

## CHAPTER 1

# God is Absolute Reality and All Creation His *Tajallī* (Theophany)

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### Introduction

One can hardly avoid the conclusion that as long as religion was central to human life, there was no ecological crisis even if there were minor degradations of the natural environment. The environmental crisis that we face today is due most of all, if not wholly, to the desacralization of both man and Nature and the preeminence of science and technology in which the religious and spiritual significance of Nature is considered irrelevant or even unreal and scientifically meaningless. The crisis is the result of man trying to “live by bread alone.” To cure the fatal disease that is causing the present crisis, it is necessary first to discover the cause of this disease and then seek a cure. The major cause is the marginalization of the spiritual dimension of human life, combined with the rejection of the spiritual dimension of Nature, which is then relegated to the status of a complex machine. The regimen is the rediscovery of the lost spiritual dimension of both man and Nature. Moreover, this rediscovery is only possible by returning to the full message, and not only the moral and social aspects, of traditional religions and the wisdom embedded in them. This wisdom is none other than traditional metaphysics and cosmology understood in its symbolic and not only its literal sense. Only this wisdom can reveal to us who we are and why we are here, what Nature is in its total and not only material aspect, and what our relation should be and must be to Nature in order not only for the natural order to survive, but also for humans to survive as a species. Religion in its universal reality is thus essential for an exhaustive revival of ecological consciousness. With this truth in mind we turn to the Islamic tradition and the wisdom it contains as it pertains to the present environmental or ecological crisis.

## The Metaphysical Foundation

Wisdom in Arabic is called *al-ḥikmah*, which is concerned first and foremost with God and second with both macrocosmic and microcosmic Creation, in light of the Divine Metacosmic Reality. According to the teachings of this tradition, the Divine Reality or God is both absolute and infinite. In fact, God is *the Absolute* and *the Infinite*. To say that God is absolute means that all otherness and relationality are excluded from Him. In fact He alone is. Metaphysically speaking, there is no reality but the Divine Reality. God is the only abiding Reality, beyond all becoming and relativity. But God is also infinite, which means that the roots of all cosmic reality are to be found in the Divine Order. It is as the Infinite that the Divine Reality generates the world. Metaphysically speaking, the Infinite encompasses all possibilities and so must include the possibility of the negation of itself. Here can be found the root of all cosmic manifestation. And yet the Divine is present in all its manifestations, and in reality all manifestation is a stage of the Divine Presence. Nature is theologically created by God, but metaphysically, although it “negates” the Divine Reality by being a veil (*ḥijāb*) that covers it, it also reveals that Reality, being the manifestation of the Divine Principle and locus of the Divine Presence. Nature, therefore, is sacred but it is not divine. Moreover, although not divine but sacred, it must be respected and loved as such by those who believe in God and who love Him. As the Sufis have said, the wisdom of God is written on every page of the cosmic book and He is present everywhere in His Creation. The whole of Creation is the theophany (*tajallī*) of His Names and Qualities.

While Islamic theology, going back to the Qur’an, speaks of Creation, Islamic metaphysics, also going back to the Qur’an, but especially to its inner meaning, speaks (along with theophany) of manifestation, emanation, and similar terms when talking of the appearance of multiplicity from Unity. Sufis also speak of the very substance of all Creation being the Breath of the Compassionate (*naḥās al-Raḥmān*), which God “blew” on the archetypes (*al-‘ayān al-thābitah*) of all things, thereby generating the world. According to this doctrine, the very substance of the cosmos is ultimately a single reality which, moreover, is associated with the mercy and compassion of God. Nature is therefore to be seen as a mercy emanating from the Divine Mercy and is to be treated as such.

Sufi doctrine, as formulated by Ibn ‘Arabī and many others, also speaks of the unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), a doctrine that has been interpreted in multiple ways by Muslim sages over the centuries and has been misinterpreted by many Western scholars as pantheism. However, *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not mean that the world in its totality is God or even that God is only immanent without being transcendent. Rather, in the words of Frithjof Schuon, it means that “the world is mysteriously plunged in God” and that all being (*wujūd*) belongs ultimately to Him; nothing has an independent *wujūd*. This doctrine can be interpreted as *wujūd* having grades (*marātib al-wujūd*) like the rays of the Sun, which radiate from the Sun to become the light that illuminates the sky and the road on which we walk; all are rays of the same Sun and nothing other than the rays of the Sun, but with different degrees of intensity and weakness. Or it can be interpreted as a single light reflected on the myriad of mirrors

that constitute cosmic existence. The Persian poet Rūmī (1207–1273) summarized this doctrine in a famous verse:

We are non-existence reflecting being,  
Thou art Absolute Being and our being besides.

