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God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

**MUSLIM THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON CREATION BY DR TIM WINTER
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The place where I want to start is a familiar one for Muslim participants: it is the very recent festival which is known as the Festival of the Ascension, *Leilat al-Miraj* in Arabic. This is an opportunity around the Muslim world to allow congregations to reflect on a trans-historical event which in many ways is seen as a culminating moment of prophetic history. It is described in many *hadith* reports and elaborated in sometimes rather baroque ways by thousands of poems and litanies in every Muslim language. The event portrays the Man of Praise, the prophet Muhammad, praying in congregation with the earlier prophets in Jerusalem, and taken by Gabriel through a great ascent through the seven heavens into the presence of God. A number of symbolic events occur there, one of which or perhaps two are of direct relevance to Islam's construction of itself, as a religion with a particular kind of relationship with the natural order.

For those of you unfamiliar with the story, I want to spend a couple of minutes just quoting a text which gives a summary, a flavour of the traditional teaching. It is one of the key imaginative points of departure in the Muslim understanding of the founding narrative of the religion.

“The Holy Prophet perceives majestic oneness take formless form, clear as a full moon in the night sky, thus perceiving Allah as lovers of reality will perceive him in the highest dimensions of paradise. Essence communes with the Beloved Prophet in modes unimaginable, where neither word, nor voice, nor sign nor touch is needed. With divine tenderness far beyond even the prophet's enlightened expectation, the voice of truth resounds through his entire being. ‘I am your secret heart, your true desire. I am your perfect refuge, your only love. I am the divine reality you worship. For Me alone, O Muhammad of light, you have sighed unceasingly throughout the long journey of prophecy. You have secretly called out, “Why can I not directly behold the beauty of the Essence of Beauty?” Come now, Friend of all souls. The love I feel for you is beyond my love for the whole of creation. All humanity is your humble servant. Whatever you desire from the infinite treasure house of divine power and blessing is yours for the asking, thousandfold healing, thousandfold illumination, thousandfold love. Beloved Messenger, your soul will never turn from the experience of this. Return now into temporality and invite humanity, the created expression of My Essence, to come unto Me, to gaze at last upon the source of truth and beauty. Travelling beyond

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time and eternity, you have interceded for them all at the abode of Essence. I grant to your community the daily prayers of Islam, which when performed with purity of heart will lift them into paradise whilst still on earth. Every level of heavenly experience is contained in the prayer. The prayer will lead them along the very way of ascension that I led you.”

The fundamental Muslim practice of the five daily prayers is thus believed to be a recollection of the prophetic ascension. Its basic postures of standing, sitting, bowing and prostration are said to be based on the worshipful form of angels whom the prophet saw on his mysterious journey. The Australian theologian, Rod Blackhurst, evinces this Quranic ethos in his very interesting essay 00:51:53 on Muslim prayer as a cosmological act. For Blackhurst, the prayer gifted at the ascension is a primordial enactment of humanity’s status as bridge between heaven and earth. The Muslim worships in a fully embodied way, in a mind-body synergy which is particularly characteristic of Islam’s sense of itself, as the reclamation of a putatively lost Abrahamic primordiality. The entire Muslim life is shaped by forms of worship which engage the body and spirit with the movement of sun and moon, and hence represent the believer’s full belongingness to the created order. Nonetheless he is, like Adam, “between water and clay”, the water which is of heaven and the clay which is the stuff of which he is made. This Abrahamic cosmology depicts religion as being in the *fitra*, the Quranic term which denotes nature and what is natural not as “fallen” but as a theophany shot through with grace and reminders of God’s presence.

