

The Human Environment

Charles Gai Eaton (Hassan Abdul Hakeem)

Spirit and form, the inward and the outward, *Al-Batin* and *Al-Zahir*: questions regarding the human environment and its significance have to be dealt with from different perspectives. There is the spiritual perspective and there is the practical, earthly one. They do not contradict each other; on the contrary, they are — like everything else in our lives and in accordance with the principle of *Tauheed* — inter-connected. For us, there can be nothing outside the orbit of the Faith, since there is nothing outside Allah (SWT) other than His own “outwardness.”

Every problem that we face and every question that we ask relates back to the Center, and the Center is always Allah (SWT). This world, this universe, and all that it contains is not some chance agglomeration of material atoms, unconnected with our being; it is the *mazhar*, the theater created for us, in which we live out our personal dramas and fulfill our destiny. The scenery and what, in a theater, are called the “props,” satisfy all our genuine needs, and the cosmos itself is neither more nor less than the landscape through which we pass on our journey towards the predestined end.

Already at this stage a brief digression seems necessary. Both the Qur’an and the Bible describe this world as made for us and for our use. Christians in recent centuries and their heirs in the post-Christian age have taken this as a license justifying the greedy exploitation of the natural environment. We, in the light of Qur’anic teaching and in terms of the doctrine of man as *khalifah*, perceive — or should perceive — primarily our responsibility to all that

The Human Environment was the third in a series of lectures delivered by Charles Gai Eaton from February 28 to March 2, 1992, on the occasion of Annual Qur’anic Muhadrat (Lectures) held at the Qur’an Auditorium, Lahore.

surrounds us. But I mean to return to that theme later in this talk.

Among Muslims today there are two particular groups which deny or ignore the importance of outward forms. As it happens these groups are at opposite ends of what might be called the Islamic "spectrum." On the one hand we have the "modernists" who insist that "outward things," including much that is required of us by the *Shari'ah* in so far as it deals with outward forms, do not matter. All that matters, they say, "is what you have in your heart." This argument is, to say the least, naive. Our hearts are constantly influenced and may eventually be transformed by our immediate environment and cannot be isolated from this environment. It does not seem to occur to them that, if we live in a physical setting which is entirely alien to our Faith, entirely secular and profane, then the likelihood is that this setting in which we live out our lives will drain faith from our hearts, instead of supporting and nourishing it.

The second group to which I referred is made up of those who are commonly described as "fundamentalists," and this includes the political revolutionaries. Whatever you choose to call this particular segment of the *Ummah*, they are characterized by a similar attitude. They do not say "all that matters is what you have in your heart," but they say "all that matters is the moral rule," the distinction between what is (in their view) *halal* and what is *haram*. This morality is, so to speak, removed from its context within the totality of the Muslim's life, and is expected to operate in a kind of vacuum. They forget, if they ever remembered, that *Allahu jamilun yuhibb ul-jamal*. In this way they remind me of Protestants within the Christian fold who see no reason to beautify their surroundings or make these surroundings more fitting for the worshipper. Like our so-called "fundamentalists" they regard beauty and even comeliness as a luxury which is to be despised by those intent upon a moral "crusade."

Now at a very early stage and with astonishing speed and effectiveness, the Muslims

constructed around themselves a human environment which was in accordance with their religious needs and in accordance with their inner faith. This seems to have happened spontaneously; it was, so to speak, a natural by-product of the new, revealed Faith. It demonstrated that beauty and comeliness can be combined with the utmost simplicity and with practical considerations. The traditional Islamic city was so constructed that it facilitated adherence to the *Shari'ah*, it encouraged worship and, by its structure and layout it provided the ideal setting for the Muslim's daily life. Moreover, it blended perfectly into the surrounding natural environment. It was not, as are Western cities today, a denial and a defiance of the natural world; let us say that it "belonged" where it was, a human habitation as much in accordance with Allah's creation as the spider's web or the bird's nest, yet with an extra dimension in that it was designed as a home for those who choose consciously to worship and to praise their Creator.

