

CHAPTER FOUR

The Qur'an and the Contemplation of God's Creation

The contemplation of God's creation is one of the greatest forms of worship in Islam. It is not surprising, therefore, that many Qur'anic verses encourage this activity and do so using various methods in order to appeal to every temperament and spiritual state. The aim is to divert people away from their dulled senses, bad habits and monotonous familiarity, and encourage them to witness the signs of their Lord in the universe with insight and impressionable hearts. The following are some of the main methods.

INSPIRATION OF THE NATURE OF GOD AND HIS EXALTED ATTRIBUTES

True Islamic contemplation can only spring from a heart that believes in God and a mind that submits to Him and His Exalted Attributes. This is the unwavering faith of oneness (*tawhīd*), which is to bear witness that the Almighty is the One and only God Who created, governs and sustains the universe. Any other form of contemplation of the beauty and splendor of the heavens and the earth would be considered as atheism or polytheism (*shirk*) because the contemplator would not be recognizing, let alone praising and thanking the Creator. For this reason, the Qur'an often repeats this doctrine through the mention of God's Exalted Attributes:

Say: "He is God, the One; God, the Eternal, Absolute. He does not beget nor is He begotten, and there is none like Him." (112:1-5)

God is He; Whom there is no god but Him. He knows all things, both secret and open. He is the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. God is

He; there is no god but Him. The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace and Perfection, the Guardian of Faith and Preserver of Safety; the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme. Glory be to God! So High is He above the partners they [the infidels] attribute to Him. He is God, the Creator, the Evolver and the Bestower of forms. To Him belong the most Beautiful Names. Whatever is in the heavens and the earth declares His praises and glory. He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (59:22-24)

God is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. How can He have a son when He has no companion? He created all things and has full knowledge of all things. That is God, your Lord! There is no god but Him, the Creator of all things. So worship Him. He has power to dispose of all affairs. No vision can grasp Him, but His Grasp is over all visions. He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things. (6:101-103)

It is essential to establish this strong uncorrupted faith in God before embarking on the spiritual journey of Islamic contemplation, for it will be a guiding light to the believer as well as a firm root preventing him from being led astray. The Qur'an also uses other arguments to guide the believers on their spiritual expedition. These are often powerful images that act like reminders for those who are still reluctant and have hardened hearts.

REMINDERS OF THE FAVORS OF GOD

The Qur'an attempts to soften human hearts in many ways. One of these is by mentioning the grace and favors of God. Contemplation of these can generate a feeling of compassionate mercy and love.

And He has created cattle for you. From them you derive warmth and numerous benefits, and of their [meat] you eat. (16:5)

It is He Who sends down rain from the sky. From it you drink, and out of it grows the vegetation on which you feed your cattle. And with it He

produces for you corn, olives, date palms, grapes and every kind of fruit. Verily in this is a sign for those who give thought. (16:10-11)

He has made subject to you the night and the day, the sun and the moon, and the stars are in subjection by His command. Verily in this are signs for men who are wise. And the things on this earth which He has multiplied in varying colors [and qualities]. Verily in this is a sign for men who celebrate the praises of God [in gratitude]. It is He Who has made the sea subject, so that you may eat thereof flesh that is fresh and tender, and that you may extract from it ornaments to wear. And you see the ships on it that plough the waves, so that you may seek of the bounty of God, and that you may be grateful. And He has set up on the earth mountains, standing firm, lest it should shake with you, and rivers and roads, so that you may guide yourselves; and marks and signposts. And by the stars [men] guide themselves. Is then He Who creates like one that creates not? Will you not receive admonition? If you would count the favors of God, never would you be able to number them, for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (16:12-18)

This reminder to contemplate the mercy and love of God towards humankind and all other creatures that inhabit this globe immediately moves the hearts of those who are sensitive, appreciative and wise. As for those whose eyes and hearts are closed to the divine call for contemplation, the Qur'an describes them in verses such as the following:

Say: "Look at [and contemplate] what is in the heavens and the earth."
But neither signs nor warners profit those who do not believe. (10:101)

And how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn their faces away from them. (12:105)

The countless signs of God's marvelous creation, as Yūṣuf 'Alī records in his comment on the last verse, "are scattered literally throughout nature – throughout creation – for all who have eyes to see.

And yet man is so arrogant that he turns his very eyes away from them.”¹ Such insensitive, unrelenting hearts require a harsher approach to shake their unreasonable attitude.

REPRIMANDS FOR UNRELENTING HEARTS

The tone of these addresses are often violent and coupled with threats. Most of these verses begin with the question “Have they not seen?” or “Do they not see?”