In other ascension narratives we find a second incident. Here, Gabriel comes to the prophet and offers him two chalices, one of wine and the other of milk. When he chooses the latter, Gabriel tells him, “You have been guided to the *fitra*.” So these *hadith*, these Muslim scriptural texts, and the very luxurious commentary literature which grew upon them, are evidently constructed to make a defining point about the nature of Islamic religion. If we begin with the two chalices, leaving for a few moments the consideration of Muslim prayer (*salat*), we find that it is very probably a pithy polemic against Christian sacramentalism. The wine is not for the prophet’s people. Muslim commentators, explaining this well-known *sharia* prohibition, claim that intoxication diminishes the *imago Dei* and is hence understood as an offence against God’s purposes. Moralists predictably add information about alcohol’s social effects. Others however note that a polemical point about salvation is apparently being made as well. Wine is nature denatured, the fermentation being a sign of humanity’s departure from what God has originally made. The milk, by contrast - according to these commentaries - is a useful and straightforward symbol of a nourishment unaltered by human plans or intervention. So the angelic words, “You have been guided to nature”, are

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being constructed as an important structural principle in the newest Abrahamic dispensation.

Let's consider another of Islam's founding stories, this time a very earthly one. This is the religion's evolution of the Genesis story of Isaac and Ishmael. The latter, although firstborn, is the heir "according to the flesh" whereas the former, with his sacrifice understood by Christians as a eucharistic anticipation, is the heir in the spirit. Christian art frequently alluded to this by contrasting Ishmael's mother Hajar with the virgin Mary. Rubens, for instance, in his depiction of the women - he seemed to like the image of Hajar in particular - paints Mary in blue, the colour of heaven and virginal purity, while Hajar wears red, the colour of the flesh, Eros, carnality. Medieval western Christian polemics sometimes used the concupiscence represented by Hajar, as a sign of Islam's falsity. Islam is "a garden of nature." And here they are not far from the concept of *fitra* apparently assumed by these ascension narratives.

So *fitra* seems to be important. In some way, it is constructed as a watchword of Islam and its soteriology. The great medieval Quranic commentator Tabari wrote that *fitra* is what differentiates Islam from the baptism of Christianity or the circumcision of Judaism. There is something covenantal and initiatic about it. And all this makes sense against the backdrop of Islam's understanding of itself as the sealing or closing dispensation within the *historia monotheistica*. Islam, or Ishmaelite religion, is the third side of the equilateral triangle. It is the third visitor to Abraham beneath the oak of Mamre. And as the ascension narratives affirm, it seems to be linked not only to an Abrahamic restoration — of course, Muslims will know that the blessing of Abraham forms a key component of every canonical daily prayer — but as something more ancient, a natural sort of religion, the religion of milk, of an unmediated encounter with the divine, a substance of nature.

And so the Shrine of the Ascension, which is the Dome of the Rock, is constructed according to an octagonal plan. Octograms of overlapping squares are called in Islamic geometry *najmat al-Quds*, "the Jerusalem star." Eight pointed stars, and the octagons which are related to them, are ancient near Eastern symbols, once even representing Ishtar or Venus as the evening star. The overlapping squares are understood as a reconciliation of dualities and hence of fertility. According to my *Hutchinson Dictionary of Symbols*, the shape is "linked to creation, fertility and sex." This is also the primary resonance of the crescent and star motif which Islam gradually came to adopt as its symbol — cyclical, selenic, fertile, nocturnal. The crescent again connects with Hajar and Ishmael, Abraham's family according to the flesh, who are buried in the *Hateem*, the crescent-shaped sanctuary beside the *Ka'ba* in Mecca.

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So this theological awareness of Islam as claiming to be a latter-day retrieval of a primordial, pre-axial form of religion, the *fitra*, helps us to understand certain very conspicuous and recurrent features of the Muslim scripture. The book presents the natural world as an array of divine theophanies, saying, “Wherever you turn, there is the face of God.” (2:115) The word for natural signs, *ayaat*, is the same word that the text uses for scriptural verses. So as well as *al-Qur’an at-Tadwini*, the written Qur’an, there is *al-Qur’an at-Takwini*, the creation Qur’an, whose signs we are invited to read and which, like the written Scripture, is a bodying forth of the divine breath. So the Qur’an says (41:53), “We shall show them our signs on the horizons and in their own souls, until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth.” Even more notably in the Qur’an we find a range of verses insisting that all things praise God, for instance (17:44), “There is no thing which does not glorify Him with praise.” And also (24:31), “Have you not seen that everything in the heavens and the earth and the birds in their array, sing God’s praise? Each one knows its prayer and its glorification and God knows what they do.”