This interpretation of *wahdat al-wujūd* brings us back to the question of theophany (*tajallī*) and the symbolism of the mirror. Ibn ‘Arabī wrote that God created the mirror so that we could understand the nature of His Creation and speak about His relation to it. The surface of a mirror is nothing in itself but reflects what is placed in front of it. The image of the object in the mirror is reflected in the mirror and in a sense is that object, and yet the object is not identical with its reflected image. If we break the mirror, the object is untouched. All beings we see and experience in this world are reflections of God’s names and qualities reflected on the mirror of nothingness. Moreover, if we look directly and solely at an object that appears in a mirror as an image, we do not see the mirror; if we try to look only at the mirror, we do not see the object that appears as an image in that mirror. And if we understand the image as reality instead of seeing it for what it is, a reflection of reality, we suffer from the sin of “false attribution,” that is, attributing independent reality to something that does not possess it.

This is the root of the sin of modernism which attributes to Nature an independent reality that is at the same time distinct from the higher orders of being. Nature is then treated as a purely material reality to be used and plundered at will, unaware of the spiritual and even natural consequences of the error of this false attribution. Nature is not, however, an independent order of reality confined to the material and the quantitative. To treat it as such is to destroy its harmony and balance, and bring about the environmental crisis that is now threatening not only the natural world but also the existence of humanity, which has brought about this unprecedented crisis. Our responsibility toward Nature must include not only utilitarian and practical considerations, which of course have a role to play, but above all the rediscovery of the authentic knowledge of Nature in its spiritual aspects and its role not only in the sustenance of our earthly life, but also in its spiritual and even psychological function in our existence here on Earth as fully human beings.

## The Role of Religion

The ideas briefly outlined above reveal why religion is so important in creating ecological consciousness in Islam and, one could say, elsewhere. But in order for religion to play its role, it cannot be confined to its social and moral aspects only; its metaphysical, cosmological, and spiritual teachings must also be brought into play. One should not forget that the Christian tradition is not only the Sermon on the Mount, but also the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas and the theological and metaphysical writings of St. Bonaventure, St. Gregory of Palamas, and Nicholas of Cusa, not to speak of many early medieval figures such as Erigena and other very early authorities, such as Clement of Alexandria

and Origen. All that these men wrote about the natural order belongs to the Christian religious tradition. Similarly, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the works of many Hindu sages who wrote about the spiritual significance of Nature in Hinduism all belong to the Hindu tradition. The same holds true *mutatis mutandis* for Islam. To speak of religion and ecological consciousness one must expand the meaning of religion to include its universal sense and not consider it only in the restricted and limited connotation it has gained in most circles today. One must also pay full attention to the relevant metaphysical and cosmological teachings that have developed in each traditional religious universe over the ages. In the case of Islam, therefore, religion must include not only the Qur'an and ḥadīth, but also the writings of such seminal figures in the exposition of Islamic metaphysics and philosophy of Nature as Ibn 'Arabī, Rūmī, Shabistarī, and Mullā Ṣadrā, along with those teachings of the *Sharī'ah* (Islamic law) that concern Nature and our relation to and responsibility toward it, not to speak of nature poetry.

Although this chapter deals primarily with the metaphysical foundation for ecological consciousness based on religion seen from an Islamic perspective, a word must also be said about the role of the *Sharī'ah* in this context. In fact, many Muslim authors confine themselves to the *Sharī'ah*, which contains many teachings pertaining to Nature, but not to cosmological issues. According to it, every creature has rights (*ḥuqūq*) that must be respected. Animals must be used by man with full consideration of their rights. Trees are not to be felled without the reasons cited in the Divine Law. Running water should not be polluted and human beings should never be wasteful. These are just a few examples. In addition, the teachings of the *Sharī'ah* and Prophetic instructions created an area around Makkah and Madinah where flora and fauna were to be protected and hunting was forbidden, an early model for today's national parks and other protected areas. There are numerous other teachings of this kind that could be mentioned. Since most people in the Islamic world are pious and respect the *Sharī'ah*, emphasis on such teachings, which many Muslims especially those living in urban areas do not heed, could certainly ameliorate the environmental crisis, but the crisis cannot be overcome by such considerations alone. What is needed is an in-depth critique of the modern worldview that has led to the crisis and the reassertion of the traditional Islamic metaphysical, cosmological, and ethical doctrines about both man and Nature.

