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# “God Surrounds All Things”: An Islamic Perspective on the Environment

William C. Chittick

**I**n attempting to understand the Islamic view of the environment, we have to begin by asking how Islam has traditionally discussed the concept with which we are dealing. How does one say “environment” in the language of the Koran? What terminology would be used if this were fourteenth century Cairo or Esfahan? No doubt it is possible to translate the word ‘environment’ in a meaningful way into contemporary languages of the Islamic world, such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Urdu, but this is not because the concept as currently understood has always existed in these languages. The reason for this is obvious: Our particular view of the environment has developed along with modern science; even in English it would be difficult to find the term used in its present-day meaning before the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It is fair to say that “the problem of the environment,” in which the West is so involved, arose only because of the development of science. If there are also severe environmental problems in certain parts of the Muslim world, this is not because Islamic society is living according to its own ideals and principles; far from it. What has happened is that non-Islamic ways of doing things have been imposed by the circumstances of the past two hundred years; in other

1. The earliest instance of the use of the word ‘environment’ in the sense we are discussing today is dated by the *Oxford English Dictionary* to 1827.

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If there are severe environmental problems in certain parts of the Muslim world, it is not because Islamic society is living according to its own ideals and principles.

words, Western environmental problems have been imported along with Western technology and know-how. Traditional Islam has never before been faced with major man-made ecological disasters or even with the possibility of such, so Islam has never had to frame the kind of concepts concerning the environment with which the West is familiar.

With these prefatory remarks, we turn now to the Koran, the ultimate authority for all Islamic perspectives, and inquire whether any concepts found there indicate how a traditional Muslim would understand the English word 'environment'. An important Koranic expression which corresponds closely to the literal meaning of this term is *ihatah*, which means "to surround." In four verses it refers to hell, which is said to surround the unbelievers. Most significant for our purposes is that in a majority of the verses where it occurs it refers to God, who "surrounds the disbelievers" (2:19). Again: "My Lord surrounds what you are doing" (11:92); or: "God surrounds all things" (4:126; cf. 41:54).

It is characteristic of Islamic thought to begin any discussion with God, just as every book written by a traditional Muslim begins with the phrase, "In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate." The foundation of all Islamic ways of looking at things is, in a nutshell, the first *shahadah* or "testimony of faith": "There is no god but God." Everything else hangs upon this statement, which is the single fact about which there can be no doubt whatsoever, since it lies at the heart of the Koranic revelation and defines the very nature of reality. Hence the Koranic statement that "God surrounds all things" forms an appropriate starting point for any attempt to understand the Islamic point of view on the

environment; it means that, ultimately, God is our environment. In fact, *al-muhit*, a divine name found in the Koran and derived from the word under discussion, signifies precisely that God is "He who surrounds" or the "Environer." (It is practically synonymous with another Koranic divine name, *al-wasi'*, the "All-Embracing," a term which often occurs in conjunction with the name *al-'alim*, the "All-Knowing"; for, according to the Koran, God "embraces all things in mercy and knowledge" [40:7; cf. 6:80, 7:89, 20:9].)

If God is our ultimate environment, what is our immediate environment? One Koranic answer is God, for "To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God; God is All-Embracing, All-Knowing" (2:115). Or again, "He is the First and the Last, the Outward and the Inward" (57:3). This perspective is discussed in Sufism or Islamic mysticism, but there is no need to go into the sophisticated metaphysical views of the Sufis here. There are other Koranic answers to the same question. For example, the Koran calls our immediate environment "this world" (*al-dunya*, literally, "that which is near"), a term which is contrasted with *al-akhirah*, "the next world"; to mention one of these two terms is to imply the other. In many passages the Koran points out that the next world is a far better place than this world and that there we will meet God. We entered this world after having been with God, we live in this world surrounded by God, and we will meet him again in the next world. "God originates creation," says the Koran, "then He brings it back again" (10:34).<sup>2</sup>

2. The "return to God" (*al-ma'ad*) is the third of Islam's three doctrinal principles, after Divine Unity and Prophecy. Cf. W. Chittick, "Eschatology," in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations*, (vol. 19. of *World Spirituality*), edited by S. H. Nasr (New York: Crossroad, forthcoming).

Another Koranic term for our immediate environment is *al-ard*, "the earth." Note that this term, like the expression 'this world', is correlative, since it is normally accompanied by, and in any case implies, 'the heavens'. The phrase 'the heavens and the earth', is taken by many commentators to refer to the two fundamental kinds of creature, the spiritual and the corporeal, or the visible and the invisible. The "inhabitants of the heavens" are the angels, who are made of intelligible light and dwell in God's proximity.

