritual matters.

Despite the popularity of Rūmī and of the study of nature separately, the environmental promise of his thought has remained largely unexamined.⁴ A study of both Rūmī's vision of the cosmos and its implied ethical consequences can supply us with an example of the promise of religious studies for what has been called recently "the environmental humanities," as well as the humanities altogether, and for the overall response to the global environmental crisis. The continuity of tradition, which is not only an inheritance but a living reality that responds to each generation's problems, and the corporeal integrity of the natural world depend on humanity's ability to re-discover and re-formulate timeless traditional principles in light of this crisis.

3 See, for example, Schimmel, Annemarie, *And Muhammad is His messenger: The veneration of the Prophet in Islamic piety*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, 67–80. The *ḥadīth* literature, moreover, even makes mention of eschatological redress for animals who had been wronged in this life. See Winter, Timothy, "Islam and the problem of evil," in Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to the problem of evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 236–237. I turn to the Quranic portrayal of creation's worship below.

4 The few exceptions include Mushayyadī, Jalīl and Sasan Zand Muqaddam, "Hamchū shīrī dar miyān-i naqsh-i gāw (ti'ufānīhā dar āthār-i mawlawī)," in *Adābiyyāt-i Irfānī* 2.4 (2016), 133–158; Murad, Munjed M., *A tale of two trees: Unveiling the sacred life of nature in Islamic and Christian traditions*, Cambridge (ThD Diss.): Harvard University, 2022; Clarke, L., "The universe alive: Nature in the *Masnawi* of Jalal al-Din Rumi," in Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (eds.), *Islam and ecology: A bestowed trust*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 39–65. Despite the strengths of this last work's treatment of its topic, I disagree that, concerning "the ecological movement today," "we are no longer in a position to adopt thirteenth-century metaphysics" (Clarke, "The universe alive" 61). Rather, I agree with Seyyed Hossein Nasr who asserts that the environmental crisis cannot be resolved except through recourse to traditional metaphysics, which is timeless in its principles. See Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Man and nature: The spiritual crisis of modern man*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997.

With respect to the Anthropocene—one name for the contemporary geological age that invokes the modern environmental crisis and humanity's influence on the world through it—contemporary religious thinkers have been delving into the resources of their traditions for inspiration and guidance on how to move forward. It has been said even that the environmental crisis is itself a result of movement away from religion. This observation was made in the 1960s by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose voice was apparently the first to posit that the environmental crisis is rooted in a spiritual crisis, marking the start of the religious response to the global environmental crisis.⁵ Nasr's thesis is that the intellectual and civilizational secularism of modernism stripped humanity of its view of the spiritual reality of both its own self and its natural environment, thereby desacralizing to the human mind both humanity and the cosmos. Without full recourse to a sacred view of the cosmos, humanity's relationship with nature has become profane and violent. Nasr has called for a return to traditional sciences either to replace modern science or to address what the latter has not addressed.⁶ In an attempt to understand views of the natural world that account for more than just the corporeality of nature, the following section will turn to Rūmī's view of the world.

2 The Cosmos in Love and Prayer

In his famous *Mathnawī-yi ma'nawī* (*Spiritual Couplets*), Rūmī describes the inanimate world not as being lifeless matter but as being in love and in prayer.⁷

5 Nasr first did this in a series of lectures, namely the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago in May of 1966, the transcripts of which were published in his book *The encounter of man and nature*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1968, and later re-published as *Man and nature*. See also Quadir, Tarik M., *Traditional Islamic environmentalism: The vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2013; Abu Sayem, Md., *Religion and ecological crisis: Christian and Muslim perspectives from John B. Cobb and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, New York: Routledge, 2023. In the 1940s, Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler had lectured on not exactly the same but a relevant problem—the inherently destructive nature of materialist philosophy and of particular kinds of technology—but I have not found a diagnosis of the environmental crisis in particular (as being a spiritual malaise at its roots) that precedes Nasr's aforementioned lectures. Dessler, Rabbi Eliyahu E., "The destructive philosophy of materialism," in Aryeh Carmell (ed. and trans.), *Strive for truth!*, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1989, 143–154.