## Man and the Natural Order

Returning to the metaphysical and cosmological teachings that must be considered if an ecological consciousness can be developed that is capable of diverting or at least ameliorating the looming environmental crisis, it must be remembered that according to traditional cosmogenesis, the natural world or primordial Nature was created before man. We find this assertion in both the biblical and the Qur'anic accounts of Creation. This doctrine should not be confused with the teachings of many traditions according to which it is man—not earthly man, but Universal Man—who is the source and principle of the cosmos, as seen in teachings on Puruṣa in Hinduism and Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) in Islam. What we have in mind here is the creation of earthly man, who then becomes the central being of the terrestrial domain.

The precedence in the genesis of the natural order before man in the order of Creation has an important bearing on the environmental crisis. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not believe in original sin, but it does believe in the fall of man from his state of primordial perfection, a fall in which the natural order has also participated to some extent but not to the same degree as man. In Islam, paradise is called *jannah* or *firdaws*, meaning the Garden. In fact, both the English word paradise and the Arabic *firdaws* are derived from the Middle Persian word *pardīs*, meaning garden. This does not mean, however, that paradise is simply the idealization of the earthly garden as many modern scholars of religion claim. Rather, it means that the earthly (traditional) garden and virgin Nature are reflections of the celestial Garden or paradise. We have fallen from the Edenic state which was paradise, and nature too has fallen from its state of primordial Edenic perfection, but not to the same extent as we have. Something of that paradisaic quality survives in what remains of virgin Nature on Earth and this paradisaic presence reveals itself to those whose inner eyes and heart are open to Nature's spiritual reality.

Since men and women also carry that paradise deep within their being, even today many still turn to Nature for spiritual sustenance, even those who claim to be agnostics and not interested in religion, and encounter and experience Nature "religiously," with awe and wonder. To the extent that modern man destroys Nature, what remains of virgin Nature becomes evermore precious as both a refuge from human folly and a living presence and reminder of what we carry in the deepest recesses of our being. The fact that Nature has not fallen to the extent that we have means it can provide spiritual sustenance and remind us who we really are—beyond the veil of the state of the fall and the ordinary consciousness with which, as fallen beings, we mistakenly identify ourselves. Our inner being is woven from the strands of harmony and beauty that virgin Nature displays before our eyes. We need Nature not only physically to sustain our biological life, but also spiritually to nourish our soul and inner life, to remain truly human, true to our inward reality.

The correspondence between man (meaning here both male and female) and the cosmos, that is, between microcosm and macrocosm, is not simply the naïve teaching of various religions and philosophies in the East and West in past ages, as those who consider only the material and quantitative dimensions of things claim. Rather, it is a truth of a most profound order. The Gospel of John asserts, "In the beginning was the Word" by which the world was created, while the Qur'an, referring to how the world was created, states "God said, 'Be!' and there was." The world began with the Divine Word, which means consciousness at the highest level. Therefore, one could say, "In the beginning was consciousness." We did not evolve into a state of consciousness, as metaphysically absurd theories of human evolution assert. We began with a state of consciousness; and so did Nature.

## Consciousness

Many today recognize that plants too have a mode of consciousness and not only animals. Hinduism in fact sees the whole of the cosmos, including rocks and water, as consisting of degrees and modes of consciousness. The school of Vedanta goes a step further

and claims that there is only in reality one consciousness, associated with *Ātman*. In the Abrahamic understanding the world is seen as degrees and states of being rather than consciousness; ultimately, however, the two cannot be separated. It is interesting to note in this context that the word in Arabic for both existence and being is *wujūd*, which comes from the root *wjd*, which in the form *wajada* means “to find,” and therefore contains within itself the element of consciousness. Man cannot find without knowing, and man cannot know without consciousness. Ecological consciousness therefore requires our becoming aware that it is not only we who possess consciousness; Nature is also conscious in its own way. Usually, one speaks of inanimate, animate, and conscious beings. However, in a deeper sense we live in a universe that is alive, a *living* universe extending from the galaxies and the stars to the depths of the oceans. It is, too, a *conscious* universe, with varying modes of consciousness that manifest at different levels according to the nature of various beings. As for man, in principle he contains all levels of consciousness, being the theophany of all the Divine names and qualities that relate to Creation or manifestation.