**B**oth these pairs of correlative terms—"this world and the next world" and 'the heavens and the earth'—refer to the "cosmos" (*al-'alam*), also translated as the "world" or the "universe," and defined as "that which is other than God."<sup>3</sup> The first set of terms, 'this world and the next', describes the cosmos in terms of its becoming or its "temporal" structure, i.e., in terms of its present and ultimate situation. The second set describes the cosmos in terms of its static or "spatial" situation.

Islam's emphasis upon the primacy and ultimacy of God's reality and upon his absolute power over all he creates means that the cosmos, however envisaged, must be related back to its creator in order to be understood correctly. Even if our sole concern is the environment of our own

3. The term occurs in the Koran only in its plural form, *'alamin* (in 73 instances), and there is discussion among the commentators as to exactly what is meant; most commonly 'the worlds' is interpreted to mean either all the worlds that have been created by God, or all the inhabitants of "the world," i.e., of creation. In any case the term is often defined as here, and in this meaning it is paralleled by other Koranic terms, such as 'creation' (*khalq*); this term may also be contrasted with *amr*, in which case it refers to the corporeal world as opposed to the spiritual world).

earth in 1984, we can only understand its situation in the context of "all things" which precisely "God surrounds." Moreover, it should by now be clear that in the Islamic perspective the spiritual world comprehends and surrounds the physical world; it stands above us, between us and God, and both before and behind us, again between us and God, who is the last as he is the first. When we leave our immediate environment either through ascent to the spiritual world here and now or through physical death, we enter into a spiritual environment that surrounds the corporeal world and in turn is surrounded by the divine.

In short, an Islamic perspective on the environment will derive totally from Islam's perspective on God and the cosmos. Moreover, our relationship to the environment is of fundamental importance, as everyone knows. It is we human beings who have upset the equilibrium of the environment in the first place. This means, in Islamic terminology, that we no longer live in harmony with that which surrounds us; we have destroyed the proper relationship between man and the cosmos, and, by the same token, between man and God or between "Him who surrounds" (*al-muhit*) and "that which is surrounded" (*al-muhat*).

What then is man? How is it possible for human beings, among all creatures, to upset the relationship between the cosmos and its maker? In order to understand the situation of the surroundings within which we live, we first have to understand ourselves. So the questions raised by the problem of the environment are the central questions discussed by Islam as by most other religions: What is the nature of reality? What is man's relationship to it? What is the purpose of life? Seen from this point of

Traditional Islam has never before been faced with major man-made ecological disasters.

view, the task of delineating the Islamic perspective on the environment comes down to explaining all of Islam's teachings concerning God, man, and the cosmos. Here I can only begin this task by pointing out a few of the fundamental terms and concepts of the Koranic worldview.

#### THE SIGNS OF GOD

The Koranic term *ayah*, which means "sign" or "mark" alludes to anything that gives information about God. The term is well known in the West today in the expression 'Ayatollah', which means "sign of God" and which has come to be applied in the present century to certain religious leaders in Iran (whether rightly or wrongly is not at issue here; let it only be remarked that, in the Koranic view, strictly speaking, every single thing in the universe is a sign of God, including the devil himself). The term *ayah*, in its singular and plural forms, is employed in the Koran almost four hundred times. Generally, two kinds of signs can be discerned, supernatural (or revelational) and natural. In the first category can be included miracles and divine interventions, the scriptures revealed through the prophets, the Koran itself, and more specifically each of its verses. In the category of natural signs can be included all objects in the natural world, such as the sun, moon, stars, trees, and animals, and also every event that takes place and every pattern and law that can be discerned in this world, such as the fact that the sun rises each morning.

In the Islamic view of the cosmos, signs do not represent two or more different kinds of things; the natural and the supernatural blend and become inseparable. Divine self-revelation is an intrinsic dimension of reality; it can be perceived in a religious and supernatural context, or in

a nonreligious and natural context, but both contexts fit into larger frameworks—first that of the cosmos and secondly that of God, the two primary environments that we spoke about earlier. In other words, the natural world is not fundamentally different from the supernatural world; natural things can never be looked upon as mere objects nor can supernatural signs and miracles be considered to occur outside of natural laws. Every single thing and every single event, whether of natural or supernatural origin, is God's creation and God's sign; each must be treated with the appropriate reverence and remembrance (*dhikr*).