6 See, for example, Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Man and nature; Religion and the order of nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; "The ecological problem in the light of Sufism: The conquest of nature and the teachings of Eastern science," in Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Sufi essays*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997, 152–163; "Ours is not a dead universe," in *Parabola* 29.2 (2004), 6–13; *The need for a sacred science*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

7 Aavani, *Rumi* 69–82, 131–133; Chittick, William C., *The Sufi path of love: The spiritual teach-*

He has explained that for animals the force that animates creatures towards their food, at least from one perspective, is the love between the consumer and the consumed.⁸ But love is present in much more than just animals. The sky and the earth are in love with each other and are continuously “tasting (delight) from one another.”⁹ Similarly, night and day love each other and chase constantly after each other.¹⁰ Moreover, each creature is in love with and glorifies God, who is Absolute Perfection. This love is the very force that animates the universe.

Know that the revolution of the heavens is from the waves of Love. Were it not for Love the world would become frozen (inanimate). ... Each and every particle, loving that Perfection, is hastening upward like a sapling. “(They) glorify God” is their hastening.¹¹ They are purifying the body for the sake of the Spirit.¹²

ings of Rumi, Albany: SUNY Press, 1983, 198–200; Murad, *A tale* 200–262. In his discussion of the cosmos Rūmī focuses on the inanimate. One likely explanation for this is that the life and consciousness of the inanimate necessarily implies the life of the animate. If a rock can be said to be alive and conscious, then surely a bird can too.

- 8 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* v, 2012–2014. In Rūmī’s perspectivist poetry, which explains the multivalence of reality through different and often apparently conflicting yet ultimately complementary perspectives, the relationship between the consumer and the consumed can also be explained through a paradigm of fear, in which creatures evade being consumed. An example of Rūmī’s treatment of this would be his fable of animals of prey attempting to convince a lion not to eat them. Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, vss. 900–1201. For more on perspectivism in Persian Sufi literature, see Boylston, Nicholas John, *Writing the kaleidoscope of reality: The significance of diversity in the 6th/12th century Persian metaphysical literature of Sanā’ī, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and ‘Aṭṭār*, Washington, D.C. (PhD Diss.): Georgetown University, 2017.
- 9 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iii, 4412. I take this as a reference to rain and evaporation, among other things within the verse’s multivalence. Translation taken from Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *The Mathnawī of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, Cambridge: The E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2015.
- 10 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* vi, 2675–2678.
- 11 *Sabbāḥa li-llāh*, translated here as “(They) glorify God,” are the first words of several Quranic verses. Their use here discloses that this poem is a commentary on such verses as: “What is in the heavens and the earth glorify God, and He is the Mighty, the Wise” (Q 57:1). For Islamic explanations of the consciousness of creatures see Rustom, Mohammed, “The great chain of consciousness: Do all things possess awareness?,” in *Renovatio* 1.1 (2017), 49–60; Murad, *A tale* 210–235. See also the following which treats the topic briefly while expounding interpretations of the Quranic affirmation of different kinds of animals and birds as being communities (*umam*) like humanity’s. Winter, Timothy, “Nations like yourselves’: Some Muslim debates over Qur’an 6:38,” in Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religion and animal ethics*, New York: Routledge, 2019, 163–172. See also Faruque, Muhammad U., “Islam, nature and climate change,” in *Origins* 50.1 (2020), 13–15.
- 12 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* v, 3853–3859.

It is not surprising that Rūmī associates the love of God with the worship of God. That God is identified with “Perfection” means that all that can be loved and all that can be worshipped is within God, Who, by virtue of His “Perfection” lacks nothing. Moreover, within a religious and devotional context, to love God is to worship Him.

In Rūmī’s Quranic exegesis, love is the force that animates the cosmos. Many, however, do not perceive that all creatures are in love with and worship God. Most people do not see a stone praying nor perceive a seed as being in love. In response, Rūmī treats the tension between the Islamic scriptural portrayal of nature as worshipping God on the one hand, and the phenomenological experience of the apparent lifelessness of the inanimate in nature on the other.

Arguably, the most salient portrayal of the natural world in the Quran—aside from its createdness and dependence on God—is of a world worshipping God. For example:

The seven heavens and the earth, and whosoever is within them, glorify Him. And there is not a thing save that it glorifies with His Praise, but thou dost not understand their glorification. Indeed, He is Clement, Forgiving (Q 17:44).