The Muslims today, bowing down before secular norms, have constructed around them a human environment in which faith can only seem out of place, prayer superfluous, and the *Shari'ah* an inconvenience. Men build according to their beliefs and what they build expresses these beliefs in brick or concrete. Western cities, like Western art in general, express in their own medium the agnosticism, the pride, and the greed of their builders. When they are copied, as they are almost universally, by the Muslims, they bring with them their values — or lack of values — their worldliness and their emptiness. People who, only a few years ago, lived among things that were beautiful and entirely fitting to the Islamic way of life, now live amidst imported trash which they do not even recognize for what it is. The spiritual and psychological influence upon them of a human environment totally alien to Islam is all the more dangerous for being unperceived. At the same time, the natural world, filled with reminders of Allah (SWT) for those who have eyes to see, is exploited and ruined so that there is no escape from this prison.

It is true that the spiritual man seeks to rise above nature, but in Islam nature itself is an aid to this ascent, for it reflects a higher reality, that same Reality towards which the spiritual man journeys. It is a "reminder"; but I shall return to this matter of the *ayaat* in the Book of Nature (which cry out for our attention), later in this talk. For the moment, there is a different point I should like to make.

The Qur'an is an ocean, but human intelligence and understanding are strictly limited. As human creatures we are scarcely capable of encompassing all the different facets of our religion and giving to each its correct weight. Only Allah's Messenger (SAW) could do that! It is inevitable that we should, in the past, have emphasized certain aspects of the Faith according to our needs and neglected others. That is to be expected. But this indicates that there is still much of the ocean unexplored. There are in the Qur'an, as also in the *Sunnah*, elements which were not developed to their logical conclusions because circumstances did not require this. And yet, if I may replace this image of the ocean with a different one, both these sources might be compared to the rocks from which springs gush forth and from which new springs may yet gush forth when the times demand this renewal.

Let me take an example which may not, in itself, be of crucial importance, but which may serve to illustrate what I mean. If we compare the three Monotheistic religions, the three "Abrahamic" religions, we find little or no concern for the animal creation either in Judaism or Christianity, in fact the early and medieval Christians seem to have had only contempt for the animals, seeing them only as symbols of man's lower nature. The case of Islam is very different.

For us, if we study Qur'an and follow, so far as we can, the *Sunnah*, this animal creation and our obligations towards it assume great importance. I might remind you of the *hadith* concerning the woman who was condemned for shutting up a cat and allowing it to starve to death and of the prostitute who was pardoned for

saving the life of a thirsty dog. I would remind you also of the *hadith* concerning a prophet of earlier times who had an ants nest burned because an ant had stung him and whose Lord reproached him, saying: "You have destroyed a community which praised Me!" I am sure I need not remind you that the Qur'an informs us, regarding the other living creatures on this earth, that they are "communities like unto yourselves," and the bee and the ant are not neglected. We cannot doubt our responsibility towards the animal creation. Would I not be correct in suggesting that this is an obligation which has been much neglected by Muslims?

It must be said that, for us, obligations take precedence over rights, indeed our rights are conditional upon our carrying out our obligations. The rebel against his Lord has lost all rights, since he no longer recognizes any obligations, and it is precisely this rebel who today exploits and devours the things of this earth. Only Allah (SWT) has absolute rights over His creation. Such rights as we may claim are delegated to us and strictly limited in accordance with the needs that he has implanted in us, and, as creatures, we are ever in need. It goes without saying that the concept of man as a little god, self-sufficient and independent, deprives him of those delegated rights. It may be added that the world of nature which, to the eyes of those who possess *Iman*, sparkles with light since it reminds him of Allah (SWT), would be dark were it unperceived by man as the central being in creation, that is to say the point of communication between what is above and what is below.

Through being taught the "names" of everything, Adam (AS) and his descendants gained dominion not least over the animals, but only as the servant fulfilling towards them the wishes of Allah (SWT). Whereas, for the contemporary Westerner, economic progress is an end in itself, and the pseudo-religion of progress demands sacrifices: not only the animals, but the forests and the rivers and all the many riches with which this theater has been endowed by its Creator.

There was a time when the spiritual life was thought of as the ascent of a mountain, but this was an interior ascent which might, perhaps, be inspired by the sight of an earthly mountain in its majestic splendor. That perception, that dimension has been lost, hence the thirst to "conquer" mountain peaks physically. A man is hailed as the "conqueror" of Mount Everest; no one asks whether he has conquered himself, although that would be a far greater achievement. Again and again, we find the modern world offering secular, material substitutes for things spiritual, or else the interpretation of spiritual principles is reduced to exclusively worldly terms. If you have no ambition to climb the inward mountain and if you cannot conquer your *nafs*, then what is the point of going out and conquering some rocky peak (simply because it is there)?