The apparent archaism of Muslim scripture and its insistence on a natural cosmos which somehow seems to be alive and praising God, inclined philosophers like Herder, long ago, to describe Islam as a sort of shamanism. Schleiermacher too, in considering the religious claims of Islam, used the word “shamanism”. Here is an example of Schleiermacher’s judgment : “Islam is presented as a self-conscious monotheistic religion that nevertheless emphasised the action of the sensual world upon the emotions, thus bringing it closer to pagan polytheism.” Schlegel also saw in Islam’s garden-like paradise the idea that we are heading to a natural garden, as “the vestiges of hedonism.” Now these judgments of Islam’s evocation of nature in some ways continued older medieval European criticisms, and the Renaissance too was not particularly interested in the theme of “virgin nature.” Islam here is, to use the perhaps obsolete category, essentially Semitic, substantially reverting to Hebrew ideas of the indicativity of nature, the value of the body, and of its natural functions in the spiritual life. Hence celibacy has seldom been celebrated as a virtue among Muslims. Here Muslims quite often agree with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, where he says “Judaism rehabilitates the flesh, attaching the quality of the divine image to the biological forces in man. It affirms the goodness of the whole of man, of the natural.” The American Muslim writer Nur Al-Jerrahi even says “Physiology is theology.” This idea of the full membership of the saint in the natural world is underlined by Islam’s vision of paradise, which is famously eroticised. Sexuality in this life is understood not only as an invitation to “be fruitful and multiply” but a proleptic anticipation of the life of the blessed. Again, this drew frequent condemnation from medieval Europeans.

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But others in the European Enlightenment, particularly in its romantic literature, rather liked Islam's sacralising of nature. This is evident for instance in Goethe's poem on the Man of Praise, *Mahomets Gesang*, which describes him as a mountain stream, full of life, which brings the pure water of heaven to the land, raising up not only great cities but also fecundating nature:

*Drunten werden in dem Thal
Unter seinem Fußtritt Blumen,
Und die Wiese
Lebt von seinem Hauch.*

"Later, lower in the valley, where his steps trod, flowers bloom, and the green meadow has been given life by his breath."

Now Goethe, in his no doubt partial and insufficient reading of the Qur'an and Muslim poetry, had been attracted to this by a biophilic aspect of the prophetic charisma, and the poem enjoyed a certain popularity, being set to music twice by Schubert, for instance. But to get back to the Muslim scriptures. The idea of the Man of Praise as an emblem of the life-force spills over into a range of hadiths which record his encouragement of planting trees and other plants. For instance, this hadith related in the collection of Muslim Ibn Al-Hajjaj: "Never does a Muslim plant a plant or sow a seed, so that a bird or a man or an animal eats from it, but that it shall be recorded as a charity for him." Then the famous eschatological hadith: "If one of you is planting something, and the day of judgment begins, finish planting it." So the prophet's colour is green: his turban, the dome over his grave, his city and the oasis of Medina: there is a historic connection between the prophetic quality, the fragrance of the prophet, and the idea of growth and life. We even find passages about insects, notably the Quranic tale of Solomon, who diverted his magnificent army at the request of the queen of the ants, who wanted to protect her anthill from trampling (27:18). Then in Sura 16:69: "Your Lord has granted revelation to the bee. Make your home in the mountains and on the trees and on the trellises which they erect: then eat from every fruit and follow humbly the way of your Lord."

Other verses could be cited. Evidently the Qur'an sets out to sacralise biodiversity. Virgin nature is our most proper habitat in this evidently primordialist and naturalist vision.

(Incidentally, if you want to read more about insects in the Qur'an, I can recommend Neal Robinson's article in the new *Routledge Companion to Religion and Animal Protection*, a brilliant and interesting piece of research.)