## The Face of God

At various points, the Qur’an speaks about the Face of God (*wajh Allāh*). It mentions that everything perishes except His Face, but also that wherever we turn, there is the Face of God. Most Muslim sages interpret the Face of God as referring not to the meta-cosmic aspect of the Divine Reality, which does not participate in the creative act, but to that aspect of God’s names and qualities, or cluster of Divine names and qualities, whose theophany constitutes the cosmos, both the macrocosm and the microcosm. Everything in the created order is a reflection of the Divine Face. Moreover, the Face that God turns toward us is ultimately the face that we turn toward Him; that face is our inner reality. So, when the Qur’an asserts that everything perishes but His Face, it is not referring only to an eschatological reality but also to a metaphysical truth that everything that appears as something is non-existent in itself. It is only a reflection of His Face. In destroying Nature, modern man is thus “defacing” the Face of God, which is turned toward His Creation. More precisely, we do not destroy the Face itself—we do not have the power to destroy it; we destroy its sacred reflection in Nature and even within ourselves. Our face turned to God defines us in the most profound sense as human beings, and our destruction of the reflection of the Divine Face in Nature not only destroys the natural order, but ultimately dehumanizes, “defaces,” and destroys us.

## The Role of Man in Relation to Nature

One might ask how it is possible for one species, which according to modern thinking is nothing more than the product of the evolution of purely earthly elements through the agency of simple physical forces, to destroy the natural environment that has given rise to it. The deeper answer to this question alone demonstrates that man is not simply and



only an earthly being. Rather, he is the microcosm that contains all possibilities within himself by virtue of which there is no limit to his worldly knowledge, and he can dominate the earthly domain. But if his will is not surrendered to God and he falls short of the goal for which he was put on Earth, then he can use his warped will and cunning to play a God-like role and destroy the world of Nature in a way that no other species can—even species that are physically far more powerful, numerous, or diversified than *Homo sapiens*.

Traditionally, in Islamic metaphysics as well as in other wisdom traditions, man is seen as a channel of grace (*barakah*) for Nature. Since *barakah* flows “through the arteries of the universe,” Nature is seen as a source of *barakah* for man. The role of man in this exchange, however, is more active while that of Nature more passive. This is because man, having free will, can rebel against Heaven, whereas Nature cannot but necessarily reflects paradisaical realities. That is why it was the darkness of the soul of secularized man that “darkened” Nature and caused the destruction of so much of the natural environment, not vice versa. The environmental crisis is an externalization of the darkness of the soul of modern man and the resulting eclipse of man’s intuitive and spiritual faculties, along with the loss of the symbolist spirit. To overcome the present environmental crisis we must rediscover these lost elements and faculties within our souls. We must once again become a channel of grace for Nature, the window through which the light of grace illuminates the natural order. Then we shall discover that Nature will also help us through the *barakah* that manifests itself still so strongly in it, and it will be our spiritual companion in our journey on Earth.

To accomplish this task, we need first to remove the obstacles that the prevailing worldview has placed on the road to recovery of the sacred within ourselves; then we can realize the presence of the sacred in Nature. On the human and subjective side, we must set aside the current view of man as simply an earthly creature endowed mysteriously through evolutionary processes with cleverness and what is now called intelligence but is, however, but a shadow of real intelligence. On the objective side, we must rediscover the sacred character of Nature, but that cannot be done without rediscovering the sacred within ourselves and criticizing in depth the current ideology of scientism, a belief that is widespread (although rejected by some scientists).

## The Obstacle of Scientism

Scientism, currently widespread in the West but also accepted without much thought and, in a sense, “unconsciously” by many modern Muslims, even some pious ones, is a totalitarian ideology that generalizes the worldview derived from modern science to embrace the whole of reality and knowledge of it. According to its tenets, anything that modern science cannot study is either unreal or irrelevant. It brushes aside in cavalier fashion the spiritual dimension of man and Nature and considers the sacred reality in man and virgin Nature to be devoid of reality, or at best simple subjectivism. Theoretically, one could conceive of a world in which modern science would exist as a legitimate but limited form of knowledge of the natural world, existing alongside other sciences of Nature that are concerned with its non-material dimensions, all integrated into a universal

hierarchy of knowledge. But this is not what has happened, at least not so far. Rather, many today consider modern science to be the only legitimate knowledge of Nature, and thereby claim that science is what it can never be. Scientism is, therefore, one of the greatest obstacles, along with the current truncated image of human reality, itself related to this false ideology, which stands against the restoration of an authentic view of Nature and man's relation to it.