And the stars and the trees prostrate (Q 55:6).

Dost thou not see that God is glorified by whosoever is in the heavens and the earth, and by the birds in formation? Each has learned its prayer and its glorification, and God is knowledgeable of that which they do (Q 24:41).¹³

The Quran teaches that everything within the heavens and the earth glorifies God and has its own prayer. Whereas the literal meaning of the verses might seem evident, Rūmī mentions that some would posit that it is the *sight* of natural phenomena that *inspires* the pious to praise God, but not that natural

13 Quranic translations here have been taken from Nasr, Seyyed Hossein et al. (eds.), *The study Quran: A new translation and commentary*, New York: HarperOne, 2015. Perhaps it is worth noting that, although appearing much more frequently in the Quran, creation’s worship of God is also a Biblical theme, especially in the Psalms, where nature is exhorted to praise God in song. In Psalm 66, for example: “Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: Sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious. ... All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing thy name” (Ps. 66:1–4). Present translations of Biblical verses have been taken from the King James Version, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979.

phenomena themselves praise God. He names the Muʿtazilites in particular as a group that holds this perspective.¹⁴

In his arguments for the presence of love within nature, Rūmī essentially builds on the fact that, most often, one cannot perceive nor deduce who within a room of strangers is in love and who is not.

Wolf, bear, and lion know what love is. He who is blind to love is inferior to a dog. If the dog had not a vein of love, how could the dog of the cave seek to win the heart (of the sleepers of the cave)? There are also of its kind, dog-like in form, in the world but not celebrated.¹⁵ You have not smelled the heart in your own kind; how are you to smell the heart of wolf and sheep?¹⁶

In other words, if we cannot discern love in fellow human beings, we should not be surprised by the fact that we cannot discern love in other species. Rūmī makes a similar point for perceiving the worship of natural phenomena. Despite not being able to perceive the inner reality of the prayers of people across different religious denominations, many deny the validity of others' prayers because of differences in religious affiliations. If we cannot perceive properly the worship of others who speak, then the fact that we cannot recognize the worship of what appears to be mute, is surely not grounds for denying the possibility that they worship.

Each glorifies Thee in a different fashion,
and that one is unaware of the state of this one.
Man disbelieves in the glorification uttered by inanimate things,
but those inanimate things are masters in performing worship.
Nay, the two-and-seventy sects, every one,
are unaware of each other and in great doubt.
Since two speakers have no knowledge of each other's state,
how will it be with wall and door?¹⁷

14 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iii, 1020–1029.

15 Not only does the dog of the cave love the sleepers, but so too do many dogs in the world love those whom they protect.

16 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* v, 2008–2011. I have taken “to win the heart” from Nicholson's translation for rendering *bajustī* ... *qalb-rā*.

17 In Rūmī's perception of the world, not only does the natural environment worship God, but so too does the humanly made environment, since *all* things in existence worship God. The scope of this chapter, however, has been limited to the natural world, so I do not focus my attention here on humanly made objects. Suffice it to say, however, that if humanly

Since I am heedless of the glorification uttered by one who speaks,
how should my heart know the glorification of that which is mute?¹⁸

Moreover, Rūmī describes miracles as being the result of natural phenomena receiving commands to act a certain way and complying, revealing not only the power of God and the credibility of prophets, but also the consciousness of natural phenomena. That the sea split for Moses is proof of the sea's consciousness since it responded to God's command to split. The same is said for the fire that cooled down for Abraham, the iron that bent for David, and so on.¹⁹

Not only are miracles a sign of the consciousness of natural phenomena, but so too is the ordinary in nature. Rūmī makes this point in explaining the *quotidian* works of natural phenomena, all of which imply the presence of intelligent agents: "Therefore regard earth and heaven as endowed with intelligence, since they do the work of intelligent beings."²⁰ Interestingly, we find a Christian parallel in the writings of the early exegete Origen of Alexandria who uses the same logic in his commentary on the Biblically narrated command to the stars in the Book of Isaiah: "I have given precepts to the stars" (Isa. 45:12). Origen writes that the fact that stars can receive commands means that the stars have intelligence.²¹ The whole of nature's works—both the miraculous and the quotidian—exhibits consciousness. In the very present moment, creation's orbiting planets, burning fires, flying birds, hunting wolves, and raining clouds are evidently conscious.

