



The Earth's Complaint

SURKHEEL (ABU AALIYAH) SHARIF

In H.G. Wells', *The Sleeper Awakes*, Graham, a troubled insomniac in 1890s England, falls into a sleep-like trance from which he does not awake for over two-hundred years. When he comes out of his centuries of slumber, he awakens to a world with wondrous technological trappings, yet staggering social injustice and increasing unrest. Horrified by the stark contradictions and by the mass poverty, tyranny and malcontent in this disturbing technopolis, Graham asserts in utter anguish: "We were making the future, and hardly any of us troubled to think what future we were making. And here it is!"

INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

Our world is not unlike Graham's in that it too is marked by stark contradictions. Ours is a world where, globally, there is an abundance of food, and yet there is mass starvation and grotesque human inequalities; wherein we have increased in technology, yet decreased world stability; and where global markets expand, yet social institutions continue to collapse.

Ours is a world in which we pursue happiness on the material level with such technical brilliance; yet ours is a world where we puzzle over why an increasing number of societies are becoming alarmingly dysfunctional: spiralling rates of suicide, drug abuse, chronic depression, violent crime, and broken homes.

Ours is a world wherein we have mapped the human gene code, where neuroscience has unravelled many of the marvels of the human brain, where we have now unearthed the ruins and relics of countless cultures and civilizations; yet ours is a world where, having amassed all this data about man, never has there been a deeper

ignorance as to his true purpose of life: why he is born, why he lives, and why he must die.

Ours is a world where we have the technology to build space probes to travel beyond the frontiers of our own solar system, or observe galaxies and stars close to the moment of the Big-Bang; and yet ours is a world where man, having mislaid his spiritual compass, now wreaks havoc with the actual Earth itself: pushing it to the brink of environmental catastrophe.

Amidst such contradictions, and modernity's gross self-assertions, our world still contains immense beauty and goodness: not all is doom and gloom. Nevertheless, we do live in deeply disturbing times; the healing of which we must all partake in.

THE TRACES WE LEAVE

"The Earth's Complaint" is the title Gai Eaton gave to the third chapter of his book, *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam*. It encapsulates the feelings many of us have, living as we do in times of great global instability. The title itself is culled from the following Quranic verses: *When the earth is shaken with its earthquakes, and the earth yields up its burdens, and man says: 'What is the matter with it?' That day it shall proclaim its news, for your Lord will have inspired it.*¹

Re-iterating the implication of the above passages, the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, asked: "Do you know what the earth's news is? Its news is that it will bear witness about every man and woman as to what they did upon it. It will say: 'He did such and such on such and such day.' That is its news."² In an age where

we now realize the need for reducing our ‘carbon footprints’, the Qur’an instills in the human conscience the necessity of being responsible for our ‘earth prints’ too. As Gai Eaton poignantly remarks: “It might be said that we leave our fingerprints upon all that we touch, and they remain in place long after we have gone on our way. We forget so much of the past, but the past is still there and cannot be wiped out, unless God - under His Name “the Effacer” (*al-Afi*) - chooses to erase it from our records.”³

ESSENTIAL TRUTHS

But why, it may be asked, will the earth be inspired to tell all? Typically, the Muslim response is to explain that this accountability forms part of the wisdom for which man was created. For in Islam’s account of things, man’s place in the cosmos is a truly formidable one. He has been made a *khalifah*, a vicegerent or custodian of the earth; responsible for tending it and for upholding the Divine Will in it. In this reading, man’s sojourn on earth comes in the shape of a life-long examination; a ‘test’ in order that his potential as *khalifah* be realized and the extent of his knowledge, love and worship of God be made known. As such, the earth is said to be like a ‘field’ which man is called upon to cultivate, with knowledge, submission and good deeds, so as to reap the harvest of everlasting bliss - Paradise and proximity to God - in the Afterlife. *It is He*, reveals the Qur’an, *Who created death and life, to try which of you is best in conduct.*⁴ This same notion reverberates in the saying of the Prophet, peace be upon him, who explained: “The world is green and sweet, and God has appointed you as vicegerents in it to see how you behave.”⁵

Accountability for what we do or do not do in this life, then, forms an integral part of Islam’s essential truths. At the actual forefront of these truths comes the reminder that the universe has a Creator, and that this Creator is One. Secondly, they remind us that we must affirm this realization in our lives. In order to facilitate this, we are given a set of devotional practices which constitute the ideal and simplest means of approaching God. Thirdly, they remind us of man’s vocation as vicegerent, and of his responsibility to the earth and to his fellow men. In addition, we are reminded of the unseen world, of jinns and angels, and their influences; and of the end of days when all humanity will be brought to account. It is with

this in mind that ‘Umar, the Prophet’s close companion and Islam’s second caliph, exhorted: “Call yourselves to account before you are called to account.”⁶ There is also a hadith which informs us: “The prudent one is he who takes stock of his soul and works for what comes after death, while the foolish one is he who follows his whims yet hopes in God’s forgiveness.”⁷