In this context it is important for Muslims to know that during the past century many profound criticisms of scientism have been made in the West by twentieth-century scientists such as Arthur Eddington and James Jeans, and contemporary philosophers and social critics such as Theodore Roszak and Jacob Needleman, not to speak of expositors of traditional doctrines such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, and Titus Burckhardt. Beyond the traditionalist group, Muslim scholars who have provided a profound philosophical critique of scientism have been few indeed, although there are rare but significant figures such as Muzaffar Iqbal. It is important for Muslims, therefore, to familiarize themselves with criticisms of scientism in the West and to formulate their own criticisms based on Islamic sources.

## An Islamic Philosophy of Nature

Once the ground has been cleared, Muslims must turn to a contemporary formulation of the Islamic philosophy of Nature and science, as well as of the role of man in relation to the natural environment. To achieve this requires thorough familiarity with traditional Islamic sources, a task made difficult by the fact that the Islamic philosophy of Nature and of science are not treated as separate subjects in classical Islamic sources, as are, for example, logic, physics, and psychology. One must draw instead from diverse sources of the Islamic teachings. There is the Qur'an itself, a large part of which concerns the natural world and the relation of human beings to it. The same could be said about the ḥadith. Commentaries on the Qur'an, therefore, are also a valuable source, especially theological, philosophical, and Sufi commentaries such as those of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Mullā Ṣadrā, 'Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, and Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī. Then there are philosophical works dealing with natural philosophy (*al-ṭabī'iyyāt*), parts of which deal directly with the philosophy of Nature and science as we see at the beginning of the *ṭabī'iyyāt* of Ibn Sīnā's *Kitāb al-shifā'* ("The Book of Healing"), in the section titled *Fann al-sanā' al-ṭabī'ī*. Similarly, treatments of this subject can be found in other schools of Islamic philosophy such as the Illuminationist School (*ishrāqī*) founded by Suhrawardī, who developed an elaborate physics based on light; or the School of Transcendent Theosophy (*al-ḥikmat al-muta'āliyah*), founded by Mullā Ṣadrā; it contains another version of the philosophy of Nature related to what came before but with new elements, especially trans-substantial motion (*al-ḥarakat al-jawhariyyah*).

Another rich source for the Islamic philosopher of Nature is general works that deal with natural history, such as the writings of al-Mas'ūdī and Ibn Qutaybah, or with such sciences as botany and zoology, such as the works of al-Jāḥiẓ, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', and al-Damīrī. There is also a whole genre of literature, in Arabic, Persian, and other Islamic languages such as *al-Kalīlah wa'l-dimnah*, which contains valuable material concerning



the natural environment and the relation of human beings to it. There are, too, many poetical works dealing with this subject. Many of these works reflect not only the sciences of Nature but also, to one degree or another, the *Sharī'ite*, philosophical and/or Sufi teachings about Nature and man's role in relation to God's Creation.

For the needs of Muslims today seeking to reformulate a philosophy of the natural environment and to waken ecological consciousness, nothing is more important after the Qur'an itself than Sufi sources, in both poetry and prose. Works such as *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyah* ("The Makkan Openings") of Ibn 'Arabī written in Arabic prose, or the *Mathnawī* of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī in Persian poetry, are inexhaustible sources for the formulation of this philosophy. The poetic opus of Maḥmūd Shabistarī, *Gulshan-i rāz* ("The Secret Garden of Divine Mysteries") contains in synthetic form the basic principles of Islamic metaphysics and philosophy of Nature and of man, as well as the relation between the two.

Such sources, along with others that we do not have space to mention here, are available to all those interested in developing an authentic, in-depth formulation of an Islamic philosophy of Nature, and of man in his relation to it. Making use of such sources, Muslims must seek to strengthen their ecological consciousness through their religion, that is, Islam. There is no more urgent matter for the Muslim intelligentsia. If the task is not accomplished, there will be no future in the long run to deal with anything else. Let us hope and pray, then, that the necessity and urgency of raising the ecological consciousness of Muslims through recourse to the very rich resources of the Islamic tradition will be recognized by all those who are seriously interested in the future of the Islamic community and of the human family as a whole.

## Further Reading

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