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Reviving the Islamic Narratives about the Sacredness of Nature: A Case for Nasr's Ecosophy as Political Ecology after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of metaphysical crisis in addition to its well-known status as a global health crisis. I argue that the general absence of a comprehensive metaphysical outlook of nature has further alienated humankind from a Divine-based cosmology of nature. COVID-19 is certainly part of nature and man too. However, our outlook at 'tackling' the disease is filled with overconfidence that man could overcome nature, thus 'defeating' the disease. This should not be the mental and spiritual state of human beings at present natural crisis. Drawing from Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis as Modern Man*, I argue that a certain arrogance had developed in modern mentality that COVID-19 was just another viral disease – until it engulfed the entire planet. Realizing that man's modern knowledge had been sorely inadequate to contain the disease as they expected, due to general disconnect with the sacred side of nature, they turned to fear, even despair. Present Islamic perspectives should revive the inclusivity between man and nature to reconnect humankind to the sacred aspects of nature. A narrative borne of Islam must serve as a communique for those who seek re-connection with nature considering the evolving ecosophy by accounting Michel Serre's *Natural Contract* to develop a new political ecology.*

Keywords: *Nature and the Sacred, ecosophy, political ecology, metaphysical crisis, COVID-19*

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is well known for affecting us for close to three years now. It has impacted us in innumerable ways including those fundamental aspects of life we took for granted before the pandemic began. Now, the pandemic situation is almost normal for us – a new and alien normal viewed from since 2019. The physical and psychological impacts of the pandemic are now fast documented in various forms – formal and informal. However, there is not much deliberation on how our metaphysical outlook has changed ever since. The change, however, is not very encouraging. Already daunted by various forces of modernity and natural catastrophes – such as climate change – then, we are now forced to face a pandemic that does not seem to subside. Like multiple tsunamis – giant waves – the COVID-19 hit our outward shores of being that are well known to literally kill us. And although we know our inner being was hugely disturbed, we did not know how to respond because of our outlook's detachment from a wholesome and Divine-based cosmology of nature.

We responded at first with a sort of arrogance – very confident with our present knowledge about the empirical world – especially of science – that we thought we could 'defeat' the COVID-19 disease by overcoming nature in no time. However, the world knows that it has now engulfed the entire planet. Realizing that man's modern knowledge is sorely inadequate to contain the disease as expected, due to the general disconnect with the sacred side of nature, the result is fear, even despair. This is where and when a present Islamic perspective needs to be brought forward to revive a notion of inclusivity between man and nature so that man can be reconnected with the sacred aspects of nature – his deeper and meaningful sense of being. This could be achieved by certain narratives about nature present in Islam that could serve as communicate for those who seek reconnection with nature by considering the evolving ecosophy and political ecology.

2. Brief Explanation on *Scientia Sacra*

To explain the concept of *scientia sacra*, I contrast it with Hugo O. Engelmann's understanding about fundamental concepts of modern science (1962, 8). Engelmann maintains the universe in modern

science is metaphysically viewed as “...a self-contained process [and] is scientifically transliterated into the concepts of particle and field. The universe as a dynamic system appears composed of irreducible, indivisible, elementary particles of organization” (Ibid). Thus, we could say that modern science is, in principle, the science of particles. The mode and levels of organization can be indefinite, but according to Engelmann, we can assume only three, namely, “...the physical, the biological, and the behavioural, to account for all empirical phenomena” (Ibid).

The system made no mention about something beyond the closed universe that could explain the workings of the universe itself. It also made no attempt to view the subsystems to arrive at a certain Unity that encompasses the meaning of the closed system itself and beyond. The only admissible evidence to solidify the claims it made are empirical phenomena – those that can be materially observed, qualified and quantified. Thus, we can say the focus of modern science, where it differs with *scientia sacra*, is that the latter points on arriving at the fact of Unity – vis-à-vis God. There is a clear objective to the science: its end and means point to the fact of Unity, vis-à-vis God in Islam. Where both the sciences meet is exhaustive employment of human reason to observe the empirical phenomena as much as possible. However, *scientia sacra* goes further than just human reason and empirical phenomena. It admits revelation and its Source as credible form of knowledge to explain the phenomena, including the empirical ones, without necessarily abandoning the fruitful products of human thought.

Scientia sacra, while respecting the veracity of human thought, does not presume as fundamental the inevitable Ultimate Reality – the Unity. At best human thoughts are mirror to something beyond, although not exclusive from, empirical phenomena, but are not *It* regarding the fact of Its being and existence. Thus, while we can rely on modern science to explain all the empirical aspects of COVID-19, we need *scientia sacra* to explain COVID-19, both as part and parcel of the universe and of human life with the essential underpinning that points to an Ultimate Reality of Unity – God.

