Three Relationships (Continued)

Eric Winkel*

We continue from this feature in the previous issue of ICR, which posited three relationships, human beings to human beings, human beings to the rest of the creation, and finally to the Creator. The first relationship is one of contract, the second of taskhīr (to be defined below), and the third of covenant.

For the second relationship, the description is no longer ‘contract’ but taskhīr. The term ‘subjugation’ in English is more accurately the antonym of taskhīr. This shows us how far we have strayed. We think we own a house, but the house owns us. We forget that the word ‘mortgage’ means ‘gripped until death’. The American author and leading transcendentalist of his time, Henry David Thoreau (d. 1862), saw a contrast between those who had been subjugated to their possessions and those who were unencumbered. Here is his imagery:

How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labour enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.2

Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), the famous Andalusian Sufi and philosopher, points out that the subjugation of the animals to us means we take on a great burden. It is not the animal that needs us – the wild horse runs away when you try to halter it.

The man is subjugated to his horse and his donkey, and he looks after her by bringing her water, providing fodder, and seeking for her to have situations where she is healthy.3

There is also subjugation among human beings, and it too shows us how far we have gone astray.

The level of king requires that he be subjugated to his people for what they want from him [...]. And the level of the citizens and the people requires that the king be subjugated to their safeguarding and defence, and fighting their enemies, and presiding as judge over what happens among them in litigations and seeking rights.4

According to Ibn al-ʿArabī,5 al-Qushayrī (d. 1074), the famous philosopher and Sufi from Persia, once told the story that a man saw someone riding on a donkey and hitting the head of the donkey, so he stopped him from doing that, and the donkey

* Eric Winkel is Principal Research Fellow at IAIS Malaysia.
said to him, “Do make him stop, because he is hitting his head.” For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the qur’ānic concept of taskhīr is where one party is put in a certain position which creates benefit for a second party. Because we recognise this benefit, we work hard to care for and tend to the first party. We recognise too that we are dependent on the first party. Anyone who beats the donkey’s head has missed completely the qur’ānic conception of taskhīr. Such a person has failed to recognise who the real head (boss) is.

In this view of taskhīr, we are subjugated not just to each other and to animals, but to the Earth, recalling the prophetic hadīth, “Be considerate to the Earth, for she is your mother.” Practices that are authentic, then, include returning plant life to the dirt, keeping fields fallow, preventing erosion, and putting nothing toxic into the Earth. Contrast this with the opposite mentality of factory farming and monoculture. The contemporary Indian philosopher, environmental activist, and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva says,

We need to start distinguishing between those economies that bring life and those that bring death. We’ve got suicidal economies – 200,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide after the WTO and World Bank’s policies. Why suicide? Corporate seeds aren’t about increasing productivity; they are about increasing debt. I call it ‘Corporate Feudalism’ – the corporations are joining with feudal structures we thought we’d left behind after Independence. I’ve sat in front of 2,500 widows in the Punjab, the wives of farmers who have committed suicide. These farmers consume pesticide in the field – ‘pesticide’ ironically translates as ‘medicine’ [davā, from the Arabic dawā] in our language. The land in that area has turned into a suicide belt. This is the same land where Gandhi started the cotton movement, where he spun for freedom.6

The mentality of death pervading corporation and factory farming tells us to extract all life from the dirt, leave behind poisons and erosion and a dust bowl, and then cut down another forest to make another ground to be exploited.