Here it bears repeating that Islam includes in the cosmos not only the world that we can see (*al-shahadah*)—or in principle could see if we were in the right place at the right time and had the right instruments—but also the invisible world (*al-ghayb*), which includes such supernatural beings as angels and lies at an ontological level closer to God than the visible world. Here again, angels and other invisible beings are so much a part of the Islamic worldview that our immediate environment is not and cannot be a closed system, shut off from invisible influences, whether angelic or divine. The visible world is a theater within which higher realities display themselves; it can never be considered apart from the demands those higher realities make upon us:

Thy Lord revealed unto the bees, saying: "Take unto yourselves of the mountains, houses, and of the trees, and of what they are building. Then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow the ways of your Lord, easy to go upon." Then comes there forth out of their bellies a drink of diverse hues, wherein is healing for

men. Surely in that is a sign for a people who reflect. (16:68-69)

What, have they not regarded the earth, how many therein We have caused to grow of every generous kind? Surely in that is a sign, yet most of them have no faith. (26:7-8)<sup>4</sup>

#### THE VICEGERENCY OF MAN

God's signs—whether those of revelation or those of the natural world—are directed toward man. In the verses quoted above and in numerous other passages, the Koran refers to the signs and then asks mankind to reflect and meditate upon them, warning those who ignore and deny them of the painful chastisement of hell. God's messengers have come to remind (*tadhkir*) man of God, and it is man's duty to remember him (*dhikr*). In short, human beings alone among the creatures (with the single exception of the jinn) are called to ponder the signs of God.

**M**an then may or may not take heed. He alone has a choice of whether or not to remember God. "Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God" (57:1, 59:1, etc.), says the Koran, precisely because all things are his signs. Again: "Have you not seen how to God bow all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars

4. Some of these verses are listed in Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Koran* (Minneapolis and Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980), esp. chap. 4, "Nature," and chap. 5, "Prophethood and Revelation." But the interested reader may find it more useful simply to glance through a translation of the Koran; Arberry's *Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964) is especially recommended since, unlike certain other translators, Arberry renders *ayah* consistently as "sign," without changing the English term to fit the context.

and the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and *many* of mankind?" (22:18) So mankind alone may choose not to bow down to God—and this fact, paradoxically perhaps, is one of God's greatest signs, for only a being created in God's image ("upon His Form," or "upon the form of the All-Merciful," as the Prophet said) could have the ability to deny him. By sharing in God's knowledge and free will, man can set himself up as a little god. The Koran seems to be alluding to this point when it says, "To God bow all who are in the heavens and the earth, willingly or unwillingly, as do their shadows in the mornings and the evenings" (13:15; cf. 3:83). Whether or not a given human being bows willingly to God, he is still a sign of God and thereby glorifies him.

The gift of free will is at least part of what the Koran is referring to when it speaks of the "Trust" that God bestowed upon mankind: "We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it; and man carried it. Surely he is sinful, very foolish" (33:72). The fact that man is "sinful, very foolish," obviously alludes to his mishandling of God's trust.

Most authorities identify the trust offered to man with the "Covenant of Alast," when the children of Adam, before their physical creation, bore witness to God's lordship over them—"lest you should say, on the Day of Resurrection, 'As for us, we were heedless of this'" (7:172). This covenant in turn is connected with the fact that Adam and his righteous descendants were made God's vicegerents (*khalifah*) or representatives upon earth. According to the Koranic account (2:30ff.), God told the angels He was setting a vicegerent in the earth, but they protested that the vicegerent would "work corruption and shed

Western environmental problems have been imported along with Western technology.

blood." Only when they discovered that Adam had been taught the names of all things, whereas they themselves possessed a limited knowledge, did they recognize God's wisdom in creating the vicegerent.

The fact that Adam was taught the names of all things refers to the special nature of his intelligence and his ability to recognize God's signs. God himself taught Adam the names (2:31); in other words, Adam learned the names of things in their aspect of relationship to God, not separation from him. These names, it should be noted, were taught to Adam—and by 'Adam', the Koran clearly means "humankind" (cf. 7:10-11)—when he was first created, in proximity to God. Many commentators point out that the names are the realities of all things, or the things as they are known by God himself. The Islamic formulation of the concept of man as microcosm, the mirror image of the macrocosm (the sum of all things), derives in part from this view of human nature as containing the names of all things within itself. Ultimately it is these same names that man "remembers" when he recognizes and acknowledges God's signs; in effect, he is affirming the intimate relationship that exists between each thing and its creator, or, as the Sufis would say, between the form and the meaning, the outward and the inward, or the manifestation and the nonmanifest reality. At the same time, he is affirming that he himself is somehow identical with all things, since his knowledge of what is outside himself derives from what is inside himself. In other words, the fact that Adam was taught all the names shows that he somehow participates through his quality of being a divine image in God's omniscience.