3. COVID-19 as a Form of Metaphysical Crisis

Seyyed Hossein Nasr spelled it brilliantly in his acclaimed work, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* when he examines “the domination of nature” by humankind (1990, 18). What underlies this domination is that nature in the eyes of modern man is desacralized and exploited to the fullest for utility and enjoyment purposes (Ibid). This is owing to the underpinning concept of ‘progress’ defined essentially with ‘economic development’ with almost utter indifference to nature. This disregard is motivated by the lack of meaning to nature. As a result, humankind develops little relationship to his environment. Other than an expectation that he could fully subjugate it to his rapacious whim, this has resulted in environmental problems unique to modern civilizations such as overconsumption, climate change, physical destruction of natural reserves, etc. So much was this assumption of domination over nature – underpinned by fundamentally materialistic assumption – that it has reduced nature to ‘mere material.’

Under this assumption, all things in nature could be explained by their material functions and dysfunctions with a bias that they always must serve the *material* human wants and needs, with ever stronger emphasis on the former. Thus, the human idea of achievement regarding nature is increasingly focused on his ‘self.’ Nasr again pointed out the idea of ‘mystique’ that is a residue from spiritual relationship with nature (Ibid, 19). From the act of perceiving nature as a reflection of the divine and contemplative sign, this time the act is about conquering nature to demonstrate man’s ability to control and dominate nature (Ibid).

With this attitude, there is little wonder that COVID-19 is viewed as just another natural problem to conquer. Many would equate it with the ‘evil’ or ‘destructive’ side of nature – taking away human lives in troves and disrupting their used-to-be ‘normal’ human activities. Suddenly this merely material nature has a characteristic – that it is ‘evil’ or ‘destructive’ just because it takes away human lives and livelihood. COVID-19 seems to be at the helm of such titles but without the traditional and religious language as ‘evil’ or ‘destructive.’ COVID-19 is not as ‘tame’ unlike other infectious diseases that had long been infecting and affecting the livelihood of human society.

Dengue and influenza for instance, have been affecting parts of human society annually but have never been treated as novel and dangerous, unlike the ‘wild’ COVID-19. The lack of historical knowledge related to earlier pandemics such as the Spanish Flu and Pestilence that resulted in millions of deaths put one’s understanding of crisis as unilinear. Science, as viewed from a detached engagement with nature, is assumed to describe and prescribe remedies for human maladies.

There will never be a full understanding about nature if we confine our perspectives without accounting for a more comprehensive view of nature. This is because when we deal with nature, we also directly deal with the human aspects of and about it, namely our own human deeds and misdeeds. It is very important to scrutinise and reflect on the motives of human deeds and misdeeds. Such scrutiny must encompass the different domains of the psychological and intellectual. More emphasis must also be centered on the spiritual as we are cognisant of its significant role in our everyday understanding of nature.

To analyse the spiritual aspect, we cannot simply hope to use the ‘tools’ meant to analyse other aspects of human *being*. While we must not deny what the empirical data and scientific methods have shown us, we must also go beyond them, i.e., to regard COVID-19 in the realm of the metaphysical.

4. COVID-19 and Cognizance of the Centre

In this paper, I draw on Nasr’s views on the medieval Islamic philosophers, namely Suhrawardi and Avicenna to get a sense that God is above nature. Firstly, according to Nasr, the conception of God according to Avicenna is as follows:

Everything in the Universe, by the very fact that it exists, is plunged in Being; yet, God, or Pure Being, who is the Origin and Creator of all things, is not the first term in a continuous chain and therefore does not have a “substantial” and “horizontal” continuity with the beings of the world. Rather, God is anterior to the Universe and transcended with respect to it. It is God as conceived in the religions of the Abrahamic

Tradition; it is God not only as envisaged by the Muslim Avicenna but also by Jewish and Christian philosophers who shared a common conception of the Supreme Deity and who, like Avicenna, reformulated the tenets of Greek philosophy in monotheistic terms. (1997, 25)

Meanwhile, by Nasr's account, Suhrawardi hails from the Illuminationist (Ishraqi) school, who sees the Universe comprising "...degrees of light and of darkness, which is the absence of light. And bodies, so far as their material aspect is concerned, are no more than this darkness, or obstruction, which does not permit the light to penetrate through it" (Ibid, 67-68). Regarding the soul, Suhrawardi is fundamentally interested in its celestial origin and its current worldly affliction. The soul constantly seeks to free itself from this worldly prison vis-à-vis "Occidental exile" to return to its native home (i.e., the celestial above) where it can truly be happy and at peace (Ibid). Thus, God in Suhrawardi's conception is "... the Pure Light, the Light of lights (*nur al-anwar*), is the Divine Essence whose light is blinding because of its luminosity and intensity. [This] Supreme Light is the source of all existence, since the Universe in all its planes of reality consists in nothing more than degrees of light and darkness" (Ibid, 69). According to Nasr,

