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Islam and the Environment*

HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES

It has been a great concern of mine to affirm and encourage those groups and faith communities that are in the minority in this country. Indeed, over the last twenty-five years, I have tried to find as many ways as possible to help integrate them into British society and to build good relationships between our faith communities. I happen to believe this is best achieved by emphasizing unity through diversity. Only in this way can we ensure fairness and build mutual respect in our country. And if we get it right here then perhaps we might be able to offer an example in the wider world.

I am slightly alarmed that it is now seventeen years since I came here to the Sheldonian to deliver a lecture for the Centre that tried to do just this. I called it 'Islam and the West' and, from what I can tell, it clearly struck a chord, and not just here in the U.K. I am still reminded of what I said, particularly when I travel in the Islamic world—in fact, because it was printed, believe it or not, it is the only speech I have ever made which continues to produce a small return!

I wanted to give that lecture to address the dangers of the ignorance and misunderstanding that I felt were growing between the Islamic world and the West in the aftermath of the Cold War. Since then, the situation has both improved and worsened, depending on where you look. Certainly the sorts of advances made by the Oxford Centre have helped to build confidence and understanding, but we all know only too well how some of the things I warned of in that lecture have since come to pass, both here and elsewhere in the world. So it is tremendously important that we continue to work to heal the differences and overcome the misconceptions that still exist. I remain confident that this is possible because there are many values we all share that have the powerful capacity to bind us, rather than what happens when those values are forgotten—or purposefully ignored.

* This is the text of a lecture delivered for the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies by HRH The Prince of Wales at the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, on 8 June 2010.

Healing division is also my theme today, but this time it is not the divisions between cultures I want to explore. It is the division that poses a much more fundamental threat to the health and well-being of us all. It is the widening division we are seeing in so many ways between humanity and Nature.

Many of Nature's vital life-support systems are now struggling to cope under the strain of global industrialization. How they will manage if millions more people are to achieve Western levels of consumption is highly disturbing to contemplate. The problems are only going to get much worse. And they are very real. Whatever you might have read in the newspapers, particularly about climate change in the run up to the Copenhagen conference last year, we face many related and very serious problems that are a matter of accurate, scientific record.

The actual facts are that over the last half century, for instance, we have destroyed at least thirty per cent of the world's tropical rainforests and if we continue to chop them down at the present rate, by 2050 we will end up with a very disturbing situation. In fact, in the three years since I started my Rainforest Project to try and help to find an innovative solution to tropical deforestation, over 30 million hectares have been lost, and with them this planet has lost about 80,000 species. When you consider that a given area of equatorial trees evaporates eight times as much rainwater as an equivalent patch of ocean, you quickly start to see how their disappearance will affect the productivity of the Earth. They produce billions of tonnes of water every day and without that rainfall the world's food security will become very unstable.

But there are other facts too. In the last fifty years our industrialized approach to farming has degraded a third of the Earth's topsoil. That is a fact. We have also fished the oceans so extensively that if we continue at the same rate for much longer we are likely to see the collapse of global fisheries in forty years from now. Another fact. Then there are the colossal amounts of waste that pollute the Earth—the many dead zones where nothing can live in many major river estuaries and various parts of the oceans, or those immense rafts of plastic that now float about in the Pacific. Would you believe that one of them, off the coast of California, is made up of 100 million tonnes of plastic and it has doubled in size in just the last decade? It is now at least six times the size of the United Kingdom. And we call ourselves civilized!

These are all very real problems and they are facts—all of them, the obvious results of the comprehensive industrialization of life. But what is less obvious is the attitude and general outlook which perpetuate this dangerously destructive approach. It is an approach that acts contrary to the teachings of each and every one of the world's sacred traditions, including Islam.

What surprises me, I have to say, is that—quite apart from whether or not we value the sacred traditions as much as we should—the blunt economic facts make the predominant approach increasingly irrational. I imagine that few of you are familiar with the interim report of the United Nations study called 'The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity Study', which came out in 2008. It painted a salutary picture of what we lose in straightforward financial terms by our destruction of natural systems and the absence of their services to the world. In the first place the authors of the report calculated that we destroy around 50 billion dollars worth of a system that produces these services every year. By mapping the loss of those services over a forty-year period, their estimate is that, in financial terms, the global economy incurs an annual loss of between 2 and 4.5 trillion dollars—every single year.