One of the consequences of man's potential knowledge of all things is

that he is given power over God's creation. The Koran recalls to man that God has subjected (*taskhir*) to him the creatures of the cosmos; this subjection itself is one of God's manifest signs:

Have you not seen how God has subjected to you all that is in the earth? (22:65)

Have you not seen how God has subjected to you whatsoever is in the heavens and earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings outward and inward? (31:20)

The Koran recounts how God commanded the angels to bow down before Adam (2:34); this is clearly connected with the fact that *everything* in the heavens and the earth is subjected to man, even the inhabitants of the invisible world.

The microcosm and macrocosm are united through the divine link that was established when God made man his vicegerent in his own image. The clear import of this Koranic anthropology is that among the creatures man alone can destroy the earth.<sup>5</sup> Still man is bound to the earth in an intimate union, so that the outward state of the cosmos reflects the inward state of his consciousness. Subject and object are inseparable, though the former takes the active role. Hence the "illness" of one side of the relationship can only be a sign of the illness of the other side, while responsibility for "corruption" remains with the active partner.

At this point a key question needs

5. Though man is "active" in relation to nature in his role as vicegerent (whether or not he fulfills it), he is "passive" inasmuch as it manifests God's signs and thereby plays a revelatory role. Though man is nature's steward, he is also in need of the wisdom it imparts to reach the full perfection of the human state. It is in the doctrine of the "signs" that close parallels are to be found between the Islamic view of nature and the Red Indian concept that man must learn from all living things.

to be answered: How in practice can man carry the trust? How can he be the perfect vicegerent who does not corrupt the earth but on the contrary establishes within it peace and harmony? To answer this question, we have to look at another dimension of the Koranic concept of human nature.

#### THE SERVANT OF GOD

**T**

o say that the Koran singles out Adam and his descendants as God's vicegerents does not provide a complete picture of the Koranic anthropology. For one thing, it is clear that not all of Adam's children are able to function as true vicegerents; "corruption and the shedding of blood" began already with Cain. From his time onward, there have been human beings who fail to live up to the trust and who therefore corrupt the earth. Hence a second key Koranic teaching about man's place in the cosmos must be added to the concept of "vicegerency" before we can gain a more complete picture of the Koranic view of man. This is "servanthood" (*'ubudiyyah*), the attribute which allows a human being to reach the fullness of his humanity and thereby become God's vicegerent.<sup>6</sup>

The vicegerent who rules over the earth does so not according to his own whims but according to God's command; he is able to represent God because he has passed beyond limited, individual motivations and surrendered his own will to the divine will. Hence he is called the "servant" or "slave" (*'abd*) of God. The Prophet

6. Those familiar with Islamic thought will recognize that I have reversed the more usual order of things for the sake of the argument.

Muhammad himself, who for Muslims is the greatest exemplar of human perfection, is mentioned in the daily canonical prayers as *'abduhu wa rasuluhu*, "God's servant and His messenger." First Muhammad is God's servant; only then is he qualified to be his prophet. So also for those who follow the Prophet; they must first be God's servants, and only then can they hope to be his vicegerents. Man cannot carry God's trust without submitting himself to him. The fundamental importance of this idea is indicated by the literal meaning of the word 'Islam', i.e., submission to God. In short, if from one point of view man was created to be God's vicegerent, from another point of view he was created to be his servant: "I have not created the jinn and mankind," says God in the Koran, "except to serve Me" (51:56).<sup>7</sup>

What then is the "service of God" that is a prerequisite to carrying the trust and becoming God's vicegerent? Simply: submission to God's will as revealed in the Koran and in the example of the Prophet (the Sunnah, or the "good example," *uswah hasanah*, referred to in the Koran, 33:21). In other words, man cannot represent God on earth without following his revealed religion. To fail to follow revelation is to ignore God's manifest signs and to become one of the disbelievers.

The term 'disbeliever' or 'infidel' (*kafir*) is itself a key Koranic concept; as such it provides another example of how Muslims understand human responsibility in the cosmos and before God. The literal meaning of the term 'disbelief' (*kufr*), which is used in

7. Many commentators point out that the first three verses of the Fatihah ("Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the worlds, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate, the Master of the Day of Judgment") refer to God, while the last three ("Guide us on the Straight Path, the path of those whom Thou hast blessed, not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those who are astray") refer to the servants. Only the middle verse refers to both sides, establishing a direct, personal link between God and his creatures.