Suhrawardi also considers the division of beings according to their degree of comprehension and awareness... the ultimate criterion for a hierarchic existence is the degree of light each being possesses, which is also identified with knowledge and awareness. The Universe therefore issues from the Supreme Light – without there being a "substantial" and "material" continuity between the two. Moreover, the Light of Lights has its vice-regent and direct symbol in every domain i.e. the Sun in the sky, fire among the elements etc. so that everywhere His signs are manifested, and all things attest to His Presence. (Ibid)

In the thought of both Avicenna and Suhrawardi, we can see therefore that nature is always below God but is never detached from Him in terms of His Reflection and Presence. While Avicenna thinks that God is not part of the continuous lesser being because he is Pure Being,

nature as lesser being nonetheless could be reflected as a Sign (*Ayat*) of God that could be contemplated by human to reach Him. Suhrawardi takes a different mode by attributing gradations of existence being God as Light of Lights (*Nur al-Anwar*). Nature is seen as this imperfect place – a prison – for the human soul who seeks the ultimate freedom transcending from an inferior state of light to the superior one until the soul returns home in the Pure Light, the Divine Essence. Thus, we can see COVID-19 as part of this Signs of God and light posts – instead of dark corners – towards God because of its part in nature. Its silver lining (of Light) is in the beholders’ part to see (us) that we could contemplate the place of COVID-19 in nature to learn its lessons to reach the Sacred.

COVID-19 can be viewed from the Tawhidic perspective of Islam as advanced by Nasr and other scholars of *scientia sacra*, of the perennial philosophy. Viewed from this perspective, COVID-19 is yet another opportunity to return inwards – a mode for reorientation of sorts toward the Center from the turbulent circumferential Periphery. The Center is none other than the Sacred Himself – a testimony to viewing the Unity, to the One God that has been the central message of revealed religions and in this essay’s particular context, of Islam. The Unity as understood here is that COVID-19 is yet another reminder and lesson for the human being to be cognizant of his or her Centre – God. Whilst the basic idea is to realise the return to God, all efforts must be done from the physical to the metaphysical. Hence, the work to return to the Centre presents the potential to cast COVID-19 not as fatalist calamity, but as a lesson to the betterment of humanity – starting from the self – and his general connection that leads to the One (*Ahad*).

With this, humanity again realizes that its confidence in science, or whatever periphery of its doings, must be all returned to the basics of human living. Recall that during the earliest phase of the pandemic, countries of the world imposed movement restrictions throughout the cities that virtually took away one of the human basic freedoms, that is, the right to free movement. However, the animal kingdom cherished the situation because the limitation imposed as such casts their return to some of the riverside, seaside, even city roads where they were thought to be ‘extinct’ or impossible to be at such place during ‘normal’ times. While COVID-19 is catastrophic to human beings as it deprives, alters their

everyday practices and lifestyle, it however provides both the physical space and ‘spirit’ space for the lower forms in the animal kingdom to ‘re-take’ what was once their natural habitat. During the period of human immobility, though the other spheres of ‘scientific endeavours’ were suddenly put to a standstill, animals and plants were able to recoup, relax, and regenerate without too much human interference.

Thus mark the equilibrium of COVID-19 to the dynamics of life in general – especially if one lives in the city where a semblance of human touch on nature is scarce. The disease reminds us in the form of silver lining of a cloud to reconnect ourselves with nature. The nature being articulated here is not just about walking in the park or any form of tourism. Rather, it calls for the deeper reflection of our environment and the direct effect around us. The effects are so significant if understood beyond the statistical numbers of everyday new cases, R-value, and so on and so forth. Of paramount importance is the contemplation on the exceptional circumstance especially about man’s deeper psyche and spiritual self that has brought humanity to this point when the onslaught of COVID-19 seems to be unstoppable.

At the psychic level, COVID-19 can be interpreted as a symbol of cognizance – that no matter how busy we may be with our life to the point that we are careless about our responsibility with our surroundings, and more importantly, with ourselves, we will be faced with the disturbance of insecurity. COVID-19 came when we were literally unaware of the magnitude of its impact when we faced it. It came as a shock to our state of being – that we needed to adjust to a ‘new normal’ in such a short period of time because of the severity of the disease at the time – there was no cure nor vaccine. But we were presented with a visual graphic of a microscopic creature that literally changed our ‘normal’ lives forever.

