



ISSACHAR FUND

Creation: Our Shared Inheritance

As people of Scripture, Muslims and Christians share a common inheritance in creation as the bounty and token of our Maker, Creator and Judge. Islam and the Christian tradition affirm equally the teaching that God has set us on earth to serve Him and our fellow human beings, and to that end has commissioned us to be caretakers of creation as His deputies. The earth is by God's command, and is framed by His revealed word by whose power the mountains ascend and the plains descend into the place God had prescribed for them. God has ordained that the waters should not inundate the earth, and has set the bounds which they shall not overrun (Qur'an liv: 49). In His unstinting providence God has filled the earth with innumerable kinds of living things and clothed and adorned the earth with trees and with every variety of flowering plant and nourishing food as expressions of His beneficence and solicitude. God gave us wisdom and knowledge to understand the secrets of nature, and placed in our hands as custodians the power to make the earth fruitful and abundant, or, in disobedience, to despoil it. Scripture assures us that If we are willing and obedient, we shall eat of the good of the land (Is. 1: 19; Qur'an ii: 167). The earth shall then become "a spouse for fruit, not a courtesan for pleasure." An ancient Muslim writer expands on the theme, noting that the technological skill that makes our participation in creation productive allows God to instruct us and to hold us accountable:

Praise to God who created the earth as a couch, the mountains as tent pegs, and from thence spread out the highlands and lowlands, deserts and fertile countries. Then in the midst thereof He opened up watercourses, causing rivers and seas to flow; and guided His servants to make for themselves dwellings, to erect buildings and homes. Thus they raised edifices and cultivated the fields, hewed out houses from the mountains and dug wells and cisterns. He made their zeal, for the erection of their edifices and for the construction of all that they built and strengthened, a lesson to the heedless and an enlightenment to men throughout history.

In that role we cannot deny the truth of our misuse of creation and of the powers God has put into our hands. We have not been as heedful as we ought to be, and that has produced deleterious consequences for the environment and for the quality of life. We have been equally willful and remiss in our unbridled exploitation of creation, squandering the assets of the natural world without proper regard to consequences for ourselves and for others. In the age of advanced technological invention the bounds of our mastery over the created order now seem limitless without, however, much reassuring evidence of commensurate advance in the wisdom and humility necessary to be worthy partners with God's mission and purpose (Qur'an xxxi: 15). As a function only of the amassing of material rewards and the pursuit of self-interest, creation would appear to fall short of helping us to increase in wisdom; it seems merely to incline us to be profligate with the gifts vouchsafed to us by our Creator for the good of all. We would do well, in our self-confidence, to attend to the remonstrance of Scripture: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but do not speak, eyes, but do not see." (Ps. 115: 4-5; Qur'an xviii: 44.) Both Islam and Christianity regard that attitude as a false absolute, for it detracts from the original noble purpose with which creation is endowed.

There are, thus, relevant lessons to be drawn from the mixed record of human custodianship of creation, including the challenges and ambiguities of our technological achievements. Technology has created a vast world of undreamed of possibilities with expanded opportunities for peoples and societies across the world, stripping away from nature

the fear and ignorance that used to fill it. Yet, we cannot be ignorant of the consequences of what we do – or fail to do - with our mastery of creation. “In the end what we can say with all certainty is that there is no peace possible among men unless there is peace and harmony with nature. And in order to have peace and harmony with nature one must be in harmony and equilibrium with Heaven, and ultimately with the Source and Origin of all things. He who is at peace with God is also at peace with His creation, both with nature and with man.”¹

An international conference on the subject would be an important setting to begin exploration of our joint stewardship of creation in light of expanding frontiers of science and technology and of developments and opportunities arising from them. We are convinced that the interfaith exploration of the subject is timely as well as being highly desirable. There is much in our respective Scriptures to inform and guide us on the path of pursuing our role as caretakers of creation in service to God and to one another.

The conference planned for May, 2015, is the first of what is envisaged as a series of international meetings planned over the next few years to explore from an interfaith perspective the theme of Creation Care and human flourishing, looking at how the subject is treated in

- i. Scripture
- ii. Tradition
- iii. History
- iv. Communities of faith.

Our understanding and response to the gift of creation may be laid out under the headings of

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968, 136. See also S. Nomanul Haq, “Islam and Ecology: Toward Retrieval and Reconstruction,” *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Fall, 2001.

- i. Stewardship
- ii. Conservation
- iii. Healing
- iv. Education
- v. Implementation of goals

In the first conference we shall examine the ways in which Muslims and Christians regard creation as God's handiwork, paying particular attention to creation's emblematic character as a sign and symbol of the Creator. Creation upholds life; it also belongs with our spiritual and moral nature, giving intimations of the Creator who haunts and forms us in creation's manifold rhythms and manifestations. Islam and Christianity regard Creation as a channel of intimacy with the Creator and with one another, distinct from God, but not as a barrier. The great advances achieved in the age of technological ascendancy today should deepen our sense of answerability to a common Creator and to one another; creation cannot be regarded as an artifice to be treated with contempt or to be made an object of reproach. The Muslim Scripture describes how man was appointed as God's vicegerent on earth against the objection of the angels who felt entitled to that privileged position by virtue of their unblemished life of obedience and worship of God, in contradistinction to the human propensity to corruption and bloodshed. God brushed aside the angels, declaring, "Assuredly, I know that you know not." (ii: 28.)