IN THE SHADOWS OF IDEOLOGY

In *Islam the Basics*, Colin Turner, in depicting the image of Islam in the West, writes:

“The Western image of Islam as a harsh, uncompromising religion that demands strict and unquestioning obedience from its followers, who, if pushed, will not hesitate to spread their faith with violence and terror, is one not confined to the rhetoric of twelfth-century Crusaders: fear of Islam and Muslims, or ‘Islamophobia’ as it is currently known, is sadly as visible today as it was then. Just as pictorial depictions of Muslims as child-eating demons abounded in the days of Richard the Lionheart, so too some 800 years later do we come across ostensibly serious works on Islam whose front covers carry photographs of gun-toting mullahs or balaclava-clad terrorists, often against the backdrop of blown-up embassies or hijacked airliners. While the responsibility for the creation of this negative image rests largely with sensationalist tabloid press, which is always ready to prey on its readers’ fear of the unknown, much damage has been inflicted by writers and academics who, one assumes, should know better. The Muslim world, it would now seem, is the bogey man to be feared and held at bay as we approach, in the words of one academic, the ‘end of history’.”⁸

But the notion of Islam as a faith that inspires its followers to violence in order to achieve its goals - even if this involves the killing or maiming of women, children and other civilians - is not a Western construct alone. For the past quarter of a century the over-politicization of Islam has fed this stereotype. Militant re-readings of the faith, that ascribe to it the kind of inhumane acts that have no place in it - neither from the Qur’an; nor the practice of the Prophet; and nor in the interpretations of the juristic community - are a scourge on Islam’s name and warp its essential truths. Islam *the path of salvation* is now being eclipsed by Islam *the ideology*. This is not to deny the

political dimension inherent in Islam, but to question the logic at work here. How can Islam turned political and mutated into ideology ('Political Islam', as it is now being called) in any way bring to the fore the essential truths of the faith? How can the restoration of "Islamic governance" ever warrant slaughtering the very soul of the faith on the alter of power politics? This is not a case wherein it may be said that the means justifies the goal. Not at all!

WINDOW INTO A WORLDVIEW

Having broached the subject of politics, let us conclude this paper by re-affirming some of the main tenets that inform Islam's vision of man and society; its worldview, so to speak:

1. DIGNITY

The first of them is re-affirming that every human being has been endowed with an inherent dignity that is to be acknowledged, upheld and fought for. Here, the Qur'an says: *We have indeed conferred dignity on the children of Adam.*⁹ It should be emphasized that the Islamic tradition sees all human life as dignified, not just the life of a Muslim. In his magisterial Qur'anic exegesis, Imam al-Alūsī writes that "each and every member of the human race, whether pious or profligate, has been endowed with dignity, nobility and honour which cannot exclusively be pinned down."¹⁰ This dignity is not something earned, rather it is an expression of God's grace and gift to man; a natural right of every human being - regardless of one's colour, race or religion.

An episode is recorded in which the Prophet, peace be upon him, saw a funeral procession passing by. Upon seeing it he rose to his feet and remained standing until he was told the deceased was a Jew. This occasioned the Prophet, upon whom be peace, to remark "Is he not a human soul - *alaysat nafsan.*"¹¹ This, despite the man belonging to a faith community with whom the Muslims of Madinah had stark theological differences and deep political grievances. A timely reminder for the Muslims of today.

2. VICEGERENCY

Re-affirming our vocation as *khalifabs* - vicegerents or caretakers of the earth, as it is often glossed. Informs the Qur'an: *It is He who has appointed you as vicegerents of*

*the earth.*¹² This investiture of vicegerency, which lends itself to man's dignity, finds its complement in another Qur'anic notion: that of Man being an '*abd*'; a servant of God. Servanthood requires that we as human beings be *passive* towards Heaven, in submission to God's Will. In contrast, the mantle of vicegerency requires being *active* as God's representatives, carrying out the Divine Will on earth and maintaining justice and balance on it. Asserts the Qur'an: *Work not corruption on the earth after it has been set in order.*¹³