This move to a ‘new normal’ assumes a fundamental change in our lives. But we must ask ourselves whether it will change us for the better. Also, what does it mean to be ‘better’ in the context of a ‘new normal’? Although in reflection, there is nothing new as far as the principle of human nature is concerned. Suddenly, we are ruptured in the sense that there is not much prior ‘guidance,’ a manual of sorts, to guide society into the sudden storm of pandemic. We were quite

literally walking in the dark hoping that science could guide us. Science has performed its role to the extent that it posits the materiality of the disease, i.e., by describing the virus, how it infects people, how it evolves, and so forth. But even as we have found ways to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, we are left with a host of unresolved uncertainties about the future.

For instance, by turning inwards and growing the spiritual wings to fly are how we can relate the sacredness to nature. By turning inwards, we essentially introspect the essential qualities of the self that relate to nature ‘outside.’ The realisation on the aspect is that we are part of the natural world from the ‘inside,’ that the external nature is all but reflections of our inner world. We will realize the natural relationship to the sacred when we view that our life situation between the interior and the exterior world cannot be fully appreciated if we ignore the inevitable connection. This connection cannot be explained by our material consciousness with the physical and material nature alone, even if they manifest the impacts of human thoughts and the endeavours in the outwardly empirical manner. The devastating impact of COVID-19 on human life is not the result of direct mal-intention of little viruses to harm humans. They are merely manifesting themselves and unleashing their deadly potential from none other than careless human thought and acts reflective of an egoistic drive to conquer nature. By turning inwards, we attempt to envisage a world beyond the external vision to train our internal vision to see the world as it is. The realization can be ugly at first, but the discovery of such a vision would at least enable us to contemplate the possibility to transcend the current lowly state of life that we are living into the spiritual realm.

5. Nasr’s Brief Spiritual Reflection on the Current Pandemic

Nasr wrote a short essay in the *Sacred Web* (2020) where he made a spiritual reflection on the current pandemic. In it, he reminds us that human life on Earth is temporary and is inevitably coupled with various degrees of dangers, disasters, and tragedies. He also draws our attention to the scriptural reminders of various religious traditions to be taken as valuable lessons. The idea is strong that we ought to regain

our consciousness of the cosmos all around us and embrace it as part and parcel of our lives, especially in moral and spiritual principles. Nasr emphasizes the importance of collective prayers in public spaces and houses of worship which were common during an aftermath of natural disasters (This was also observed in the West). Now, the cosmos is viewed secularly as if it is a dead machine, lacking life and spiritual significance, a mere 'it'. Thus, it denotes the modern man's forgetfulness about the underlying principles of the significance of such practices (vis-à-vis collective and public prayers after an occurrence of a natural disaster).

Nature has its own rhythm and harmony and a life of its own both visible and invisible. Therefore, like any life form, it will in some way and someday react to what humanity has done upon it so the latter can learn a lesson, as informed by the multiple verses of the Quran. We can draw spiritual lessons from nature, in which nature itself serves as teacher. The modern man fails to see such lessons, in good part because he suffers from the sin of hubris – of pride. Thus, the momentous pandemic and other worldwide crises currently facing us could make us more humble and more compassionate towards every creature, and among ourselves. Thus, the present crisis should be an opportunity for a spiritual awakening. Instead of viewing it as all gloom and doom, it should be viewed as God's gift to spiritual realities that many had been oblivious to. In particular, the present crisis could make us turn more inward, more introspective, and be more familiar with our own inner self. By doing so, we can hope to view nature as our true spiritual friend and that humans are governed by a Divine Will and not by blind forces and laws.

Nasr beautifully closes his passage when he mentions that we have only two choices when the earth suddenly cracks below us: we can either sink into the abyss or grow wings to fly to the illimitable sky. He invites us "to grow wings and fly," and cites the Quranic verse: *Kullu man 'alayha fan wa yabqa wajhu rabbika dhul-jalali wa 'l-ikram*, which he renders as, "All other than Him perish, and there remains the Face of thy Lord, Possessor of Majesty and Generosity." The Face in a way is the face we turn to God. Nasr then prays that the present tragedy aids us to face ourselves to God, not turn away from him.

6. Theophany in Ecosophy as New Political Ecology: Expanding Nasr's *Scientia Sacra* and Michel Serre's Natural Contract

I contend that the basic work in political ecology, if it were to appreciate any discourse about the Sacred, must begin by addressing the problem of desacralized knowledge that currently dominates both mainstream political philosophy and ecological philosophy. We need to also rebuild our relationship with nature in a fundamental way. In this section, I investigate reviving God-consciousness in politics by relating to Michel Serre's Natural Contract with respect to his idea of harmonizing natural rhythm with human activities by means of closing the gap between 'natural time' and 'human time' to restore some sense of connection and balance with nature.