To put that figure into some sort of perspective, the recent crash in the world's banking system caused a one-off loss of just 2 trillion dollars. I wonder why the bigger annual loss does not attract the same kind of media frenzy as the banking crisis did?

This should demonstrate the flaw in the sum that does not need an Oxbridge mathematician to understand—that Nature's finite resources, divided by our ever-more rapacious desire for continuous economic growth, does not work out. We are clearly living beyond our means, already consuming the Earth's capital resources faster than she can replenish them.

Over the years, I have pointed out again and again that our environmental problems cannot be solved simply by applying yet more and more of our brilliant green technology—important though it is. It is no good just fixing the pump and not the well.

When I say this, everybody nods sagely, but I get the impression that many are often unwilling to embrace what I am really referring to, perhaps because the missing element sits outside the parameters of the prevailing secular view. It is this 'missing element' that I would like to examine today.

In short, when we hear talk of an 'environmental crisis', or even of a 'financial crisis', I would suggest that this is actually describing the outward consequences of a deep, inner crisis of the soul. It is a crisis in our relationship with—and our perception of—Nature, and it is born of Western culture being dominated for at least two hundred years by a mechanistic and reductionist approach to our scientific understanding of the world around us.

So I would like you to consider very seriously today whether a big part of the solution to all of our worldwide 'crises' does not lie simply in more and better technology, but in the restoration of the soul to the mainstream of our thinking. Our science and technology cannot do this. Only sacred traditions have the capacity to help this happen.

In general, we live within a culture that does not believe very much in the soul any more—or if it does, won't admit to it publicly for fear of being thought old fashioned, out of step with 'modern imperatives' or 'anti-scientific'. The empirical view of the world, which measures it and tests it, has become the only view to believe. A purely mechanistic approach to problems has somehow assumed a position of great authority and this has encouraged the widespread secularization of society that we see today. This is despite the fact that those men of science who founded institutions like the Royal Society were also men of deep faith. It is also despite the fact that a great many of our scientists today profess a faith in God. I am aware of one recent survey suggesting that over seventy per cent of scientists do so.

I must say, I find this rather baffling. If this is so, why is it that their sense of the sacred has so little bearing on the way science is employed to exploit the natural world in so many damaging ways?

I suppose it must be to do with who pays the fiddler. Over the last two centuries, science has become ever more firmly yoked to the ambitions of commerce. Because there are such big economic benefits from such a union, society has been persuaded that there is nothing wrong here. And so, a great deal of empirical research is now driven by the imperative that its findings must be employed to maximum financial effect, whatever the impact this may have on the Earth's long-term capacity to endure.

This imbalance, where mechanistic thinking is so predominant, goes back at least to Galileo's assertion that there is nothing in Nature but quantity and motion. This is the view that continues to frame the general perception of the way the world works and how we fit within

the scheme of things. As a result, Nature has been completely objectified—‘She’ has become an ‘it’—and we are persuaded to concentrate on the material aspect of reality that fits within Galileo’s scheme.

Understanding the world from a mechanical point of view and then employing that knowledge has, of course, always been part of the development of human civilization, but as our technology has become ever more sophisticated and our industrialized methods have become so much more powerful, so the level of destruction is now potentially all the more widespread and un-containable, especially if you add into this mix the emphasis we have on consumerism.

It was that great scientist, Goethe, who saw life as the masculine principle striving endlessly to reach the ‘eternal feminine’—what the Greeks called ‘Sophia’, or wisdom. It is a striving, he said, fired by the force of love. I am not sure that this is quite the way things happen today. Our striving in the industrialized world is certainly not fired by a love of wisdom. It is far more focused on the desire for the greatest possible financial profit.

This ignores the spiritual teachings of traditions like Islam, which recognize that it is not our animal needs that are absolute: it is our spiritual essence, an essence made for the infinite. But with consumerism now such a key element in our economic model, our natural, spiritual desire for the infinite is constantly being reflected towards the finite. Our spiritual perspective has been flattened and made earthbound and we are persuaded to channel all of our natural, never-ending desire for what Islamic poets called ‘the Beloved’ towards nothing but more and more material commodities. Unfortunately we forget that our spiritual desire can never be completely satisfied. It is rightly a never-ending desire. But when that desire is focused only on the earthly, it becomes potentially disastrous. The hunger for yet more and more things creates an alarming vacuum and, as we are now realizing, this does great harm to the Earth and creates a never-ending unhappiness for many, many people.