3 Rūmī's Spiritual Epistemology

At the heart of Rūmī's epistemology, as we shall see, lies the contrast between worldliness and spirituality—the former being unfavorable and the latter favorable. Against this worldliness, Rūmī does not speak necessarily of a kind of asceticism akin to monasticism, but rather of being detached inwardly from

made objects such as "wall and door" glorify God, then surely it is not unimaginable that so too do stones and mountains, let alone animals.

18 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iii, 1496–1500; Aavani, *Rumi* 69–70, 367.

19 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* v, 1008–1019.

20 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iii, 4411.

21 Origen, *On first principles: Being Koetschau's text of the De principiis translated into English, together with an introduction and notes*, trans. George W. Butterworth, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973, 61. Of course, there is no suggestion here of an Origenist influence on Rūmī. Rather, both appear to be describing the same horizon.

the world and bound to the Divine. Neither does this process deny love for the world; rather, it is meant to inspire one towards a love that is oriented spiritually, through which one can love the world but through the Divine—instead of harboring a love that is worldly and independent of the spiritual. Arguably, the primary purpose of Rūmī's spiritual teachings concerning the world is to turn one away from loving the self and the world in and of themselves to loving God in and of Himself, at which point one can truly love the cosmos, which comes from God and is itself in love with Him. Another Persian Sufi poet, Sa'dī (d. ca. 690/1291), recites in his *Gulistān*: "I am joyous in the world for the world is joyous through Him; I am in love with the cosmos for the cosmos comes from Him."²²

In order to understand the illusory lifelessness of so many inanimate things in nature, we must underscore Rūmī's association of worldliness with death and of spirituality with life. The more worldly one is, the less spiritual that person is and so also the less alive. One's inclination towards worldliness and away from spirituality, therefore, is an inclination towards death and away from life itself. This inclination, moreover, blinds one to the Spirit, which reveals itself to only those who have turned to it, in the same sense arguably of the Biblical portrayal of God as Jealous: He does not accept that one worship any other.²³ But for exceptions that are divinely willed, the unveiling of spiritual realities is for only those initiated into the ways of the Spirit.

All particles of the world in their inwardness,
addressing you, say all day and night:
"We have hearing and sight and are happy,
but with you, O strangers, we are mute."
For as much as ye are going (inclined) toward inanimateness,
how shall ye become familiar
with the spiritual life of inanimate beings?
Go forth from inanimateness into the world of spirit,
hearken to the commotion of the particles of the world.²⁴

With Rūmī's verses in mind, we can say that the etymology of the word "inanimate"—*in* ("not") and *animus* ("life" or "soul")—describes the *appearance*

22 Cited in Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Can we live in harmony with nature?," in *Renovatio* 3:1 (2019), 76.

23 "For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Ex. 34:14). Of course, this is also an Islamic theme, and not only in Rūmī's poetry.

24 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iii, 1019–1024; Aavani, *Rumi* 73, 367.

of inanimate creatures, that is, that they appear to be dead, but not that they are dead spiritually. The spiritual prayers of creatures are pronounced in spiritual tongue; therefore, they cannot be heard normally except through spiritual ears.²⁵ One cannot use corporeal ears to hear what is pronounced on a spiritual tongue; rather, one is obliged to activate spiritual faculties in order to perceive spiritual prayers. Rūmī makes reference to a spiritual eye (*chashm-i jān*) and to a spiritual ear (*gūsh-i jān*), as well as to the (spiritual) heart. Explaining the process of intellection—with rootedness in the Quranic association of the heart with intellection (e.g., Q 6:25)—Sufi epistemological frameworks, including Rūmī's, identify the spiritual heart as the central spiritual and intellectual organ.²⁶ He notes further:

The spiritual ear and spiritual eye are other than this sense-perception; the ear of reason and the ear of opinion are destitute of this (inspiration).²⁷

The speech of water, the speech of earth, and the speech of mud are apprehended by the senses of them that have hearts.²⁸

In Rūmī's spiritual epistemology, in order to perceive the spiritual realities of nature, we must purify the heart—the intellectual faculty—which could then see things as they really are. This intellectual faculty is not identical to “reason,” with which most human beings think; rather, the intellect encompasses reason. Rūmī distinguishes between “partial intellect” (*‘aql-i juz’ī*) and “universal intellect” (*‘aql-i kullī*).²⁹

How then do we perceive the natural world? In Rūmī's perspective, the fact that we consider rocks to be thoroughly inanimate things that have no sign of life tells us that we ourselves are somewhat void of the spiritual life that animates. Prior to hearing the prayers of nature and to witnessing the joyous love of nature for God, we ourselves must change, moving from worldliness to spirituality until we have rejected the world as lover and turned towards the Divine Beloved. Otherwise, we ourselves harbor a kind of unfavorable death that taints our view of the world, coloring it dead.