Serre is looking into a possibility of human dialogue with nature – how we can speak the natural language again by being sensitive to *temps* – time and weather – vis-à-vis our physical-experiential surroundings just like sailors and peasants during premodern era. In this sense, a political community (vis-à-vis a state, an international body, etc.) can be likened to a ship whilst everyone on board the ship is fragile, subject to the mercy of the high seas and which demands collective cooperation and conscience of everyone not only between people, but also with the surrounding seafaring elements (i.e., weather and time). Being collectively fragile, we recognize that there is a need for a pact – a contract – that is the product of our mutual needs and attune to ourselves and with nature. This pact is beyond individualistic need to survive – no sailor can survive alone in the high seas – it is a recognition that everyone is in the high seas together with the mentality that we are not about to conquer the high seas, but with the intent that we are able to journey together while appreciating nature all along. The binding relationship is love, care and vigilance. It goes beyond individualistic short-term political or economic consideration to more long-term, even inter-generational considerations (i.e., climate change is a result of a generation's work that could not be wholly resolved here and now; and same goes to any pandemic with whatever life and material damages it has done) by returning our sensitivity to nature's 'slow time.'

Thus, there is a need for a two-way exchange in thought about our relationship with nature, not just a one-way exploitative attitude. The

preliminary to this is by asking: what if we put nature at the centre and not our narrow modern human existence of means and materiality? What if we also empower nature by giving it rights in our legal institutions, hence our politics? This is significant because nature is existentially independent from our human reasoning, and our historicist tendencies tend to favour our narrow current needs. As long as we exist, we always experience nature by applying our thoughts and attitudes towards it. Unfortunately, it is modern humans who have applied our thoughts and attitudes in such a detached and careless manner that we put ourselves on the pedestal and nature is literally put below our feet and far away from the transcendent. At this point, the Tawhidic science, the science of Unity and God consciousness, applies. This is where Nasr's ecosophy could inform a new political ecology envisaged as a lesson from this pandemic.

Following Nasr's (1989) outline about the state of modern man and his reduced mode of understanding that falls far short of wholesome understanding due to a discourse of knowledge that is disconnected from the Sacred, there is little hope to frame any mode of knowledge that could resonate God and His Wisdom as reflected in nature. In politics, there are many questions to be raised in related problems such as that of the hierarchy of existence and the standing of the humans within it. This would open the question of rulership, rights, and obligations of and about nature, interrelationship between species, responsible usage of natural resources, climate order and so on. Following Nasr, there needs to be a revamp of the mechanized and obsolete idea about the natural world. This is to realise that the natural world is in fact alive and having its own conscience that we can at least move from the conquest of nature mentality to a vision of nature that considers humankind as responsible rulers because they answer to a real and higher authority above themselves and above nature.

This can be applied when reflecting on the possible contingency of political will, potential ability and hope from something beyond (vis-à-vis a miracle or recalling/reconnection with the Higher Order) as reflected during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is unique because it is the first pandemic in the digital era where everyone seems to relate to everyone but at the same time removed as far as they could psychologically get in the spatial sense. Within this context, the lightning

fast spread of the disease – ironically due to our own material efficiency (i.e., cheap and fast air and land transportation) and other social and political mechanisms used to mediate societies had somehow increased its rate of infection that it forced governments to take drastic measures.

There were pandemics in the past such as the Bubonic Plague, the Spanish flu, etc. Each time a pandemic came, human society responded according to the knowledge about being of their time. While scientifically and practically they can act very differently, they all have the same objective: to end the pandemic as soon as possible, and to minimize all harm caused to human society. Thus, when we discuss harm, we look at the loss of many lives and various degrees of health issues related to COVID-19. We also look at major economic losses framed in terms of lost businesses and individual livelihood which result directly and indirectly from COVID-19. We also touch on aspects of psychological harm such as suicide due to various social pressures that result from COVID-19 and various public and government responses to tackle it. What is unerring about the disease is that, at present, none could predict its trajectory, and that has been a cause for uncertainty. Governments and health authorities are now keen to conclude that we now must accept that COVID-19 is already endemic, and we must accept the fact and fate that we are going to live with the disease for good.

The mitigating factor is that society now has some medical means to reduce the effects of COVID-19 both to individuals and human collectives. Thus vaccines, COVID-19 test kits, pills, and other forms of medical interventions are formulated to tackle the disease. With aid of various public health and intervention measures done by the government, we are now entering into a ‘new normal.’ This new normal is a description of our daily lives with a causality due to COVID-19. Without COVID-19, there is no ‘new normal.’