So all this, for Muslims, confirms the idea of Islam as the religion of milk, of unaltered nature to be joined through the movements of nature which emphasise our proper belongingness in the world. As in most primordial communities, the direction of prayer is horizontal, not

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vertical. Time is lunar, and not solar. There is no intercalation. And we exercise our innate ability to recognise holiness when living properly in our bodies, recognising the nature and sanctity of non-human persons and the entire natural world. This of course reveals modernity as nothing but an exercise in alienation. Layla AbdelRahim writes, “A function of civilisation is to stamp out our yearning for wildness. Children are born wild and dream of a wild world that exists for its own mystery.”

So the *sunna*, which is the Muslim pattern of life, is an Islamic substantiation of primordial living functioning as a shield against the alienation imposed by technical modernity. To follow its norms is to wear a kind of hazmat suit which excludes the chemical toxins of a disrupted world. The Qur’an says this, in a verse very often quoted by Muslim eco-warriors (30:41): “Corruption has appeared on earth and in the sea because of what the hands of men have wrought. Thus does God make them taste some of the consequences of their actions, so that they might perhaps return.” By adopting the *sunna* we find ourselves shielded from the worst toxins of a destructive modernity. We connect again with the motions of sun and moon. We celebrate the sanctity of nature: we fast, we venerate holy places: we repeat a chant whose origin was received in the *jalaal*, the *mysterium tremendum*, which made its recipient sweat and shake. We understand gender: we live for a higher purpose, and that form of life is all-embracing. This is not a part-time religion. We do not recognise the division between sacred and profane, any more than our palaeolithic ancestors did.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this evident primordality of the Quranic voice is its insistence that we are in community with non-human orders of creation, which are also considered explicitly to be sentient communities. One of the classical criteria for distinguishing the Palaeolithic from the Neolithic is that the former created a self which was defined by co-ordination with nature which ended up as human, whereas the Neolithic self defined itself in relationality with other humans. And here we face something which does seem strangely reminiscent of shamanism. In particular, for the rest of this little talk I would like to focus on one verse which appeared in Sura 6, entitled *Al-an’am* “The Cattle”, verse 38. Here is a cautious translation:

“There is not an animal in the earth, nor a bird flying on two wings, but that they are nations like yourselves. We have neglected nothing in the Book. Then unto their Lord they shall be gathered.”

Passages like this in the first instance constitute part of the Qur’an’s condemnation of Arab pagans whom I suppose in roughly Durkheimian vein had long defined their tribal identity in terms of animal totems. The prophet himself had been born into the Meccan clan of the Shark. As part of its function of delineating tribal identities, paganism maintained elaborate

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rituals of animal mutilation and other animal-related practices which the new revelation saw as abominations. This chapter receives its name because it deals with various such sacrificial and votive rites. Now in place of a universe directed by tribal deities in which humanity was divided by totem and fetishes, the new monotheism preached a fellowship of believers which was summoned to see the animal order as a sign of creation's unity and integrity under one God.

Now, the verse seems pretty straightforward in its affirmation of animal and bird life presented and valued as sentient aspects of creation. And yet, if you look at the commentaries, it triggered centuries of impassioned debate. Two themes in this verse proved especially taxing for the commentators, the citing of animals as "nations like yourselves" (*umamun amthaalukum*), and the "gathering" of animals "unto their Lord". In what sense, later Muslim scholars wondered, could animal communities be like us? And is it true that like their human counterparts they would be resurrected to face God's final judgment? The modern Tunisian commentator, Ibn 'Ashur, laments that "this is a verse that begins obscurely and ends more obscurely still."

Now the Qur'an's initial targeting of indigenous Arab religion could be seen as part of the continuum of the wider evolution of late antique debate over the implications of monotheism and attitudes to the world. The markedly up-beat, pro-nature, pro-body, affective atmosphere of the Quranic revelation reflected the text's own understanding as a historic reparation, as it says, a *shifa*, a "healing", not only of paganism, but of the "Religions of the Book". This is a prophetic religion, after all. When the new scripture of the Qur'an burst into the former provinces of Byzantium, it was widely received by its audience as a synthetic corrective, repairing what was seen to be the penitential and rather ascetical temper of much early Christianity, and pushing the dominant monotheistic style back in a generally "Semitic" direction.