Today we see man, no longer as *Khalifah*, caring for his sector of the earth, or as contemplative learning from the earth how to rise above it; we have man as predator and exploiter, devouring this earth. His needs grow, they are never satisfied, and the more he consumes the more ravenous he is. There could be no clearer proof that man, when he is not kept within certain bounds, certain limits, becomes the destroyer of the natural environment upon which, nonetheless, he depends for his existence.

The loss of harmony between man and nature, the opposition set up between them, is but an aspect of the loss of harmony between man and his Creator. Those who turn their backs upon their Creator can no longer be at home in creation; they might be compared to bacteria or viruses which ultimately destroy the body which they have invaded. Today man is no longer the custodian of nature. He is inevitably alienated from it because, were he not alienated, he could not feel free to treat it merely as raw material for exploitation. This makes the human creature like a stranger in this world, not in the higher sense which led the Prophet (SAW) to command the believer to be "as a stranger in this world," but in the sense of one who comes as an enemy to the earth upon which he is born. Although I am

speaking specifically of Western man, you may perhaps acknowledge that Islamic man, now so much under the influence of the Western mindset, is perilously close to following the same path.

What was it that made possible this view of the natural world, so different to that of all other peoples at other times? I mentioned the French philosopher Descartes briefly, but Descartes emerged from the culture into which he had been born. It was, I think, Christian dualism, which made such an absolute division between the spiritual and the material, that gave rise, after many centuries, to the secular conviction that the visible world is indeed a separate and hostile order of reality to the human one. From this it was a short step to regarding matter as the only reality. We hear a great deal about contemporary "materialism" and the love of this world which has replaced the love of God. It might be more accurate to say that this is simply the wrong kind of materialism, the wrong kind of love. Many of you, no doubt, will know these lines from the Persian poet, Sa'adi:

I am joyous with the cosmos,
For the cosmos receives its joy from Him;
I love the world,
For the world belongs to Him.

It is when we imagine that the world belongs to us, with absolute rights of ownership, that love of the world becomes a great evil.

The Prophet (SAW) is reported to have prayed: "Lord, increase me in wondering!" So we might pray for the opening of our eyes and with them, our hearts, so that we may marvel at the works of the Creator. For this we need to regain something of the child's vision of the world, before it is overcome by self-interest and stale habit. Should we not be astonished when we see the splendor of what Allah (SWT) has made?

But let me return briefly to the dualism of Descartes' secular philosophy, originating in the dualism inherent in Christian theology. For Descartes, the whole of reality could be reduced to two poles, mind and matter, both cold, both lifeless, both cut off from the source of Light,

which is also the source of wisdom and of all true understanding. It was on the basis of this dualism and this exclusion of Transcendence that modern science arose, that same science which so dazzles many of our people that they become angry if one speaks of it critically.

It sometimes happens that I am invited to talk to Student Islamic Associations in British universities or polytechnics. I face audiences of good young people who are trying to be good Muslims. I can say to them much that is controversial, critical of today's Muslims and possibly hard for them to accept, but it is only if I have cast some doubt upon modern science as an infallible source of truth and upon technology as an unqualified benefit that I face hostile questioning after my talk is done. I suppose these young people would say that this science belongs to the world as a whole, that it is value-free, presenting no threat to our Faith, and that we Muslims — had we not become slothful in the Middle Ages — would have developed the same science and brought it to perfection.

I think not! It seems to me inconceivable that the Muslims, left to their own devices and still true to themselves, could have pursued the same path. Modern science is rooted in the post-Christian West and in Cartesian dualism. For this science to function it must reduce everything there is to pure quantity, that is to say, to mathematical formulae. In so doing it inevitably excludes the greater part of reality. The scientific method, by its very nature, requires the exclusion of all non-material factors or considerations and the isolation of the material world from all that lies beyond it. It requires also the exclusion from the mind of the scientist of any mental process that is not strictly rational and mathematical. How is it possible for any Muslim to accept this as a source of infallible knowledge?