²⁵ This, moreover, seems to account for the second half of Q 17:44, which I have quoted above.

²⁶ Chittick, William C., *The Sufi doctrine of Rumi*, illustrated ed., Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005, 86–95; Rustom, Mohammed, “The metaphysics of the heart in the Sufi doctrine of Rumi,” in *Studies in Religion* 37.1 (2008), 3–14.

²⁷ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* i, 1462; Aavani, *Rumi* 78.

²⁸ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* i, 3279; Aavani, *Rumi* 76.

²⁹ See Aavani, *Rumi* 80–81, 165–192; Chittick, *The Sufi path of love* 35–37, 65–68.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that, as evinced by the *Mathnawī*'s exordium and the centrality of love in Rūmī's poetry, the spiritual goal for Rūmī is not the perception of the spiritual life of the inanimate in nature. Rather, it is the mystical return to the Beloved. To hear a tree's prayers is more of an effect of the spiritual life, not its goal.

Moreover, that some who are not spiritual sojourners have experiences of the spiritual life of nature is itself an exception made possible through Divine Omnipotence—God can unveil whatever to whomever. Nonetheless, in this epistemology, spiritual maturity is normally a central condition for intellectual perception, and so those who know God are also those who truly know the world, thereby witnessing, for example, a tree's prayers, a stone's invocation, and the love of all cosmic beings for God's Perfection.³⁰ In other words, those who are realized spiritually are able to see nature as she really is, alive and worshipping. What appears to be dead to profane eyes is alive contrarily in the perceptive eyes of the saintly.

In Rūmī's framework, as well as in Sufi and more generally other Islamic frameworks, the Prophet is the personification of spiritual capability who therefore sees reality as it is. Rūmī's reference to the Prophet's vision of the natural world is meant to be taken as a window into the objective reality of nature. In the Prophetic sight, the world is alive, in love, and in prayer. When the gnostic Sufi is graced with similitude of such vision, the illusion of lifelessness in the inanimate vanishes and makes way for the reality of spiritual (i.e., true) life.

And to the Prophet this world is continuous
 In praising God yet to us it looks heedless:
 To him this world is full of love and justice;
 To ordinary men it's dead and lifeless.
 He sees the hills and valleys moving round;
 He hears wise words from bricks and from the ground;
 They are all dead and limited to most;
 I've never seen a stranger veil exposed.³¹

30 For more on Rūmī's epistemology, see Aavani, *Rumi* 165–191, 237–262.

31 Rūmī, *Mathnawī* iv, 3532–3535. The verse that follows continues this point while employing soteriological imagery: "To our eyes graves are all alike as well—God's friends see gardens next to pits of hell." Translation taken from Rumi, [Jalāl al-Dīn], *The Masnavi: Book four*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

4 Responding to the Environmental Crisis

In his defense of the spiritual reality of the natural environment Rūmī gives us an alternative view of the cosmos to those that have given birth to the global environmental crisis. I propose that this is a view worth considering in the academic response to it. His views are relevant not only to religious studies, but also to the environmental humanities, as well as to the preservation or re-discovery of traditional sciences that account for more than the corporeal in human encounters with the natural environment. In Rūmī's view of the universe, nature is not some kind of machine, as it is in the Cartesian paradigm, nor is it to be limited to its corporeality, which is an axiom of the modern scientific approach. Rather, the natural world is the congregation of worshippers and lovers who have not only instrumentalist value for human beings but also inherent spiritual value. They have value that is independent of humanity and dependent fully upon the Divine.³² To speak of nature as being alive, in love, and in prayer, is to speak of its spiritual reality and integrity. Rūmī gives us a means for perceiving this in non-human creatures, whether animal, plant, or mineral.