The Koranic statement that "God surrounds all things" is an appropriate starting point for any attempt to understand the Islamic point of view on the environment.

the Koran as the opposite of the word 'faith' (*iman*), is not "lack of faith" but "covering over the blessings one has received," i.e., ingratitude. The idea of man's ingratitude toward God points to the fact that man the servant has purposefully and knowingly severed the link between himself and his Lord. Thus it brings us back to the Koranic doctrine of signs: the great sin of the disbelievers or the ungrateful is that they cover over and conceal the signs of God by not acknowledging that the universe is his theater of activity and that the scriptures are his guidance. To treat the natural world and the religions sent by God with anything but reverence and gratitude is to enter into the ranks of the ungrateful infidels. "And," says God in the Koran, "those who disbelieve in the signs of God—for them awaits a terrible chastisement" (3:4; cf. 2:39, 4:56, 5:10, 5:86, 22:57, etc.).

According to a well-known Koranic formula, a punishment that God metes out to disbelievers is that they "lose both this world and the world to come" (22:11). Indeed, one of the manifest signs of God that the Koran often returns to is the fact that he has destroyed disbelievers throughout history. "Journey in the land," commands the Koran in several passages, "and behold what was the end of them that cried lies" (3:137, 6:11, 16:36), or "them that committed sin" (27:69).

When human beings fall into disbe-

lief and ingratitude and thereby fail to render to God the service and worship that are his due, they will reap the fruit of their own works.

The Koranic message then is clear: Man can be the vicegerent of God, ruling over creation on his behalf, only on the condition of submitting his own will to God's will. If man fails to surrender to God's guidance as transmitted by the prophets, he will not be able to function as a true vicegerent. Instead of establishing peace and equilibrium, he will work corruption. More specifically, the role of Islam is precisely to establish peace and equilibrium between heaven and earth with a view towards man's ultimate good. The very word 'Islam' derives from a root meaning "peace" (*salam*), and thus in the Muslim consciousness "submission to God" (*islam*) means also "peace with him." Given the hierarchical nature of reality, it is only natural that peace with "Him who surrounds"—our first and our last environment—is a prerequisite for peace with our immediate environment. We cannot live in harmony with the cosmos until we live in harmony with God. Man as God's vicegerent can only rule the subjects that have been entrusted to him on the condition of accepting God's rule over himself. Once he rebels against God, the creatures will rebel against him. This explains why he is on the verge of being destroyed by the very creatures he is supposed to rule. ■



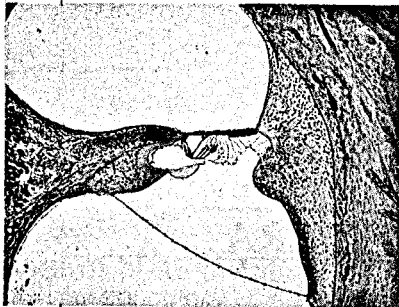
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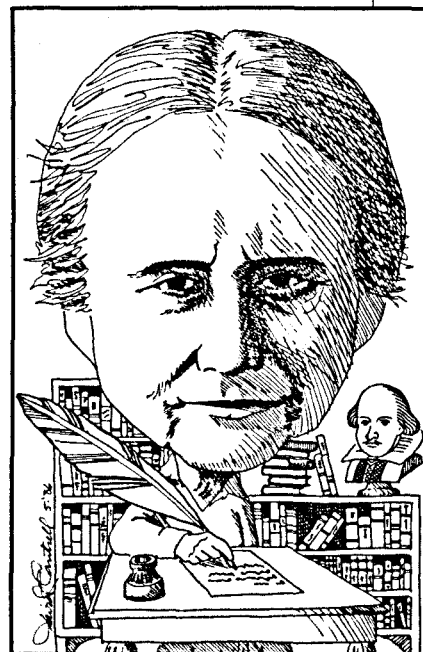
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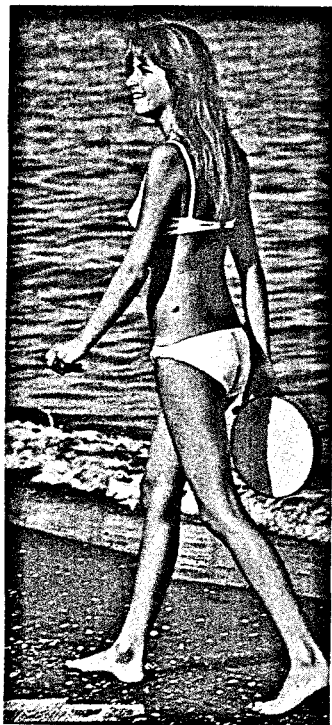
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