What it politically entails is that public life is never going to be the same again from 2019 onwards. Previously, that public life was taken for granted. Philosophically, it had something to do with liberal notion of freedom in public and private lives. Somehow, that freedom was suddenly taken away, suspended, or limited by various COVID-19 intervention measures. This ‘freedom’ is a notion of a public life

about what it ‘used to be,’ which is everything about life before 2019. Somehow, after 2019, whatever idea of freedom we invoke, we relate it to the pre-2019 notion of freedom. Freedom now has a time marker, a sort of historicist outlook about its nearest known golden age now lost due to a sudden pandemic.

It means the loss of potential of many planned and realized activities viewed from economic and social achievements. No longer can we simply dive into the ‘old’ ways of doing things; such activities as face-to-face meetings, daily commute to work, and eating in a restaurant have become sources of longing, even sources of fear and abhorrence for some. At the back of our mind, there is now a thought – depending on our degrees of attachment – of the possibility that we will be infected with COVID-19. It is not that we fear COVID-19 like we fear dangerous creatures of the jungle, but we fear it more as something that snatches away our potentials to realize our life achievements, by literal infection and sickness, even death from the disease itself, or by various social limitations to curb it.

Somehow, out of this fear from COVID-19, rationalized by our knowledge of modern science and statistics, we have turned more inwards. However, this inwardness shrinks us. This inwardness is not the kind of freeing journey into the self towards the Center and Origin as Sufi and other spiritual masters have in mind. Rather, it is a form of belittling the self. The irony before is that being modern, hence positively rational, should free us. Now, that same rationality has been the source of self-limitation. It is as if our own sharp intellect has turned against us.

7. COVID-19 as Communicative Mode of Return to God

COVID-19 can be seen as a communicative mode of return to God. It can be seen as God’s calling – a reminder – for modern humanity to return to Him. When modern humanity is busy with endless and most often mundane activities of worldly progress, COVID-19 sets to upset such routine like a very sudden pull of a break. Some see it as a rude awakening – but an awakening, nonetheless. Like it or not, the world

has forever changed because of the pandemic. There is virtually no chance for the world to return to an ‘old normal,’ a carefree and careless world in which we lived before 2019. We must be honest to ourselves in this, and we must be able to accept the fact that we must adapt to the new world that we are living in, a notably more uncertain world whilst its trajectory is hard to predict – other than that of more natural calamity if we continue with our present carefree and careless state. A major break from routine can be seen as a breakaway and forced retreat from the disquiet yet numbing everyday life. Suddenly, a time-space is open again with major restrictions – we are forced to be and remain with ourselves at a certain place.

Consider the various situations that people are in – some with privileges may be able to be more private in their mansions and condominiums, but not so those who are less economically fortunate, who may not be able to have a private space, but are forced to stay in one small place with many others – usually family members for those who stay in a small flat and such, or with co-workers for those who stay in dormitories and similar quarters. Also consider those who are forced – by their own will, or by law and circumstance, to work during the peak of COVID-19. Consider the medical officers and others who needed to keep going during those times when things were difficult due to the novelty of the situation.

We need a comprehensive metaphysical outlook of nature to clarify the silver lining of COVID-19 to us. So far, COVID-19, at least in the public and popular discussions has largely been about medical, public health measures and policy effectiveness on how to control the spread of the disease and minimize its impact on everyday routine. While not denying the importance and value of such discussions, we need also turn our attention to ways we have been perceiving nature so far. Many scientific and social scientific methods have been employed to understand the impacts and solutions of COVID-19. However, none seems to integrate them so we could understand the COVID-19 problem from a broader angle. Those studies assume objectivity, hence a certain kind of distance from COVID-19 as an object of study to the human being that studies it.

While we uphold the benefit of social scientific studies, we seldom see the significance of religions and their aspects in presentations about COVID-19. It seems that COVID-19 has proven a ‘victory’ for modern mathematical and scientific worldviews. Religion and spirituality at best seem to have taken the backseat among the larger worldview of public discourse. Religion and spirituality are usually taken as domains of solace in ‘modern’ sense of its study. Now it seems that solace is running short – fear seems to take over for a period during the pandemic. While the world is trying to move towards the endemic phase, it is also burdened by the scar it experienced during the various peaks of pandemic. The narrative of trust then shifted towards trusting the vaccines – a symbol of man’s capability to control nature. While vaccines may be able to control the physically severe or lethal threat of the disease, vaccines are nowhere close in alleviating the deep sense of widespread uncertainty. Suddenly, there is a vacuum that modern science and medicine cannot fill, namely, the uncertainty of the heart.