Have they not seen what is before them and behind them, of the sky and the earth? If We wished, We could cause the earth to swallow them up, or cause a piece of the sky to fall upon them. In this there is a sign for every devotee that turns to God [in repentance]. (34:9)

Do they not look at the camels, how they were made? And at the sky, how it was raised? And at the mountains, how they were fixed? And at the earth, how it was spread out? (88:17–20)

Many such verses come from the Qur’anic narratives or from the words of the prophets. For example, Noah (Nūḥ) reprimanded the unbelievers among his people with the following words:

What is the matter with you, that you do not believe in God or fear God’s Majesty, seeing that it is He Who created you in diverse stages? Do you not see how God has created the seven heavens one above another and made the moon a light in their midst, and made the sun a [glorious] lamp? (71:13–16)

PRAISE FOR THE PIOUS

Conversely, some verses offer encouragement and praise to the mentally alert, who see nothing in the world that does not teach them a lesson and remind them of the innumerable favors of God. These are the pious who remember God in every psychological or physical state of their psyche and body:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs for men of understanding – men who celebrate the praise of God, standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the wonders of the creation in the heavens and the earth. O Lord, You have not created this for naught! Glory be to You! Give us salvation from the torment of fire [in the hereafter]. (3:190–191)

APPEALS TO THE INNATE AESTHETIC SENSE

The Qur'an also urges people to contemplate the Divine signs in the universe by awakening the innate aesthetic sense in them. The following verses, aim to arouse people's genuine feelings and emotions so as to enable them to observe the beauty of everything on the earth – whether the various colors and shades, plants, animals, or even inanimate objects:

Do you not see that God has sent down rain from the sky, whereby We have brought out produce of various colors. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colors, and black intense in hue. And similarly among men and crawling creatures and cattle who all have various colors. Those who truly fear God among His servants are those who have knowledge. For God is Exalted in Might, and is Oft-Forgiving. (35:27–28)

We also find verses where the Almighty, after showing His favors to humanity in creating the cattle for their sustenance and use, reminds His slaves to contemplate their beauty:

And He has created cattle for you. From them you derive warmth and numerous benefits, and of their [meat] you eat. And you have a sense of beauty in them as you drive them home in the evening and as you lead them forth to pasture in the morning. (16:5–6)

He Who has made everything which He has created most good and beautiful, He began the creation of man with clay. (32:7)

In his important work, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (In the Shade of the Qur'an), Sayyid Quṭb interprets this last verse in the following moving words:

This world is beautiful, inexhaustibly beautiful. Man may grasp and enjoy this beauty as much as he wishes, and as much as the Creator of this world wishes. The element of beauty in this world is intentional. Perfection of creation results in achieving beauty. The perfection of creation is apparent in the beauty of every organ and every creature. Look at the bee, the flower, the star, the night, the morning, the shades, the clouds, this music pervading the entire universe, this perfect and whole harmony. It is a pleasant journey in this universe of beauty and perfection. The Qur'an draws our attention to all this, so we may ponder and enjoy it. Hence: "He Who has made everything which He has created most good," is a verse which arouses the heart to trace the aspects of beauty and perfection in this great universe.²

THE ALMIGHTY'S OWN FAITH IN HIS CREATION

However, the most important point which elevates the status of contemplation is that God Himself swears by some of His creation. This is the greatest call to ponder over this creation, probe its depths, and think deeply about its content. The Almighty swears by the dawn, the mid-morning, the twilight, the moon, the figs and the olives; he swears by the winds, the stars, the sky, the break of day and the descending night.

There is no doubt that the high status accorded by Islam to contemplation is what led worshippers and ascetics such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī to assert that "one hour of contemplation is better than a whole night's vigil in worship" and for the Umayyad caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz to say that "remembrance of God is a good deed, but contemplation of God's favors is the best form of worship."³

ISLAMIC ENCOURAGEMENT TO SELF-CONTEMPLATION

People's ignorance of themselves and their failure to contemplate and study the affairs of humankind are considered by Islam to be glaring

examples of negligence and a lack of observance of one of God's greatest signs in the universe. When Islam urges people to contemplate the heavens, the seas, the mountains and the rivers, and to meditate on what God created for the benefit of humanity, what, then, can be said about meditation on the creation of the human being, before whom God made His angels prostrate, and to whom He subjected whatever existed in the heavens and on the earth?

And He has subjected to you, as [a gift] from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on the earth. Behold, in that are signs indeed for those who reflect. (45:13)

While there are many Qur'anic verses which encourage meditation on the heavens and the earth in general, and where the human being is considered the most important creation, there are also many verses which are specifically concerned with contemplating the creation of humankind. As previously mentioned, the Qur'an uses every means to arouse human hearts from their dulled senses and monotonous familiarity, in order to witness the signs of the Lord in the heavens and on the earth with alertness and enlightened insight. The verses concerning humankind follow similar methods of encouragement in order to suit every heart and every emotional state.