But today we no longer see man as vicegerent, tending to the earth; instead we now see man as predator and exploiter, devouring the earth. As his 'needs' grow ever more, he is never quite satisfied. The more he consumes, the ravenous he becomes. Man, having chosen to reject or neglect his higher purpose of creation, and failing to discern any deep significance in nature, or anything that worths meriting his respect - it is, after all, a product of mere 'chance' - has desacrilised nature, subverted the balance and provoked an ecological crisis. In doing so, man has become the most malignant element in creation itself. "If the world has changed," wrote Gai Eaton, "this only reflects the change in the idea we now have of our place in it. When the Vicegerent lets go of the reigns, all things run wild."¹⁴

3. TRUSTEESHIP

We may, of course, make use of the earth for our food, our clothing, the instruments of our trade and, indeed, for deploying the possibilities that lie within us. But all of this is conditional; for it is not as owners of the earth that we make use of it, but rather as trustees. This being the third tenet: *We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were afraid of it. But man assumed it, for man is unjust and ignorant.*¹⁵

This trust, or *amānab*, engages the two most essential privileges of man: intelligence and free will. It confers on him the freedom to choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood, heaven and hell. It enables him to contemplate the divine order around him, and to intervene positively and to live in harmony with it. Humanity is thus invested with an empowerment that carries with it a weighty responsibility as well as a terrible risk in that man, if he renounces his role as vicegerent and takes to

defiance, shows himself to be no more than *unjust and ignorant*, and thus a source of discord in creation. Our current state demonstrating precisely this.¹⁶

Interestingly, according to Ibn Taymiyyah, the doctrine of *siyāsah al-shar‘iyyah* - that is to say, Islamic political theory - emerges from the following Qur’anic stricture: *God commands you to render back things held in trust to their rightful owners, and if you judge between people, that you judge justly.*¹⁷

4. SANCTITY

Another tenet in Islam’s *weltanschauung* or worldview concerns sanctity of life: both human and animal. As for the human being, he is indeed a sacred creation, and so any infringement of that sanctity is deemed by Islam to be a heinous crime: *Whosoever kills a person for other than crimes of manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he has killed the whole of humanity; and whosoever saves the life of one person, it shall be as if he has saved the whole of humanity.*¹⁸ Acts of terror, then, in which women, children and other innocent civilians are targeted and killed is categorically repudiated by the *sharī‘ah* and amounts to nothing less than murder. The juristic consensus about this was typified by al-Nawawī, who stated: “Scholars are unanimous about the prohibition of killing women and children providing they do not engage in [direct] combat.”¹⁹ Ibn Qudāmāh, in a like vein, said: “Women, the elderly, children or monks may not be killed, for they are non-combatants.”²⁰ The cue for this classical doctrine is taken from the order of the Prophet, peace be upon him, who “forbade the killing of women and children.”²¹

It goes without saying that the above rule is in context of a legitimate war. In Islam, judgements related to war and peace are not left to scholars, soldiers, let alone vigilante cells. Rather, it rests solely with the head of state. This is a cardinal rule of war, as Ibn Qudāmāh says: “The question of declaring war is left to the head of state and his decision. Compliance with that decision is the subject’s duty with regards to what the authorities deem fit in the matter.”²² The acts of terror that a fringe minority now seek to pass off as a legitimate jihad is, therefore, a gross deviation from the *sharī‘ah*. In fact, Abdal Hakim Murad contends: “Terrorism is to jihad what adultery is to marriage.”²³

Turning to the animal kingdom, here the Qur’an insists on courtesy: *There is not an animal in the earth, nor a creature flying on two wings, but they are nations like you.*²⁴ The courtesy required is one based upon a sense of awe and respect for all of earth’s living creatures. The Prophet, peace be upon him, was once asked: Shall we be rewarded for doing good, even to animals? He said: “There is a reward for serving every living creature.”²⁵ On another occasion, he told a group of people mounted on their camels, chatting to one another: “Ride these animals safely and leave them safely, and do not use them as chairs for your conversations in the streets and marketplaces.”²⁶ He also informed that. “A woman was once thrown into Hell for caging a cat until it starved to death.”²⁷ There is also the hadith wherein a man took an egg from a bird’s nest which then distressed the mother bird. Observing this, the Prophet, peace be upon him, instructed the man: “Have mercy on the mother and give back her egg.”²⁸

If this is Islam’s ethical teachings in respect to animals, how odd it is for someone to then believe that the same faith could allow the intentional killing of innocent men, women or children: “*What! Have you slain an innocent soul though he has killed nobody? Truly you have done a thing most foul.*”²⁹

5. JUSTICE

The subject of justice permeates the whole of Islam. The Qur’an is strewn with references to the theme of justice, identifying the good society with a just one. *O you who believe!*, exhorts the Qur’an, *Be steadfast witnesses for God in equity; and never let hatred of any people make you swerve from justice. Be just; that is nearer to God-fearingness.*³⁰ There is also the ethical imperative which requires: *If you give your word, do justice, even though it be against a kinsman.*³¹ Justice is so intrinsic to Islam that, according to Ibn Taymiyyah: “It is said that: ‘Allah upholds a just state even though it be disbelieving, but will not uphold an unjust state even if it is Muslim.’ It has also been said: ‘The world may endure with justice and disbelief, but not with injustice and Islam.’”³² This goes a long way, I suppose, in explaining the pitiful state of so many countries in the Muslim world today.