Nature, viewed from the positive and medical sciences, is mechanical, complex, and soulless. It may contain life, but the only life concerned is the biological and the psychological; not much beyond. The spiritual aspect of nature is missing in this worldview, thus, preventing a perspective of healing from the spiritual angle and at most a more complete metaphysics of nature. Thus, it can be said that the self-limiting view of nature that we are currently engaging in prevents a more wholesome view of nature. With the limit, we are blind to problems that lie outside of the currently understood matrix of the world, such as our spiritual ineptitude to confront the current state of nature. We are now living in our make-believe system that the world only exists on a certain limited plane – a plane limited by our imagination that fails to transcend due to lack of relation to the Divine. In other words, due to our self-limiting thought – thinking that our sheer rationality is sufficient to comprehend nature – we cut ties with the essential source of nature, which is the Divine.

COVID-19 is certainly part of nature and man too. This is because on the one hand, it exists in nature. The coronavirus is nothing new. But what is new this time is that it has managed to wreak havoc to human lives and upset our usual activities; thus began the relationship

between humans and the disease. What was external and alien to humans is now part and parcel of their lives. This is not something new in the longer arc of human history. Because of COVID-19, we now learn a hard lesson that diseases are not always ‘routine’ in their nature of occurrences – just like our attitude to influenza virus, for instance. They will occur routinely, but we are very sure to be able to contain it. Hence our mindset tends towards overconfidence at ‘tackling’ the disease by overcoming nature, thus ‘defeating’ the disease. This arrogant attitude – hubris – the sin of modern man as Nasr describes it, blinds us from the possibility that a tiny creature could ‘defeat’ us instead. No, it does not have to eradicate us in one fell swoop – it just needs to create a prolonged disturbance and disequilibrium for humanity to feel the pangs of its presence. But its presence is not due to the virus’ own conscious making. The presence of the virus is felt only because human beings think it is now ‘the enemy,’ just like the any ‘other’ to satisfy their need to be victorious and overcome ‘the challenge – in this case his long-term health and possibly, his life.’ This mindset that man will always be victorious – to be able to conquer all including the deepest aspect of Nature is, arguably, our great blind spot in this pandemic.

8. Revelation, Nature, and the Pandemic

Revelation, the Quran in particular, speaks volumes about the role of human beings as vicegerent (khalifah) of God on Earth. For instance, in Quran 2:30:

لُعَجَّتْ أُولَاقِ طُّفَّيْلِخِ ضِرْأَنَآ اِيْفِ لُعَاجِ اِيْنِ اِيْكْفِيْلَمَلَلِ لِكْبُرِ لَاقِ ذُوِ
سُدُقُنُوْ كَفِيْمَحَبِ حُبِّسَنُنُ نُّحَنُوْ ءَاْمَدِلْ اِيْكْفِسْ اِيْوِ اِيْفِ دُسْفِيْ نَمِ اِيْفِ
٣٠ نَوْمَلِغَتِ اِلِ اَمِ مَلْغَا اِيْنِ اِلِاقِ طُّفَّيْلِ

[Prophet], when your Lord told the angels, ‘I am putting a successor on earth,’ they said, ‘How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?’ but He said, ‘I know things you do not.’ (Abdul Haleem trans.)

Here, human beings are given a noble but heavy task that even the angels raised concerns about human beings’ potentiality to cause

damage and bloodshed. Viewed within this context, the fact of human rulership over nature encompasses the knowledge of even the noble angels. God mentions that He knows what the angels do not regarding the human vicegerency on Earth, signaling a form of stewardship that must always be taken with knowledge and remembrance of God. God is the true King because even the angels who constantly celebrate and proclaim God's holiness are not even chosen for the task because their lack of knowledge to rule the Earth despite their unwavering submission. Osman Bakar explains the role of Islamic revelation in his latest book, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage* (2022) to further expound Nasr's conception about Man and Nature to deal with modern challenges of human vicegerency of planet Earth. Osman Bakar further asserts the principle of Unity of God, *al-tawhid*, to be the central teaching of Islam which is repeatedly asserted in the Quran, the five pillars of Islam, and the six pillars of faith (Ibid, 22-27). Osman Bakar also details about Islamic Ecology and Environmental Science that could be derived from the first part of the Shahadah: there is no god but God in the metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological sense (Ibid, 27-39).