In the Mediterranean world, where a pessimism about the world and the flesh had become normal amongst many who had inherited some of the world- and body-denying assumptions of late Hellenistic religion (I think it comes more from them than from the Gospels specifically, but it was a feature of early Christianity, if you read Peter Brown and others), Islam saw itself as bringing an unmistakably life-affirming, though not exactly indulgent, world-view. Its anthropology repudiated teachings on original sin, and encouraged a pious style of travelling to God through the world, rather than reaching Him by going round its edges. The new scripture's endlessly repeated conjurations with the material universe as a panoply of signs celebrating God, stood at the heart of the new Muslim style of contemplation, in a new, positive dispensation which was unmistakably biophilic and celebratory of the natural order.

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It is perhaps due to this twofold Quranic challenge to Arabian and ascetical Christian views of the natural world that we find the early Muslims scribes keen to record a very large bulk of prophetic directives on animal welfare. These have been investigated in a rather good book by Richard Foltz, a text alert to the vast improvement, as he sees it, brought to these territories by the arrival of the new and reparative dispensation. Foltz even goes so far as to conclude that “the mainstream Islamic legal tradition accords more rights for non-human animals than the legal systems of the contemporary west.” This is a polemical statement, but he believes it to be supported by the witness of the classical *sharia* canon and the pro-nature vision of the new sealing revelation with its retrieval, as it sees it, of the *fitra* principle of primordality. The Founder is a man exemplifying what Blackhurst identified as a distinct blend of a primordial sense of appurtenance to nature with an extremely uncompromising and simple monotheism, a kind of *ur-monotheismus*, and he seems to have dispensed a good fraction of his moral teaching with reference to the animal kingdom. Some of his dicta are evidently attacks on pagan practices, as in the *hadith* where he says, “May God curse anyone who mutilates animals.”

But a larger genre indicates a more general insistence on the ethical treatment of the animal order. Some examples. *Hadith*: “it is a great sin for a man to imprison the animals which are in his power”. *Hadith*: “a dog was once panting by a well, almost dead with thirst. Beholding it, a harlot of the children of Israel removed her slipper, dipped it in the water, and gave it to drink. For this God forgave her her sins.” Another *hadith*: “We were once on a journey with God’s messenger who left us for a short while. We saw a hummara bird with two young and we took the young fledglings. The hummara hovered with fluttering wings and the Prophet returned saying, “Who has injured this bird by taking its young? Return them to her.” “The prophet forbade that animals should be set to fight each other.” In some cases, we find the prophet challenging the culture of hunting which had existed in Arabia from time immemorial. So while hunting game for food is still permitted, sport hunting is to be prohibited. *Hadith*: “there is no-one that without reason kills a sparrow or anything higher thereto but that God shall ask him about it.” “The prophet cursed anyone who took an animate creature as a target”. So that’s a representative sample of the scriptural material which has really been an important part of how the prophet understood his mission.

Now these texts have a straightforward moral, hortatory purpose, emphasising the essential goodness and worth of God’s creation. But much more curious are those hadiths which seem to invest animals around the prophet with a near human degree of consciousness. And it’s here that the puzzlement over the Quranic verse originates, and we find some sort of explanation for why these Enlightenment thinkers thought that Islam was some kind of shamanism. What are we to make for instance, of the following tale, narrated in Abu