I hope you can just begin to see my point. The utter dominance of the mechanistic approach of science over everything else, including religion, has ‘de-souled’ the dominant world view, and that includes our perception of Nature. As soul is elbowed out of the picture, our deeper link with the natural world is severed. Our sense of the spiritual relationship between humanity, the Earth and her great

diversity of life has become dim. The entire emphasis is all on the mechanical process of increasing growth in the economy, of making every process more 'efficient' and achieving as much convenience as possible. None of which could be said to be an ambition of God. And so, unfashionable though it is to suggest it, I am keen to stress here the need to heal this divide within ourselves. How else can we heal the divide between East and West unless we reconcile the East and West within ourselves? Everything in Nature is a paradox and seems to carry within itself the paradox of opposites. Curiously, this maintains the essential balance. Only human beings seem to introduce imbalance. The task is surely to reconnect ourselves with the wisdom found in Nature which is stressed by each of the sacred traditions in its own way.

My understanding of Islam is that it warns that to deny the reality of our inner being leads to an inner darkness which can quickly extend outwards into the world of Nature. If we ignore the calling of the soul, then we destroy Nature. To understand this we have to remember that we are Nature, not inanimate objects like stones; we reflect the universal patterns of Nature. And in this way, we are not a part that can somehow disengage itself and take a purely objective view.

From what I know of the Qur'ān, again and again it describes the natural world as the handiwork of a unitary benevolent Power. It very explicitly describes Nature as possessing an 'intelligibility' and affirms that there is no separation between Man and Nature, precisely because there is no separation between the natural world and God. It offers a completely integrated view of the Universe where religion and science, mind and matter are all part of one living, conscious whole. We are, therefore, finite beings contained by an infinitude, and each of us is a microcosm of the whole. This suggests to me that Nature is a knowing partner, never a mindless slave to humanity, and we are Her tenants; God's guests for all too short a time.

If I may quote the Qur'ān (67:30): *'Have you considered: if your water were to disappear into the Earth, who then could bring you gushing water?'* This is the Divine hospitality that offers us our provisions and our dwelling places, our clothing, tools and transport. The Earth is robust and prolific, but also delicate, subtle, complex and diverse and so our mark must always be gentle—or the water will disappear, as it is doing in places like the Punjab in India. Industrialized farming methods there rely upon the use of high-yielding

seeds and chemical fertilizers, both of which need a lot more energy and a lot more water as well. As a consequence the water table has dropped dramatically (I have been there, I have seen it): so far, by three feet a year. Punjabi farmers are now having to dig expensive bore holes over 200 feet deep to get at what remains of the water and, as a result, their debts become ever deeper and the salt rises to the surface contaminating the soil.

This is not a sustainable way of growing food and maintaining the well-being of communities. It does not respect Divine hospitality. The costs it incurs will have to be borne by those who will inherit what is fast becoming the ruined and frayed fabric of life. So for their sake, we have to acknowledge that the immediate, short-term financial benefits of our predominant, mechanistic approach are too expensive to continue to dominate our way of life.

This happens when traditional principles and practices are abandoned—and with them, all sense of reverence for the Earth which is an inseparable element in an integrated and spiritually grounded tradition like Islam—just as it was once firmly embedded in the philosophical heritage of Western thought. The Stoics of ancient Greece, for instance, held that ‘right knowledge’, as they called it, is gained by living in agreement with Nature, where there is a correspondence or a sympathy between the truth of things, thought and action. They saw it as our duty to achieve an attunement between human nature and the greater scheme of the Cosmos.

This incidentally is also the teaching of Judaism. The Book of Genesis says that God placed Mankind in the garden ‘to tend it and take care of it’, to serve and conserve it for the sake of future generations. *Adāmāh* in Hebrew means ‘Earth’, so Adam is a child of the Earth. In my own tradition of Christianity, the immanence of God is made explicit by the incarnation of Christ. But let us also not forget that throughout the Christian New Testament, Christ often refers to Himself as ‘the Son of Man’—which, in Hebrew, is *Ben Ādām*. He, too, is a ‘son of the Earth’, surely making the same explicit connection between human nature and the whole of Nature.

Even the apocryphal Gnostic texts are imbued with the same principle. The fragments of one of the oldest, ascribed to Mary Magdalene, instructs us: ‘Attachment to matter gives rise to passion against Nature. Thus, trouble arises in the whole body; this is why I tell you: Be in harmony.’ In all cases the message is clear. Our specific

purpose is to 'earth' Heaven. So to separate ourselves within an inner darkness leads to what the Irish poet, W. B. Yeats, warned of at the start of the twentieth century. 'The falcon cannot hear the falconer,' he wrote. 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.'