Viewed from the context of human vicegerency and their commitment to Shahadah, we could say that the COVID-19 pandemic teaches us a lesson to rule the Earth right again by reasserting his commitment to Shahadah: there is no god but God. In a way, COVID-19 serves as an expensive lesson and warning from God, the true King Himself – as did other pandemics that came before COVID-19 and potentially deadlier pandemics that may come after. Human beings must return to their role as khalifah, as God's vicegerent, not as egoistic plunderers whose aim is to make nature subject to their whims and desires. The turning away from God in this context is really the forgetting, or worse, the abandoning of the Shahadah. Thus, viewed as notice of return to Unity, to God, COVID-19 despite all the physical pain and economic calamity it wrought to human lives and livelihood, can also be viewed as God's Wisdom (*Hikmah*) for those who are willing to look at the silver lining, just as we saw the animals that came out in the open in cities, riverside, and lake during the first total lockdown during the pandemic.

The outcome of realizing the wisdom of nature from one of God's sacred names, *al-Hakim*, The Wisest should return to us the basic sense of custody of planet Earth as our only home in this world to be accounted for both in this world and the next. We must move away from accounting nature as a marketplace with gross profiteering and see her considering the sacred *manifestation*, an *Ayat*, of God.

9. Re-Sacralizing Nature: An Islamic Perspective

Following Nasr, nature in Islamic perspective possesses a sacred aspect (1990, 21). All the phenomena that it contains, including itself, contain meaning. Therefore, whatever occurs as phenomenon, big or small, observable or unseen, ultimately serves to tell something about the Sacred. Nature in this sense is a Sign (*Ayat*) that points to the ultimate existence of Unity, of Tawhid, which concludes that God is the Ultimate Reality. While nature itself is not God, it serves as an essential vehicle for contemplation about existence of God.

In contemplative Islamic tradition, nature is part of the “ontological Quran,” the *Quran al-takwini* that is an essential co-reference to the revealed Quran, the *Quran al-tadwini*.

“Have they not contemplated the realm of the heavens and earth and all that God created, and that the end of their time might be near? What [other revelation] will they believe in if they do not believe in this?” (Quran 7:185)

This verse of the Quran, and many other similar verses, emphasizes the entire aspect of nature – the wholeness of it, vis-à-vis the various realm of heavens, earth, and God's creation, in relation to the end of our time. The Quran further asserts that one of the essential foundations of belief is this reflection about nature and all its aspects. This reflection thus forms a bridge between revealed knowledge on the one hand, and empirical and experiential knowledge on the other. Thus, we can say that contemplation is key to the Sacred because of its connecting function.

Regarding COVID-19, the wisdom of its whole picture can be

projected from our contemplation of both. On the one hand, COVID-19 lies indeed in the empirical knowledge – its origin, viral strain, vectors, etc. On the other hand, it is in the realm of experience – whether we get infected and sick because of it and all other direct and indirect experience that results from it such as working, mandated mask wearing, and movement limitation, etc. Both are conceptualized as a Book, which presumes that they are to be read and explored in chapters and sections resembling that of a book. Within that ‘book,’ COVID-19 can be thought of as a major chapter of our time. As noted earlier, it has changed many practical aspects of our lives that we took for granted before. It has also changed our notion of freedom and security in ways that are limiting to our physical movements and social interactions. It has even moved our world into more virtual and digital connections, which is unprecedented in known history of humanity. We are now told daily in the news that there are ongoing and upcoming military conflicts in different parts of the world. We are also facing severe droughts, forest firestorms, thunderstorms, floods, and landslides which are record breaking in modern history. Viewed exclusively from just one angle, these are immense problems that even to tackle one of them takes tremendous task with gloomy prospects with all the unfolding uncertainties around them.

Hence, enter the Sacred in nature considering these confusing signals. A view of the Sacred gives hope and rest to a notion of existence that is ever pressurised due to tremendous challenges well beyond the ken of any single individual to contain. It opens a door to remembrance (*zikr*) to reflect the state of inward self for the betterment of personal and collective life of which spirituality and its related activities will be at the communicative centre – a messenger of sorts – to the conscientious network of hope that will guide further activities.

10. Conclusion

To conclude, we need to seriously reassess Islamic narratives about nature. To this end, we can view nature from a perennial wisdom with its principles that is ‘fresh in its time’ to be able to rejuvenate its discourse within the context of modern human beings who are struggling with reckless subjugation and mechanization of their environment and has

tainted their vision of nature as enabler to contemplate the Divine. The key is contemplation of nature – a deep contemplation that requires participation of the whole of human self, and not just the contingency of human hands and minds disconnected from the rest of his being that has clouded his vision about power, rulership, rights and obligations and relationship with nature and its order. In this, the contemplative tradition of Islam as outlined by Nasr, if expanded further into the realm of political ecology, may well provide a contemporary answer.

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