Nasr has argued that the environmental crisis began with a move in the human perception of nature, from nature being a "thou" to nature being an "it."³³ In this move, nature lost practically its inherent value in the eyes of humanity. Despite environmentalist outcries, quotidian modern life is built on an imbalanced destruction of nature which comes about as a result of a vision of nature as being thoroughly or primarily an "it." Of course, quotidian human life necessitates the consumption and therefore destruction of natural resources even in traditional societies, but to equate any modern city (New York City or Amman) with any traditional city in its consumption and destruction of nature is to lack a sense of proportion. Doing so also ignores the resilience of nature, which modernism has transgressed to the point of creating a global environmental crisis. To undo this, we are in need of a rediscovery of nature

32 Nonetheless, in Sufi metaphysics the state of the world is dependent on the presence of saintly human beings. Another famous Sufi metaphysician, Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240), explains in the first chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (*Ringstones of Wisdom*) that without *al-insān al-kāmil* (in technical translation: "the Perfect Man"), the world would perish. See Murad, Munjed M., "Vicegerency and nature: Ibn 'Arabī on humanity's existential protection of the world," in Mohammad Faghfoory and Katherine O'Brien (eds.), *Voices of three generations: Essays in honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2019, 299–314.

33 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Limits of growth and the environment," lecture, *Revival of the Islamic spirit*, Toronto, 27 December 2014.

through the sacred. It is the sacred alone that can affirm fully and objectively the spiritual value of non-human creatures. Rūmī's poetry—not fanciful and fictional but multivalent and metaphysical—contains the seeds for a framework that can do exactly that. So too do the metaphysical teachings of other sages within and outside of the Islamic tradition hold promise for better understanding what or who nature is.

The only way to recover and maintain any lasting relationship with an other as a “thou” rather than an “it” is through the encounter with the Divine “Thou.”³⁴ In Rūmī's framework, one must live spiritually in order to perceive the spiritual life of the world. He teaches a way of recognizing the “thou” in the encounter with the natural other, specifically through re-orienting oneself to the sacred, thereby fulfilling the human purpose and joining the cosmic worship of Divine Perfection.

It has been said that since human experience today is intertwined with religion and since the environmental crisis is itself intertwined with human experience, it is impossible to solve this crisis without considering religion.³⁵ In other words, religion is such a major force in human life that it has the capability to influence most human beings towards a return to global environmental balance. Rūmī's view of the world gives us one more reason to consider religious views of nature within religious studies, the environmental humanities, and elsewhere. Religions contain deep repositories of traditional wisdom that could enrich our relationship with the natural world today. Considering seriously Rūmī's view of reality can help us answer a question that I believe should be integral to the environmental humanities and to any lasting effort at solving the environmental crisis: “What, in relation to the natural environment, does it mean to be human?” The present study finds a promising answer in the *Mathnawī*'s call for an inward turn to the spiritual, which Rūmī associates with life, and away from worldliness, which he associates with death. In this movement, one realizes one's spiritual life and inner reality, as well as the spiritual life and inner reality of other beings, including the inanimate.

In Rūmī's analysis of the human condition—if one may dare to offer a summary of an extensive and multivalent treatment of a very large topic—the purpose of humanity is the spiritual realization of the human self. In realizing

34 Albeit in a different context, Martin Buber appears to make this point in his *I and thou*, New York: Touchstone, 1970.

35 See, for example, Jenkins, Willis, “Whose religion? Which ecology? Religious studies in the environmental humanities,” in Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 22–32.

one's true self, moreover, one perceives the true self of the so-called inanimate other, discovering thereby a universe of beings. Here, the human subject must transform itself before it can perceive a natural object properly. Rather than the conventional modern paradigm in which human beings try to force nature to conform to humanity's aggressive ways of living, Rūmī's framework is one in which human beings conform to the sacred, with which nature is in conformity already. Purity of soul is a necessary precondition to spiritual perception. What accounts for our misperception of a lively world's inanimate creatures as dead is that, in detaching ourselves from spiritual life, we orient ourselves away from life itself and towards death. Here, worldliness clouds vision of spiritual life—both one's own and others'—and only in the light of the sacred can one see things as they really are. In this light, the spiritually perceptive can see objectively and even empirically that the creatures of this world, even the apparently inanimate among them, are in their inner nature alive, religious, and in love.