In a stark warning, the Prophet, upon whom be peace, announced: “What destroyed those who came before

you was that whenever one of their nobility committed theft, they left him alone; but if one of their weak stole, they applied the prescribed punishment on him.”³³ In the absence of retributive justice, ill will will be the fruits.

Shabby tyrants and corrupt government officials are not the only stains upon justice, there is distributive or social injustice too. The Qur’an states: *God created for you all that is on the earth.*³⁴ Moreover: *He has subjected to you whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on earth.*³⁵ The earth’s bounties, according to the Qur’anic reading, are for all humanity, not just for some. Yet having stated the obvious, we live in a world where twenty percent of the globe (that’s principally us in the developed nations) consume eighty-six percent of the earth’s resources and goods in order to buttress a materialistic driven lifestyle. Our growing concern here in the industrialized West is not so much the fear of poverty as it is obesity! The U.N. recently warned: “The imbalance in economic growth, if allowed to continue, will produce a world gargantuan in its excesses and grotesque in its human and economic inequalities.”³⁶

Bleaker still, of the 6 billion people living on the planet, 1.2 billion of them live in severe poverty; 800 million of them go to bed starving each night; 1.3 billion have no access to safe drinking water; and 30,000 die each day from poverty related diseases - many because they are too poor to afford vital medicines. Yet the U.N. alerts us that: “Globally there is enough food to feed the world. But to our shame, we live in a world where food rots and people starve.”³⁷

Partake of the fruits of the earth for our needs we must; partake of them for our enjoyment we certainly can; but partake of them excessively or irresponsibly we cannot and must not. *Eat and drink, says the Qur’an, but not excessively. For God loves not the excessive.*³⁸

6. MERCY

Finally, no vision of society could be complete without compassion, mercy and kindness. Islam seeks to nurture a compassionate society: one rooted not in rugged individualism, selfishness or hyper capitalism;³⁹ but “rooted in,” as Abdal Hakim Murad duly points out, “immediate and sincere concern for human welfare under a compassionate God”⁴⁰

*And My mercy, proclaims God in the Qur’an, embraces all things.*⁴¹ The Qur’an also says that *He has prescribed mercy on Himself.*⁴² The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “When God created creation, He wrote down in a book - which is with Him above the Throne: Indeed My mercy outstrips My wrath.”⁴³ The Divine Rigour is still present in creation, but it is conditioned and dominated by Divine Mercy.

As for creation, the Prophet, upon whom be peace, said: “Those who show no mercy, shall receive no mercy.”⁴⁴ One celebrated hadith has it: “Those who show mercy will be shown mercy to by the All-Merciful. Be merciful to those on earth, and those in heaven will be merciful to you.”⁴⁵ Such teachings flowing from the Prophet, the Messenger of the All-Merciful, are only to be expected when we recall the Quranic declaration about him: *We have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds.*⁴⁶ He said of himself: “I am the Prophet of Mercy.”⁴⁷ While on another occasion, he remarked: “I have not been sent to curse, I have only been sent as a mercy.”⁴⁸

In an age where calls for justice reign paramount, some may wonder why Islam celebrates the Prophet with the quality of mercy more so than with justice. We need only reflect on the fact that justice - which is giving all things their due - is not always enough to bring about healing in the social fabric. So long as injustices and wrongs are remembered and not forgiven, or justice is perceived as an instrument of punishment, then resentment on either side remains and can, at the slightest provocation, ignite into anger and rage. Forgiveness and mercy, by contrast, can melt away grievances and put a closure on conflict. This was vividly demonstrated by the Prophet, peace be upon him, the day he re-entered Makkah. After suffering persecution, humiliation and rejection by the Makkans, the Prophet, some eight years later, returns as the City’s conqueror. Rather than exacting retribution or revenge, which would have been the normal course of events for most conquerors, the Prophet, peace be upon him, said to his opponents: “I say to you what my brother Joseph said: *This day, no reproach shall be upon you. May God forgive you; He is the Most-Merciful of the merciful.*⁴⁹ Go, for you are all free.”⁵⁰ Thus, in choosing forgiveness over justice, the Prophet, peace be upon him, breaks the possible cycle of vengeance and vendetta, and liberates the people from being held hostage to history. A clear

case of the Shakespearean: “That quality of mercy ... ‘Tis mightiest in the mightiest.”