Even the most ignorant among us knows that there is nothing that is independent of Allah (SWT), nothing that is self-subsistent. The moment we acknowledge the authority of Revelation, we have become "unscientific." The scientific method as such is immediately

destroyed the moment we acknowledge even the possibility of Revelation as a source of knowledge. And yet — one will be asked — how is it that the material world falls in so neatly with the theories of the scientist and appears to confirm his conclusions? In Islam we can admit of no absolute boundaries between one aspect of reality and another, since all reality derives from Allah (SWT) and is dependent upon Him. There can therefore be no total separation between the scientific observer and what he observes. The one affects the other; there exists a kind of mutuality and interaction.

Dr. Israr Ahmad has, in one of his publications, drawn attention to the great changes that have taken place in this century, particularly in the science of physics. Matter is no longer considered as something entirely knowable, and the previous absolute faith in mechanical laws has given way to a less rigid view of the physical universe. This is certainly true of certain scientists at the very top of their profession, but their theories are so complex and so far beyond the understanding of the ordinary person that the rest of the scientific profession, including science teachers in schools, continues to think and speak in terms of pure materialism. For them, everything that exists is fully explained by science, and that is the end of the matter.

I have a friend who works in London hospitals, although not as a doctor. She remarked to me once that, among the medical staff, the reaction to the fact that she is a religious person is always one of patronizing tolerance. They are too polite to tell her that she is childish, but this is what they imply by their attitude. They imply that she believes in fairy tales. They still hold fast to a wholly mechanistic view of reality and still assume that science has eliminated God from the universe. The fact that quantum mechanics and the indeterminacy principle and all the ideas advanced by physicists in recent years have made their position untenable has had no impact upon them. They might as well be living in the last century, in which that mechanistic interpretation was

unquestioned. It is their influence which spreads far and wide through education and through the media.

Yet science still functions in terms of myths, usually described as theories or hypotheses. And the most powerful of these is the myth of evolution, as it is commonly understood. It accords so precisely with what the post-Christian world wants to believe; it satisfies the need for causality on the horizontal level, that is to say for a purely material causality. The fact that it is unproven has become irrelevant, yet it is this myth more than any other that has undermined religious faith in the West. Which came first; the myth or the abandonment of faith which it is thought to justify? That is like asking which came first, the chicken or the egg!

It has also provided a further excuse for disregarding and despising what is assumed to be inferior. If man is the evolutionary crown of matter, then all lower forms, whether plant or animal, are like rungs of a ladder which can be kicked away or misused by the climber, so superior is he, that it would seem absurd for him to show respect or consideration for other forms of life.

Before I leave this topic for more important considerations, there is one further point that needs to be made. Let us take the example of a clock. The scientist studies with great intellectual rigor the mechanism of the clock and the manner in which it functions; beyond that he goes on to study the atomic structure of its parts, and he displays an encyclopedic knowledge of all that is contained in its casing. But can he tell the time? A clock exists only to tell the time. In short, our concern as human creatures is with the meaning of all things. Their structure and the precise manner of their functioning may be of interest, but it tells us nothing about their meaning.

Allah (SWT) has informed us concerning the meaning of things by means of *ayat* contained in two books, the Qur'an and the natural world. Words, the vocabulary of any particular language,

although they are our principal tool for communication and although this is the tool employed by Allah (SWT) in the Qur'an, there are in truth other modes of communication. The "signs" however which are found in nature cannot be verbalized. It is impossible, when we are reminded of Allah (SWT) by a particular natural phenomenon, to explain why this is an effective reminder or to say what precisely it tells us. That does not reduce its efficacy. People take communication between human creatures for granted, yet it is one of the great miracles, comparable on a lower level to the supreme miracle of communication between the transcendent Absolute and created beings who are incapable even of imagining His grandeur; hence, of course, the miracle of the Qur'an.

But, in the case of the Qur'an itself, the Revelation does not rest only in the words which you may look up in a dictionary (this is why no translation is adequate). I believe most of us would agree that there is a quality in the actual sound of the words, the music of the words, which also has its effect upon the human substance; the same may be true of the traditional scripts employed in the different *masahif*, which are not merely pleasing to the eye but, by their beauty and by their rhythms, add a further dimension to the total Revelation.

