

Stewardship of Nature

IT has been said earlier that man was created to be God's *khalifah* or vicegerent on earth; that this means that he is expected to transform the world from what it is into what it ought to be. We also said that the will of God in nature is being fulfilled necessarily through the workings of natural law. Finally, let us remember that in the Qur'an, God declared everything in creation is designed and/or redesignable to serve man's happiness and lead to his felicity.

From this it follows that nature is not an enemy. It is not a demonic force challenging man and inciting him to conquer and subdue it. Such a view belongs to those religions whose cosmogonies make the world itself a god, whether good or bad and more often the latter. Such gods, or chthonic forces, must be appeased, if not subdued or manipulated so as to work for man's advantage. Islam regards nature as inert and neutral, a great positive blessing at best, whose joys are advance payments on the rewards of Paradise. It is an orderly cosmos created by God as the theater where man is to do his good deeds, perfectly fitted and equipped by the Creator according to the best measurement, the best form, the best pattern, and is hence absolutely free of any flaws.

In nature, happenings take place in accordance with natural laws, i.e., with the will of God. Hence, it is orderly. But its orderliness

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depends upon its Creator whose will it follows. This will is not whimsical; the Qur'an describes it as eternal and immutable. Hence, causal determination in nature may well be trusted to function. This trust which is the base of nature's orderliness is a function of man's vicegerency. For if man is to perform in nature, the system would have to be trustworthy, capable of receiving man's efficacious interference for the production of given and predictable results. Otherwise, if human causal efficacy could not be trusted to produce the predicted results, then purposiveness is destroyed and with it, the divine assignment of vicegerency.

Muslims have looked upon nature, following these principles, as an open book, a second revelation from God, which anybody could read who has cultivated the requisite knowledge and discipline. The Qur'an, they maintained is easier to read. Its statement of the will of God is direct and eloquent. Nature, on the other hand has to be "treated" to uncover her secret, her law, by scientific investigation and experimentation. But with some preparation, its truth is as public as that of the Qur'an.

This explains why the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, who had never developed any science to mention, fell upon the scientific legacy of classical antiquity with such enthusiasm that around 700 CE, a chemistry or botany manuscript would be travelled for from Eastern Persia to Alexandria, and would be gladly exchanged for a thousand golden pieces. By 800 CE, however, there remained nothing of the scientific and philosophical achievements of antiquity but was well known and mastered by the Muslims. Gradually, this led to the presuppositions of Greek natural science which were found to conflict with the Islamic notion of God.

The problem was not the concern of the scientists who continued with their work unconcerned with those deeper issues. The philosophers took up the problem and, in their hands, the vague assumptions were clarified and pushed to their ultimate conclusions. Cosmic order became cosmic determinism, matter became eternal, divine initiative and providence were denied. The Aristotelian categories were the seemingly irrefutable base. If natural law is truly law, its application must be universal. This gives us a closed cosmos where everything

cannot happen except by a cause sufficient to bring it about. But if such a cause is there, its effect must necessarily follow. Thus, the chain of causality envelops the world. God may have built up the system; but does not run it. Like clockwork, it runs itself. Matter, the presupposition of everything, cannot be destroyed. It only changes form. Hence, it cannot come into being i.e., be created. It is eternal, coeternal with God.

It was the great al-Ghazālī who dealt the death blow to this kind of philosophy. Like David Hume who followed him almost a thousand years later, al-Ghazālī analyzed the causal connection and found it implying no necessity. That A follows *after* B, he reasoned, which is all that the observations of science establish, does not necessarily mean or imply that A happens *by* B. The judgment “B is the cause of A” is only a generalization of probable validity, a validity growing in probability the more often we experience A following upon B but never reaching a perfect validity of 1. If the scientist is absolutely certain that A will follow upon B, whence then does his assurance come? It is his faith that the world order, or ontological equilibrium which brought about the last instance of the claim, will not fail to operate in the future. This faith is the product of religion, not science. Matter may have been at the base of all events and even antedate them. But it could not have brought itself into being. If it has a cause, its cause could not be caused in turn, if an infinite regress is to be avoided. Modern astronomy and space science are not opposed to the doctrine of an expanding universe. This conclusion is equally that of contemporary philosophy of science, the closed cosmos theory being a nineteenth century fad which the twentieth century has exploded.

Nature, we may conclude, is pliable and capable of change. Man is capable to steward its forms to what ought to be. Agriculture, horticulture, engineering and architecture, in short, civilization itself consists precisely in such stewardship. But no alteration performed in vengeance or resentment against nature or without responsibility to the Creator of nature, can remain innocent for long. For if nature is not used as a gift from God given for a moral purpose, its abuse is certain. If the moral purpose of God is denied, may it not be abused? Raped, as modern man has done? In Islam, no such souring of the quest or

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usufruct of nature is possible. For, for the Muslim, the secret working of nature is God's pattern and will; and the utility of nature is a divine gift meant solely for fulfillment of the moral law.

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