This is not to belittle justice, or to suggest that righteous indignation against tyranny or injustice is not mandated by faith. Rather, it is simply asserting that some situations require ‘transcending’ justice, and healing hurt through forgiveness and mercy’s warm embrace.

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END NOTES

1. Qur’an 99:1-5.
2. Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 3575, who said: “It is *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*.”
3. *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2000), 39.
4. Qur’an 67:2.
5. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.2742.
6. Cited in Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, *Mukhtaṣar Minbāj al-Qāsidīn* (Damascus: Maktabah Dār al-Bayān, 1999), 397.
7. Al-Tirmidhī, no.2461, where he declares it to be *ḥasan*. Its chain, though, is weak - as per Ibn Ḥajr al-‘Asqalānī, *Hidāyat al-Ruwwāt ilā Takbrīj Aḥādīth al-Maṣābiḥ wa’l-Mishkāt* (Cairo: Dār Ibn ‘Affān, 2001), 5:49.
8. Turner, *Islam the Basics* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 184-5.
9. Qur’an 17:70.
10. Al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), 15:117.
11. Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.1312.
12. Qur’an 6:165. Al-Rāghib states: “Vicegerency (*khalāfah*) is deputyship on behalf of another, either due to the absence of the deputy; or due to his demise; or his being incapacitated; or out of being honoured as his representative. It is with this final meaning that God has delegated His Friends to be His representatives on earth.” *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2002), 294.
13. Qur’an 7:56.
14. Eaton, *King of the Castle* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1990), 141. In the original passage, the word “Viceroy” was used. I have substituted it with the word “Vicegerent” so as to be consistent with the rest of the translation.
15. Qur’an 33:72.
16. Cf. Roger Du Pasquier, *Unveiling Islam* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 21.
17. Qur’an 4:58. Cf. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Siyāsah al-Shar‘iyyah fī Iṣlāḥ al-Rā‘ī wa’l-Ra‘iyyah* (Kuwait: Dār al-Arkam, 1986), 12-13.
18. Qur’an 5:3.
19. *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1995), 11:292.
20. *Al-Mughnī Sharḥ al-Kabir* (Saudi Arabia: Dār al-‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1999), 13:177-8.

21. Al-Bukhārī, no.3015; Muslim, no.1744.
22. *Al-Mughnī*, 13:11.
23. From his *Contentions 5*, at www.masud.co.uk
24. Qur’an 6:38.
25. Al-Bukhārī, no.3321; Muslim, no.2245.
26. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, no.15629. The hadith was declared sound (*ḥasan*) by Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūṭ *et al.*, in his critical edition of *al-Musnad*, 24:392.
27. Al-Bukhārī, no.3318; Muslim, no.2242.
28. Abu Dāwūd, *Sunan*, no.2675.
29. Qur’an 18:73.
30. Qur’an 5:8.
31. Qur’an 6:152.
32. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Dār al-‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1991), 28:142.
33. Al-Bukhārī, no.6788; Muslim, no.1688. The hadith ends with a rigorous proclamation: “By God! If Fatimah, daughter of Muhammad were to steal, I would cut-off her hand.”
34. Qur’an 2:29.
35. Qur’an 45:13.
36. Dr. Jacques Diouf, Director General of the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organisation - cited in *Anti Capitalism: A Guide to the Movement* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2001), 60.
37. U.N. *Human Development Report*, 1996.
38. Qur’an 7:31.
39. Britain’s Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks wrote: “Even before the anti-globalization movement was under way, concerns had already been expressed in the West about the impact of a market-led consumer culture on social institutions. As early as 1947 Joseph Schumpeter had warned that ‘Capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own.’ Throughout the liberal democracies of the West, families and communities have been in decline, leading to new concentrations of poverty and social breakdown.” Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London & New York: Continuum, 2003), 31.
40. *The Fall of the Family* (Part I) at www.masud.co.uk
41. Qur’an 7:156.
42. Qur’an 6:12.
43. Al-Bukhārī, no.7404; Muslim, no.2751.
44. Al-Bukhārī, no.5997; Muslim, no.2317.
45. Al-Tirmidhī, no.1989.
46. Qur’an 21:107.
47. Muslim, no.2355.
48. *ibid.*, no.2599.
49. Qur’an 12:92.
50. As per Ibn Hishām, *Sirab*, 2: 274.



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