The very sounds of nature may add to this universe of meaning — this flood of communication between the Creator and the creature who stands at the center of His creation, man. I remember a certain Sheikh who was delivering a *mudhakirah* when thunder sounded, rolling on and on; he fell silent and remained silent after the heavens had spoken. What could he have added to that? But we must be very patient and very attentive to hear in the sounds of nature that note of universal praise, the prayer that all creatures in the natural world raise to Allah (SWT). Have you not observed that when, during the dawn prayer or the remembrance of Allah (SWT), bird song reaches our ears, this does not disturb us, indeed it reinforces our remembrance? Although, if we hear the sound of motorcars or machinery, these sounds do indeed

interrupt our worship. The *ayaat* of the Book and the *ayaat* in the natural world and the *ayaat* within the human soul are all aspects of a single Revelation.

There is nothing in creation that does not praise Allah (SWT) and glorify Him. This in itself is a reason for approaching all that surrounds us with respect. You do not interrupt a man at prayer, for he is praising his Creator. You should not disturb anything in nature, let alone destroy it, without good cause, for it too is occupied in praise. What is a good cause? Our genuine needs — not our superfluous needs — so that we too can continue to praise and enjoy the gift of life which Allah (SWT) has given us. But, in giving us these things, He has set bounds to our use of them and forbidden profligacy. On the one hand there is need, on the other greed — the “greed for more and more.” If we are composed of needs, as indeed we are, and if the foundation of our needs is the need for our Creator, the source of our being, and if that Creator is alone the final satisfier of needs — *Al-Kafi* — then it is to be expected that, when man turns his back upon his Creator, he will be forever unsatisfied and, in still seeking satisfaction, will exceed all bounds. Until the development of technology as we now know it, this may have harmed the perpetrator, but it did relatively little harm to the earth. Man’s range has been extended immeasurably; that is why, today, we are the great destroyers.

Yet natural phenomena both veil and reveal their Creator, as does everything that is other than Allah (SWT): “Some He guides and some He leads astray.” He may both guide and lead astray by one and the same phenomenon; it is we who make it either a source of guidance or a source of error. Those who see the revelation in nature are guided; those who stop at the surface, sometimes a glittering and deceptive surface, may be misled.

We are required as Muslims to remember Allah (SWT) constantly, or as constantly as we are able. To do so we need constant reminders in what surrounds us and what impinges upon our senses, and that is precisely why the “signs”

in nature are so important. Hardly less important are the "signs" we encounter in the works of man. But which works? The works of devoted craftsmanship undertaken by men who themselves remember Allah (SWT) constantly; not the objects which pour from the machines which have no touch of the human about them, and therefore no touch of the Divine. It is part of man's function, if he is among the rightly guided, to make things which are in themselves reminders, but today this is very rare and is becoming ever more rare.

I would like to illustrate this point by quoting from my friends, the late Titus Burckhart, otherwise known as Sidi Ibrahim. I quoted this passage in my book on Islam, but I value it so highly that I have no hesitation in repeating it now. Burckhart lived as a very young man in the Moroccan city of Fez, where he accepted Islam. In his book on Fez he writes:

I knew a comb-maker who worked in the street of his guild. He was called Abdul Aziz... He obtained the horn for his combs from ox skulls. He dried the horned skulls at a rented place, removed the horns, opened them lengthwise and straightened them over a fire, a procedure that had to be done with the greatest care lest they should break. From this raw material he cut combs and cut boxes for antimony on a simple lathe. As he worked he chanted Qur'anic Surahs in a humming tone. I learned that, as a result of an eye disease which is common in Africa, he was already half-blind and that, in view of long practice, he was able to "feel" his work rather than see it.

One day he complained to me that the importation of plastic combs was diminishing his business. "It is a pity that today, simply on account of price, poor quality combs from a factory are preferred to more durable horn combs. It is also senseless that people should stand by a machine and mindlessly repeat the same movement, while an old craft like mine falls into oblivion. My work may seem crude to you, but it harbors a subtle meaning which cannot be conveyed in words. I myself acquired it only after many long years and even if I wanted to, I could not

automatically pass it on to my son if he himself did not wish to acquire it... This craft can be traced back from apprentice to master until one reaches Sayyidena Seth, the son of Adam. It was he who first taught it to men, and what a prophet brings... must clearly have a special purpose, both outwardly and inwardly. I gradually came to understand that there is nothing fortuitous about this craft, that each movement and each procedure is the bearer of an element of wisdom. Not everyone can understand this. But even if one does not know this, it is still stupid... to rob men of the inheritance of prophets and to put them in front of a machine where, day in and day out, they must perform a meaningless task.