The traditional way of life within Islam is very clear about the 'centre' that holds the relationship together. From what I know of its core teachings and commentaries, the important principle we must keep in mind is that there are limits to the abundance of Nature. These are not arbitrary limits, they are the limits imposed by God. As such, if my understanding of the Qur'ān is correct, Muslims are commanded not to transgress them.

Such instruction is hard to square if you found your understanding of the world on empirical terms alone. Four hundred years of relying on trying and testing the facts scientifically has established the view that spirituality and religious faith are outdated expressions of superstitious belief. After all, empiricism has proved how the world fits together and it is nothing to do with a 'Supreme Being'. There is no empirical evidence for the existence of God so, therefore, Q.E.D., God does not exist. It is a very reasonable, rational argument, and I presume it can be applied to 'thought' too. After all, no brain scanner has ever managed to photograph a thought, nor a piece of love, and it never will. So, Q.E.D., that must mean 'thought' and 'love' do not exist either!

Clearly there is a point beyond which empiricism cannot make complete sense of the world. It works by establishing facts through testing them by the scientific process. It is one kind of language and a very fine one, but it is a language not able to fathom experiences like faith or the meaning of things—it is not able to articulate matters of the soul. This is why it consistently elbows soul out of the picture.

But we do have other kinds of 'language', as Islam well knows, and they are much better at dealing with the realm of the soul and matters of meaning. Each is a different aspect of our language, in fact. Each deals with different aspects of the truth and if you put empiricism, philosophy and the spiritual perception of life together, just as the Islamic tradition at its best and richest has always done, then they tend to complement each other rather well.

As an example, take the difference this made in the ninth and tenth centuries, during the so-called 'Golden Age of Islam'. It was a period which gave rise to a spectacular flowering of scientific advancement,

but all of it was underpinned by an age-old philosophical understanding of reality and grounded in a profound spirituality, which included a deep reverence for the Natural world. This was an integrated vision of the world, reflecting the timeless truth that all life is rooted in the unity of the Creator. This is the testimony of faith, is it not, embodied in the contemplative implication of the formless essence of the Qur'ān's *ḥaqīqat*? It is the notion of *tawhīd*, the oneness of all things within the embrace of the Divine unity.

Islamic writers express it so well. Ibn Khaldūn, for instance, who taught that 'all creatures are subject to a regular and orderly system. Causes are linked to effects where each is connected with the other'. Or the great Shabistārī in fourteenth-century Persia, who talked of the world being 'a mirror from head to foot, in every atom a hundred blazing suns where a world dwells in the heart of a millet seed'. Words that resonate, don't you think, with William Blake's famous lines: 'To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower'.

Other Western poets have captured this truth too. William Wordsworth, perhaps one of the greatest of all our Nature poets, describes 'a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply interfused . . . A motion and a spirit that impels/All thinking things, all objects of all thought/And rolls through all things'. I quote the poets because they help us identify this 'sense sublime' and inspire reverence for the created world.

Reverence is not science-based knowledge. It is an experience always mediated by love, sometimes induced by it; and love comes from relationship. If you take away reverence and reduce our spiritual relationship with life, then you open yourself up to the idea that we can be little more than a chance group of isolated, self-obsessed individuals, disconnected from life's innate presence and un-anchored by any sense of duty to the rest of the world. We are free to act without responsibility. Thus we turn a blind eye to those islands of plastic in the sea, or to the treatment meted out to animals in factory farms. And it is why the so-called 'precautionary principle' is so often thrown out of the window.

This is the principle that would make us think twice if, say, we were to climb into a vehicle that happens to have a ninety per cent chance of crashing. Instead, because the danger is not proven beyond doubt, we think it is safe to embark upon the journey. This is how we proceed in many significant fields—in matters like genetic modification or

climate change. We go on denying that there may be side effects, even if our intuition warns us to be cautious, or even if there is some related evidence. Recently, for instance, the news emerged that, for the fourth year in a row, more than a third of honey-bee colonies in the United States failed to survive the winter. More than three million colonies in the U.S. and billions of honey-bees worldwide have died. Scientists say they are no nearer to knowing what is causing this catastrophic collapse, but there is plenty of evidence that modern pesticides have played their part. Given that bees, like nearly every other bug, are insects, I would have thought it was rather obvious. And yet we carry on with a narrow-minded, mechanistic approach to industrialized farming, with all its focus on high yields at whatever price. So we lace the fields with pesticides that kill insects. It is quite bizarre how we continue to entrust our food security to the very substances that are destroying the harmonic cycle which produces our food. It really is a form of collective hubris and I often wonder if those who practise such well-exercised scepticism in these matters will ever see that ‘the Emperor is wearing no clothes’.