Activists use metaphors such as ‘rape’, ‘plunder’, and ‘stealing’ to describe the interactions between corporations and land, and they apply as well to interactions with individuals. In terms of taskhīr, we ask whether we expended more wealth on the subject than we received, whether we returned to the subject more than we received, because it is we, after all, who depend on the subject. That our mothers, our biological mothers and our Earth mother, are long suffering and patient with their children is no excuse for ugly behaviour. In the chapter on the earthquake, we read that Earth will on that day give her report (Qur’ān 99:4). The Prophet said, “She will testify to what each one did on her back.”7

One of the environmental lessons of the Qur’ān is in the story of the Marib Dam. A great civilisation had grown around the irrigated area, which was rich and fecund.
The phrase *qurratu* zāhiratun (Qur’ān 34:18) is interpreted by the eminent exegete al-Ṭabarānī (d. 970) as cities near to each other and interconnected. When a man leaves one city, the other becomes visible, so they did not need for their journey to al-Shām [Syria] any provisions. And a woman would leave with her spindle, with a basket on her head, and spin for awhile, and she would return to her house after the basket had been filled with fruits (falling into the basket). Between al-Shām and the land of Sabā’ [‘Sheba’, in Yemen] it was like that.8

But some wanted the stopping places to be far apart, so that they could enrich themselves by supplying provisions. Al-Ṭabarānī says they “grew reckless toward their good fortune”.

As a consequence, “they darkened their souls” (Qur’ān 34:19), that is, by leaving thankfulness and obedience; and one could say, by ungratefulness.

“So we made them legends” for those after them to speak about their situation and their affairs. Of them and their homes, no trace remains. He [Allah] said, “We scattered them completely dispersed,” that is, we separated them into different countries completely apart from each other, and that is that they were driven out of the country, and they ended up being symbols for the Arabs, who say, “The people were scattered”, aydī saba or ayādī Sabā’.9

The dominant paradigm among environmentalists seems to be ‘sustainability’. There is, however, an assumption that needs to be addressed by the Muslim. Conservation and sustainability assume that there is a limited amount of a resource, and that with this scarcity, we should make sure it lasts for us later and for the next generations. The paradigm that clashes with this view assumes that resources are not limited, and that science and technology (meaning, the new religion) will magically come to our rescue. I think that the focus on scarcity is not correct – but neither is the unlimited growth paradigm, because both operate in a mechanical world where God is absent. Another world view, one found among First Peoples and some Muslims too, is that our correct relationship, with respect to the environment, to God is thankfulness. In their address to the United Nations in Geneva, the Native American Iroquois or ‘Six Nations people’ said,

We believe that man is real, a part of the Creation, and that his duty is to support Life in conjunction with the other beings. That is why we call ourselves Ongwehonomwe – Real People. The original instructions direct that we who walk about on the Earth are to express a great respect, an affection, and a gratitude toward all the spirits which create and support Life. We give a greeting and thanksgiving to the many supporters of our own lives – the corn, beans, squash, the winds, the sun. When people cease to respect and
express gratitude for these many things, then all life will be destroyed, and human life on this planet will come to an end.10

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

We ‘darken our souls’ when we abandon thankfulness. The commentators see this as a pair: we abandon thankfulness and we stop refraining ourselves from disobedience. These are not abstract: these are very real, practical activities.

• ‘Thankfulness’ is recognising that blessing comes from God.11 Our relationship to farming changes when we act with thankfulness.
• Similarly, refraining from disobedience means many concrete practices: practise land ownership according to the sharīʿah and do no harm through pollution (e.g., fertilisers, pesticides, GM seeds) to the land, the waters, and the people, to name just three.

For this one, we are all in the same boat. According to the ḥadīth, “ʿĀʾishah heard that the Prophet had once said: ‘When the bad appears on the earth, Allah will send down on the people of the Earth his calamity’. She said, ‘And if among them are people who obey Allah?’ He said, ‘Yes (still).’”12

Notes
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 4:460.
8. See http://altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=91&tSoraNo=34&tAyahNo=18&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1 (accessed on 14 July 2010).
11. With reference to Qur’ān 34:13, Ibn Kathīr, in his *Tafsīr Qur’ān al-Karīm*, reports the following ḥadīth: “David said, ‘Lord, how shall I thank you, when thankfulness is a blessing from you?’ He said, ‘Now you have thanked me, when you said that blessing comes from me’. And He said, ‘But few of my creatures are thankful’”; available online at http://altafsir.com/Tafsir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=34&tAyahNo=13&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1 (accessed on 14 July 2010).