The following verses are examples detailing the creation of man, and the favors that God bestowed on those with soft hearts:

We created man from a quintessence of clay; then we placed him as [a drop of] sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed. Then We made the [drop of] sperm into a clot of congealed blood. Then of the clot We made a [fetus] lump; then We made from that lump bones, and clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed from it another creature. So blessed be God, the best Creator. (23:12-14)

Say: "It is He Who has created you [and made you grow], and made for you the faculties of hearing, seeing, feeling and understanding. But little thanks do you show." (67:23)

As for the cruel-hearted and the arrogant, the Qur'an addresses them with similar reproachful questions:

Does not man see that it is We Who created him from sperm? Yet, behold [how he stands forth] as an open adversary! (36:77)

Have We not created you from a fluid [held] despicable which We placed in an abode of rest, firmly fixed, for a determined period [of gestation]? For We do determine and We are the best to determine. Woe on that Day to those who reject the truth! (77:20-24)

Concerning the arousing of the aesthetic aspect of human nature, the Almighty says:

We have indeed created man in the best of moulds. (95:4)

He has created the heavens and the earth in just proportions, and has given you shape, and made your shapes beautiful, and to Him is the final goal. (64:3)

Just as God swears by some of His cosmic signs and creations on earth, He also swears by the human soul; sometimes it is in the context of His cosmic signs, and at other times in connection with the Day of Judgment, thus exalting the human soul to the highest level. *Sūrah al-Qiyāmah* opens with this glorious oath:

I swear by the Day of Resurrection, and I swear by the reproachful soul. Does man think that we cannot assemble his bones? Nay, we are able to put together in perfect order the very shape of his fingers. (75:1-4)

The divine oath may also come as a vow to create the well-proportioned human self and to inspire it with life after referring to the universe, where God swears by the sun, the moon, the day, the night, the firmament, and the levelled earth:

By the soul, and the order given to it, and the enlightenment as to its

wrong and its right – truly he who purifies it will prosper, and he who corrupts it will fail. (91:7–10)

The Almighty also makes an oath by other aspects that relate to humankind. For instance, in a short but comprehensive surah, God swears by the short lifespan of humankind on the face of the earth, after which a human being will be either raised to high levels of bliss or sunk into perdition:

By the mid-afternoon [or the short lifetime], man is really in loss – except those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and join in the mutual teaching of truth, and of patience and constancy. (103:1–3)

God also swears by His Exalted Being to assert the truthfulness of the Qur'an, and exemplifies it by one of the most important gifts He has bestowed upon human beings, namely, their ability to speak and communicate with one another:

Then, by the Lord of the heaven and the earth, this [Qur'an] is the very truth, as true as the fact that you can speak. (51:23)

These, then, are some of the Qur'anic verses which encourage people to contemplate upon themselves. In fact, if there were nothing to denote the wonder of God's creation in the universe except human beings, that would be sufficient to force them into absolute submission to their Creator. Indeed, people will always be mystified by their soul, their spirit and their mind, which are the very creations that distinguish them as human beings. Although these are only some of their components, they cannot be embodied in time or place, and will thus remain beyond human comprehension. To realize that they are unable to understand fully their identity is, alone, the greatest challenge that calls people to submission and modesty.

Even the simpler psychological phenomena whose effects can be recorded in the laboratory – like learning, memory, emotions and motivations – are still not fully grasped by psychology. The latter only touches on the external aspects of their infinite depths, like a child

playing near the shores of an endless ocean. Furthermore, the tangible biological and material aspects of humankind can only be understood at the superficial level. Even if the entire human race were to spend all its life investigating the signs of God in the human body, it could only scratch the surface. As previously mentioned, the human brain is still the most enigmatic thing in this universe. All the bewildering achievements of science have only increased people's astonishment at the complexity of the biological computer carried inside the human skull. Benson writes in *Timeless Healing*:

[the brain] is so complex, so constantly in motion, so megafaceted and super-connected that all our attempts to describe its actions are, by nature, simplistic. Every remarkable discovery we make only further elucidates how astonishingly elaborate is the brain and its circuitry – that which affords us life and health, movement and memory, intuition and wisdom. That which appears to be a crude clump of jelly assembles and then retains notes on every movement, every breath, every incident that has ever occurred to you or ever will, as well as every thought or dream you have ever had or ever will have.⁴

Therefore, the divine call, which questions how people can be blind to the miraculous creation of their own selves – “And in your own selves, do you not see?” (51:21) – will always remain as new and challenging as when it was first revealed. To expound further on the meaning of this verse, it may be useful to conclude this chapter with a quotation from Sayyid Qutb:

“And in your own selves, do you not see?” Man is the greatest wonder on this earth, but he is inattentive to his own worth and inherent mysteries when his heart is inattentive to faith, and when he is denied the favors of certitude. He is a wonder in his body formation: in the secrets of this body, in his spiritual formation and in the mysteries of his soul. He is a wonder within and without, as he represents the elements of this universe.

You claim you are a microcosm

While you contain the macrocosm.

Whenever man contemplates himself, he is faced with astonishing and bewildering mysteries: the formation of his organs, their positions and functions; the way the functions are executed; the mysteries of his soul, and its known and unknown energies; how he forms his concepts and the way they are stored and remembered. All these images...where and how are they stored? These images, visions and sights...how are they recalled? What is unknown of these images is immeasurably more. Then there are the mysteries of humankind, in its propagation and succession: one cell carries all the characteristics of the humankind, including those of the parents and forefathers. Yet where do all these characteristics lie, in such a tiny cell? And how does that cell recreate them minutely, ending with a reproduction of this wonderful human being?⁵