This, then, is why the wisdom and learning offered by a sacred tradition like Islam matter—and, if I may say so, why those who hold and strive to preserve their sacred traditions in different parts of the world have every reason to become more confident of their ground. The Islamic world is the custodian of one of the greatest treasuries of accumulated wisdom and spiritual knowledge available to humanity. It is both Islam’s noble heritage and a priceless gift to the rest of the world. And yet, so often, that wisdom is now obscured by the dominant drive towards Western materialism—the feeling that to be truly ‘modern’ you have to ape the West.

To counter that tendency I have done what I can with my School of Traditional Arts to nurture and support traditional and sacred craft skills—not least those of Islam—because they keep alive a perspective that we sorely need, even though short-term fashion deems them to be irrelevant. The geometry and patterning that are taught at the School are the basis of the many crafts that have been all but abandoned in many parts of the world, including the Islamic world. It is a tragedy of monumental proportions that they are being forgotten because they reflect the spiritual mathematics found everywhere in Nature. As Islam teaches very specifically, it is a patterning that reflects the very ground of our being. It is the Divine imagination, so

to speak; the ineffable presence that is the sacred breath of life. As the seventeenth-century mystic Ibn ʿĀshir, puts it, by the practice of these arts you ‘see the One who manifests in the form, not the form by itself’.

For many in the modern world this is hard to understand because the view of God has become so distorted. ‘God’ is seen as being, somehow, outside ‘His’ Creation, rather than part of its unfolding—what the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas called ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’. God being the Principle that underlies the Cosmos, the Cosmos is the result of God knowing it and of it knowing the uncreated God. Notice the emphasis there on ‘un’-created. It is of profound importance. The basis of all existence is in this relationship.

I suspect the reason why this is such an unfashionable view is that the deep-seated experience of participation in the living, creative presence of God is offered to us in all traditions not by empiricism, but by revelation. This is a rare and precious gift and only given to those whose supreme humanity and capacity for great humility achieves a mastery over the ego. It comes at the moment when ‘the knower and the known’ become one—the moment when the mind of Man comes into union with the mind of God.

This, of course, is not deemed possible from an empirical point of view, but revelation is a very different kind of knowing from scientific, evidence-based knowledge, and I cannot stress the point strongly enough; by dismissing such a process and discarding what it offers to humankind, we throw away a very important lifeline for the future.

I must say, once you do blend the different languages—the empirical and the spiritual—together as I am suggesting, and as I have been trying to say for so long, then you do begin to wonder why the sceptics think the desire to work in harmony with Nature is so unscientific. Why is it deemed so worthwhile to abandon our true relationship with the ‘beingness’ of all things, to limit ourselves to the science of manipulation, rather than to immerse ourselves in the wider science of understanding? They seem such spurious arguments, because, as Islam clearly understands, it is actually impossible to divorce human beings from Nature’s patterns and processes. The Qur’ān is considered to be the ‘last Revelation’ but it clearly acknowledges which book is the first. That book is the great book of Creation, of Nature herself, which has been taken too much for granted in our modern world and needs to be restored to its original position.

So, with all this in mind, I would like to set you a challenge, if I may; a challenge that I hope will be conveyed beyond this audience today. It is the challenge to mobilize Islamic scholars, poets and artists, as well as those craftsmen, engineers and scientists who work with and within the Islamic tradition, to identify the general ideas, the teachings and the practical techniques within the tradition which encourage us to work with the grain of Nature rather than against it. I would urge you to consider whether we can learn anything from the Islamic culture's profound understanding of the natural world to help us all in the fearsome challenges we face. Are there, for instance, any that could help preserve our precious marine eco-systems and fisheries? Are there any traditional methods of avoiding damage to all of Nature's systems that revive the principle of sustainability within Islam?

To give you an idea of what I mean, let me offer a few examples drawn from the work done by my School of Traditional Arts, where project workers have shown that re-introducing traditional craft skills brings a coherence to people's daily lives, perhaps because they fuse the spiritual with the practical.