Bibliography

- Aavani, Gholamreza, *Rumi: A philosophical study*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2016.
- Abu Sayem, Md., *Religion and ecological crisis: Christian and Muslim perspectives from John B. Cobb and Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, New York: Routledge, 2023.
- Boylston, Nicholas John, *Writing the kaleidoscope of reality: The significance of diversity in the 6th/12th century Persian metaphysical literature of Sanā'ī, 'Ayn al-Qudāt and Aṭṭār*, Washington, D.C. (PhD Diss.): Georgetown University, 2017.
- Buber, Martin, *I and thou*, New York: Touchstone, 1970.
- Dessler, Rabbi Eliyahu E., "The destructive philosophy of materialism," in Aryeh Carmell (ed. and trans.), *Strive for truth!*, Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1989, 143–156.
- Chittick, William C., *The Sufi path of love: The spiritual teachings of Rūmī*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1983.
- Chittick, William C., *The Sufi doctrine of Rūmī*, illustrated ed., Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005.
- Clarke, L., "The universe alive: Nature in the *Masnawi* of Jalal al-Din Rūmī," in Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (eds.), *Islam and ecology: A bestowed trust*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 39–65.
- Faruque, Muhammad U., "Islam, nature and climate change," in *Origins* 50.1 (2020), 13–15.
- Holy Bible: King James version*, Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1979.
- Jenkins, Willis, "Whose religion? Which ecology? Religious studies in the environmental humanities," in Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 22–32.

- Murad, Munjed M., "Vicegerency and nature: Ibn 'Arabī on humanity's existential protection of the world," in Mohammad Faghfoory and Katherine O'Brien (eds.), *Voices of three generations: Essays in honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2019, 299–314.
- Murad, Munjed M., *A tale of two trees: Unveiling the sacred life of nature in Islamic and Christian traditions*, Cambridge (ThD Diss.): Harvard University, 2022.
- Mushayyadī, Jalil and Sasan Zand Muqaddam, "Hamchū shīrī dar miyān-i naqsh-i gāw (ti'ufānīhā dar āthār-i mawlawī)," in *Adābiyyāt-i Irfānī* 2.4 (2016), 133–158.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The encounter of man and nature*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1968.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The need for a sacred science*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Religion and the order of nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *Man and nature: The spiritual crisis of modern man*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "The ecological problem in the light of Sufism: The conquest of nature and the teachings of Eastern science," in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1997, 152–163.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Ours is not a dead universe," in *Parabola* 29.2 (2004), 6–13.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Limits of growth and the environment," lecture, *Revival of the Islamic spirit*, Toronto, 27 December 2014.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein et al. (eds.), *The study Quran: A new translation and commentary*, New York: HarperOne, 2015.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, "Can we live in harmony with nature?," in *Renovatio* 3.1 (2019), 73–81.
- Origen, *On first principles: Being Koetschau's text of the De principiis translated into English, together with an introduction and notes*, trans. George W. Butterworth, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973.
- Quadir, Tarik M., *Traditional Islamic environmentalism: The vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2013.
- Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Mathnawī-yi ma'nawī*, ed. Reynold A. Nicholson, Tehran: Intishārāt-i Amīr Kabīr, 1960.
- Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, Cambridge: The E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2015.
- Rumi, [Jalāl al-Dīn], *The Masnavi: Book four*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn, *Masnavi.net*, <http://www.masnavi.net/> (last accessed: 22 October 2024).
- Rustom, Mohammed, "The metaphysics of the heart in the Sufi doctrine of Rūmī," in *Studies in Religion* 37.1 (2008), 3–14.

- Rustom, Mohammed, "The great chain of consciousness: Do all things possess awareness?," in *Renovatio* 1.1 (2017), 49–60.
- Schimmel, Annemarie, *And Muhammad is His messenger: The veneration of the Prophet in Islamic piety*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Winter, Timothy, "Islam and the problem of evil," in Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *The Cambridge companion to the problem of evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 230–248.
- Winter, Timothy, "'Nations like yourselves': Some Muslim debates over Qur'an 6:38," in Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of religion and animal ethics*, New York: Routledge, 2019, 163–172.