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Dawood's collection of hadiths? The *hadith* has the prophet going into a farm where a camel is out of control, exhibiting a fit with its eyes streaming. The prophet, unafraid, walks over to it and rubs its ears and it quietsens down. He asks who the camel belongs to and a man identifies himself as its owner. The prophet says, "Do you not fear God concerning this beast which he has let you own? It complained to me that you starve it and tire it by overworking it and using it beyond its capacity." In the same hagiographies we find that key instances in the prophet's career depend on animals for their successful outcome, and that these animals are presented as recipients of some kind of divine inspiration. Perhaps the best-known example is the prophet's choice of a site for his home and his mosque when he arrived as a refugee in Medina. Seeing that rival clans wished to have the political advantage of having him as their guest, to preclude disputes he let go of the rein of his camel and said that Providence would guide it to the correct place. The site that the camel chose is now the location of his mosque (which is incidentally said to be the second biggest building in the world, with the first being the Boeing factory in Seattle). So it was an animal that chose the site. In another incident (Muslim children, who love these stories, will be very familiar with these) an Abyssinian army which had come to destroy the Ka'ba in Mecca is confounded by two animal interventions. Firstly, its fearsome battle elephant refuses to march on the holy city, and secondly the invading army is pelted with stones by birds. A no less celebrated case is the rescue of the prophet from pagan pursuers during his exodus to Medina. As he hides in a cave, pigeons make a nest and a spider weaves a web over the cave's entrance. The miracle would serve to persuade the search party that no-one could have entered the cave for days.

So in these hadiths, which show the Man of Praise saved by the intervention of animals, one is struck by the fact that these creatures seem to be presented as consciously acting under divine tuition, something which does seem anomalous in a new religious culture which is in full and absolute revolt against a pagan animism in which desert creatures and even trees and rocks had been reckoned to contain spirits and djinns of various kinds. A familiar kind of Hume-ian generalisation about the rationalising shift from polytheism to monotheism would presume that ancient superstitions about souls inhabiting the natural world would be vigorously suppressed in favour of a divine and human monopoly of consciousness and agency. But in the primal Islamic case something more complex seems to have emerged. Again, we seem to revert to our characterisation of the prophet's religion as a reprise of very ancient and even primordial styles of religion, coupled of course with a fierce rejection of anything smacking of polytheistic belief.

The Muslim tradition itself promotes this self-understanding. The Meccan shrine is claimed to have been the worshipping place of Adam, long predating the Jerusalem Temple. Islam,

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taking itself as the final moment in the monotheistic drama, also claims to be a significant invocation and rehabilitation of pre-Abrahamic forms of worship and relationality with the world. It starts with the prophet who can communicate with animals, and who then bears a book that instructs its audience to consider them as “nations like unto yourself.”

So having very briefly sketched this self-understanding of Islam as the recovery of a pre-Abrahamic and primordial religious style, let’s briefly close by looking at what the medieval commentators made of this difficult text in the sura of The Cattle.

Firstly, one has to consider the puzzle represented by “animal nations.” The word is actually *umam*, the plural of *umma*, a word almost invariably applied to human collectivities. It is strange to use it for animals. Muslims themselves famously constitute an *umma*, for example. In arguing against pagan cruelties, Scripture here seems rhetorical in suggesting that birds and animals form communities, animal peoples. But the rhetoric does not invalidate the comparison, and the commentators needed to determine exactly what kind of nations animals formed. The preferred view was that each species was an *umma*, so Fakhr ad-Din Al-Razi, who died in 1209 and was one of the great Quranic commentators, produces a *hadith* in which the prophet describes dogs as an *umma*, as a people.

More tricky is the question of how these communities might be “peoples like yourselves.” So Razi, looking at the large debate which had already accumulated by his time, finds six major possible interpretations. Here they are:

1. “Nations” indicate that their members resemble each other, can reproduce with each other, and find comfort with each other.
2. They are like humans in that they are also created by God and depend on His provision.
3. They are like us and unlike the inanimate realm in being capable of mutual communication.
4. They are like us insofar as they are reached by God’s care, grace, mercy and compassion.
5. They resemble us in being resurrected to receive their rights. (We’ll examine that later on)
6. Each species is an *umma* in that it prefigures some set of human potentialities, so that some humans are like dogs, others are like peacocks, others resemble lions and so forth. These views are all listed and explained in Razi’s great commentary. (01:21:16) There are other views in other commentaries: for example, Al-Qurtubi (died 1273) believed that animals are “like ourselves” in that “it is not right for humans to wrong them”, thus indicating that the word *umma* denotes a community possessed of legal and moral rights, and his companions indicate that this is the correct interpretation.