Since I founded it, the School has helped restore these skills in places as far afield as Jordan and Nigeria. It also helps to build bridges within communities in this country which have suffered the worst fractures. In Burnley in Lancashire, for instance, project workers have been teaching children from many backgrounds an integrated view of the world using the patterns of Islamic sacred geometry. This has not just inspired the imagination of the children taking part, but their teachers too. They tell me they have discovered a much more integrated approach to education, where maths and art are not alien to one another, but are seen as two sides of the same coin and directly rooted in Nature's patterns and processes.

In Afghanistan, I have only recently managed to see the work being done under the umbrella of what we have called the Turquoise Mountain Foundation—an initiative I launched some four years ago—which is running similar education programmes and craft training courses. It is also helping with the urban regeneration of the old historic quarter of Kabul by guiding people to start businesses using the craft skills they have learned.

For example, in the building of schools, people are being shown how to use mud-bricks which are a quarter of the price of the concrete blocks used by other agencies. They are also resistant to earthquakes,

whereas concrete is not. And they cope much better with extremes of temperature—mud-brick buildings are cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter. What is more, they use local labour and local, natural materials. So these schools are a good example of how traditional wisdom blends with modern needs. After all, you can still use computers and other modern technology in a mud-brick building! And more comfortably, too, given that it is more suited to local conditions.

When I finally did manage to reach Kabul earlier this year—after several years of trying—what I saw was truly remarkable. It proved to me that teaching and employing traditional crafts is an effective way of re-introducing the kinds of techniques that are benign to the natural environment. They are also capable of restoring a cultural balance in people's minds. By encouraging a wider celebration of the traditional, ancient culture of Afghanistan, these skills help in a very practical way to counteract the oppressive effects of extremism in all its forms, both religious and secular. This is how traditional wisdom works. It is not a theory or a science written down. Its wisdom is discovered through practice and in action.

These are schemes that are close to my heart, but the Oxford Centre keeps me informed of many others. Working in Muslim countries, the World Wildlife Fund has found that trying to convey the importance of conservation is much easier if it is transmitted by religious leaders whose reference is Qur'anic teaching. In Zanzibar, they had little success trying to reduce spear-fishing and the use of dragnets, which were destroying the coral reefs. But when the guidance came from the Qur'an, there was a notable change in behaviour. Or in Indonesia and in Malaysia, where former poachers are being deterred in the same way from destroying the last remaining tigers.

And it is not just such interventions that are important. It is mystifying, for instance, that the modern world completely ignores the time-honoured feats of engineering in the ancient world. The *qanāts* of Iran, for example, that still provide water for thousands of people in what would otherwise be desert conditions. These underground canals—unbelievably 170,000 miles of them—keep the water from the mountains moving down the tunnels using gravity alone. And the water in every village is then kept fresh by the way the storage towers keep the air flowing freely, moved by the wind.

In Spain, the irrigation systems constructed 1200 years ago also still work perfectly, as does the way in which the water is managed by the

local population—a way of operating devised before the Muslim rule in Spain disintegrated. The same sorts of Islamic management schemes operate in other parts of the world too, like the *hima* zones in Saudi Arabia which set aside land for use as pasture. These are all examples of how prophetic teaching, in this case framed by the guidance of the Qur'ān, maintains a long-term view of things and keeps the danger of a self-interested form of short-term economics at bay.

I am sure that if an organization like the Oxford Centre could help to establish a global forum on 'Islam and the Environment' many more very practical, traditional approaches like these could become more widely applied. They may range from science and technology to agriculture, healthcare, architecture and education. Think what could be achieved if mothers and fathers, the teachers in madrassas and Imams, all sought to demonstrate to children how to translate Islamic teachings into practical action—how to blend traditional knowledge and awareness of Nature's needs with the best of what we know now.

This is certainly something I feel we have to do in the one final issue I have to mention as I close. Perhaps a few facts and figures might demonstrate why.

When I was born in 1948, a city like Lagos in Nigeria had a population of just three hundred thousand. Today, just over sixty years later, it is home to twenty million. Thirty-five thousand people live in every square mile of the city, and its population increases by another six hundred thousand every year.