What could I add to that? The old comb maker, long dead, has said it all. We are not obliged to believe that this craft came from Seth, but we cannot deny that the traditional crafts had their origin in Allah (SWT); that they were pregnant with meaning, with communication, whereas the products of the machine are purely *dunyawi*, therefore meaningless. Which do we choose: quality or quantity, the heavenly or the worldly, that which has meaning or that which is meaningless? And why is it that so many Muslims in our time cannot tell the difference? I leave these questions unanswered.

It may however happen that pre-industrial technologies (if that is not a contradiction in terms) may yet be of use to us. Having theorized a good deal, I want at this point to digress and quote a specific example of destruction and its possible remedy in this country, a case to which a friend in England drew my attention. You are, I am sure, aware of the threat due to the deforestation taking place in the North, particularly Swat. There are good reasons for this; primarily the lack of alternative fuel, which obliges the villagers to cut down the trees until the mountains are bare and the soil is eroded, clogging rivers at their source. It has, I am told, been calculated that, within a hundred years, the rivers will have been destroyed, and this will affect almost the whole of Pakistan. Unlike so many of the other environmental

problems that we face, this, so I am told, has a relatively easy answer: the use of the ancient technology of water wheels, in this case generating electricity so that the villagers no longer need to go in search of fuel. Here, I think, is a good example of the way in which respect for the environment, care for the environment (which is a religious duty), coincides with practical needs and the material interests of the people. That kind of concern, in which the spiritual and the material come together, is — surely? — characteristically Islamic.

To neglect our duty towards the natural world is not only to harm ourselves and perhaps, in the long run, imperil human life itself, but it is a betrayal of the Trust which we accepted when we bore witness to the Lordship of Allah (SWT) in that primordial covenant. And, in being faithful to that Trust, we are also protecting and furthering our own interests during our worldly existence and that of our descendants.

I have already suggested that our environment may be perceived and understood at different levels, both revealing and veiling Reality. The veils are thick, as they must be if we are to live our lives in this world. We know that, were these veils to be completely removed, this world would no longer exist. But what is it that lies behind these coverings, could he but see it? What is our real "environment," as against what we perceive with our poor senses and about which we conjecture in our poor minds? Allah (SWT) has named Himself *Al-Muheet*, the All-Encompassing. In accordance with the *hadith* concerning prayer — "Though you see Him not, yet He sees you" — we live always in the Divine Presence. If we knew this fully and plainly in our everyday experience, we would not be here; we would be totally and finally with Allah (SWT). Our relative blindness is from his Mercy, so that we may experience existence. But we have nonetheless to remember and take note of our real situation in every decision and in every action. "Whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of Allah." To keep this ever in mind is the key to all good, for no sane person could do wrong in

that Presence. How better can we show respect for that unseen Presence than by showing respect towards that which veils Him?

True humility, true *faqr*, awareness of our poverty before our Creator, is not so much a matter of thinking ill of ourselves or of exaggerating our own unworthiness, as it is of seeing our own situation objectively, and, seen objectively, it is a situation of total dependence. Therefore humility is neither more nor less than realism. We are constantly reminded of our dependence upon Allah (SWT) by the very fact that, in our bodily existence, we are dependent upon the food and the drink and all the other gifts that He has provided for our benefit. We are not the "conquerors" of anything on earth. He alone is the Conqueror. To act with humility under all circumstances is to act as we would hope to do in the very presence of our Creator although, during the short time that we have here, we do not see Him.

This, too, expresses true *Iman*, and we should bear in mind that the root of the Arabic word has a sense of "peace" and "safety." I have heard this compared to the condition of one who, in his heart, dwells in the ocean, far below the turbulent waves, where all is calm. And although he acts, as act he must, on the surface, amongst the waves and in the midst of the storm, yet the possessor of *Iman* never loses his awareness of the still depths, his awareness of ultimate safety. And yet that safety, that peace, is also all around us, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear with; then inward peace and outward peace are united as, behind every veil, the principle of *Tauheed* unites all things in the presence of Allah (SWT).