These are very disparate, but they all share an ethical conclusion: whatever its exact sense, the verse evidently enjoins us to behave morally towards these orders of creation because

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God has deliberately stated that they bear a valid resemblance to our human selves. And they segue into a second set of interpretations, which one might call cosmological: thus Razi cites the companion of the prophet Ibn Abbas as holding that these communities are like ourselves “because they know God, attest to his unity, and praise and glorify Him.” This links to another Quranic verse (17:44): “There is nothing that does not hymn His praise”, and also a verse about “living creatures, each of which knows its prayer and worship” (24:41). God Himself, and His messengers, have spoken to non-human animals, the bees and so forth. So the animals that we have seen are somehow possessing a form of consciousness which may be used to promote God’s purposes.

And here we have to return to this curious crypto-animism, or anthropomorphism, which we discussed earlier. So Razi cites a *hadith* in which the Prophet says, “Whoever kills a sparrow in jest, it will come on the Day of Judgment chirruping to God, saying ‘O God, this man killed me in jest, and took no benefit from me, and did not leave me to eat the fruits of the earth.’” That is a very theologically freighted conception: the idea that the bird can speak on the Day of Judgment, that it has rights, and that God will take the sparrow’s side against somebody who maltreated it: It is clearly indicative of something that is very characteristic, you might say, of an earlier age, and is characteristically Ishmaelite.

So you can imagine that this triggers a large Muslim investigation of the idea of animal souls, which is linked also to Hellenistic Aristotelian ideas about what animal consciousness is like, which we don’t really have time to go into. It is complex.

So let me just close — because I have a tendency to speak at excessive length, which comes from many years of giving sermons — with a few quotes from one of the Sufi commentaries. This is Ruzbihan Al-Baqli (died 1209) in his Quranic commentary “The Brides of Speech”. This is what he says about this passage.

God created the animals, birds, predators and insects with the primordial nature (fitra) of monotheism, and instinctual knowledge of Him, which is why He speaks to them and has created for their minds pathways to His eternal presence and secrets. It is by that presence that they live. Their whistling, lowing, singing and roaring are from the sweetness of the spiritual world which is reaching them and the manifest lights of His glory. They long lovingly for God and to taste the oceans of His mercy.

Ruzbihan goes on to give a quantity of Sufi stories about saints communing with animals. So, for Ruzbihan, “nations like yourselves” means like humanity “in seeking the true God and in intuiting Him from His subtleties in creation which bring out the lights of His attributes in the world.” Interestingly, the animals are not just seen as passive substrates of the Divine properties but as active pursuers and agents of His truth.

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So in what sense, then, are they like ourselves? And here he tries to explain. I am a great Ruzbihan fan so I will quote this last gobbet:

All the nations share a basic created nature in being composed of the four elements, and are made with animal and spiritual natures, and are equal in eating and drinking, motion and congregation, the qualities of the self and properties of identity such as desire, anger passion and pride. This equality is based in the stuff of the primordial nature (fitra), according to which God made them, as He has said 'From it did we create you; to it did we return you; from it shall we bring you forth one more time.' They all had their drinking places in the ocean of God's spec and his eternal words which indicate the paths of His unity. The nature of animals, birds, insects and predators is mingled with knowledge of their maker and creator: His qualities and essence they know. This discourse is not difficult or insufficient for them to understand.

On that rather unsatisfactory point I shall end. Hopefully this hasn't been too disjointed and I have conveyed at least the basic sense of how Islam historically understood itself as the repairing of an essentially pagan and often rather cruel world by preaching a primordial monotheism that also engages with certain other qualities of primordial life, such as a sense of community with the natural world. This conception of *fitra* is one of the most characteristic concepts one needs to understand if one is to read the Qur'an with any kind of understanding. Islam is certainly not a shamanism, but one can see why those Enlightenment readers of the Qur'an thought that that was what was going on.