I choose Lagos as an example. I could have chosen Mumbai, Cairo or Mexico City; wherever you look, the world's population is increasing fast. It goes up by the equivalent of the entire population of the United Kingdom every year. Which means that this poor planet of ours, which already struggles to sustain 6.8 billion people, will somehow have to support over 9 billion people within fifty years. In the Arab world, sixty per cent of the population is now under the age of thirty. That will mean, in some way or other, 100 million new jobs will have to be created in that region alone over the next ten to fifteen years.

I am well aware that the very long-term prediction is that population may go down. 150 years from now the trends suggest there may be as few as four billion people, maybe even just two billion, but there is no getting away from the fact that in the short term, in the next fifty years, we face monumental problems as the figures rocket. No mega-

city can ever hope to catch up with the present expansion in their numbers to provide adequate healthcare, education, transport, food and shelter for so many. Nor can the Earth herself sustain us all, when the demands and pressures on her bounty worldwide are becoming so intense.

I know it is a complicated issue. The experts suggest that, in theory, the Earth could support 9 billion people, but not if a vast proportion is consuming the world's resources at present Western levels. So the changes have to be essentially two-fold. It would certainly help if the acceleration slowed down, but it would also help if the world reduced its desire to consume.

I have been following carefully the findings of my British Asian Trust in India which has been helping to run a women's education project in a drought-prone region of Maharashtra called Satara. They have noticed that a real difference can be made when women are able to become more involved in the running of the community. This is also the experience in Bangladesh. I have long been fascinated by Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. It operates micro-credit schemes that offer loans to the poorest communities through a bank which is now ninety per cent owned by the rural poor. Interestingly, where the loans are managed by the women of the community, the birth rate has gone down. The impact of these sorts of schemes, of education and the provision of family planning services, has been widespread. Whereas in the 1980s, the average family in Bangladesh had six children, now the average figure is three. But with mega-cities growing as they are, I fear there is little chance these sorts of schemes can help the plight of many millions of people unless we all face up to the fact more honestly than we do that one of the biggest causes of high birth rates remains cultural.

It raises some very difficult moral questions, I know, but do we not each one of us carry the same responsibility towards the Earth? It is surely time to ask if we can come to a view that balances the traditional attitude to the sacred nature of life on the one hand with, on the other, those teachings within each of the sacred traditions that urge humankind to keep within the limits of Nature's benevolence and bounty.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have endured all this with patience and fortitude. You have also given a very good impression of listening to my own personal thoughts on the perspective opened up by Islamic

teaching. I have wanted to convey them to you because it always moves me to be reminded that, from the perspective of traditional Islamic teaching, the destruction of the Earth is represented as the destruction of a prayerful being.

Whichever faith tradition we come from, the fact at the heart of the matter is the same. Our inheritance from our Creator is at stake. It will be no good at the end of the day as we sit amidst the wreckage, trying to console ourselves that it was all done for the best possible reasons of development and the betterment of Mankind. The inconvenient truth is that we share this planet with the rest of Creation for a very good reason—and that is, we cannot exist on our own without the intricately balanced web of life around us. Islam has always taught this and to ignore that lesson is to default on our contract with Creation.

The Modernist ideology that has dominated the Western outlook for a century implies that ‘tradition’ is backward looking. What I have tried to explain today is that this is far from true. Tradition is the accumulation of the knowledge and wisdom that we should be offering to the next generation. It is, therefore, visionary—it looks forward.

Turning to the traditional teachings like those found in Islam that define our relationship with the natural world, does not mean locking us into some sort of cultural and technological immobility. As the English writer G. K. Chesterton put it: ‘Real development is not leaving things behind, as on a road, but drawing life from them as a root.’ I would also remind you of the words of Oxford’s very own C. S. Lewis, who pointed out that ‘sometimes you do have to turn the clock back if it is telling the wrong time’—that there is nothing ‘progressive’ about being stubborn and refusing to acknowledge that we have taken the wrong road. If we realize that we are travelling in the wrong direction, the only sensible thing to do is to admit it and retrace our steps back to where we first went wrong. As Lewis put it, ‘going back can sometimes be the quickest way forward’. It is the most progressive thing we could do.

All of the mounting evidence is telling us that we are, indeed, on the wrong road, so you might think it would be wise to draw on the timeless guidance that comes from our intuitive sense of the origin of all things to which we are rooted. Nature’s rhythms, her cycles and her processes, are our guides to this uncreated, originating voice. They are our greatest teachers because they are expressions of Divine Unity. Which is why there is a profound truth in that seemingly simple, old saying of the nomads – that ‘the best of all Mosques is Nature herself’.