

an emergent sub-set of Americans practice tattooing and body modification as a means of reconnecting their minds with their physical bodies and the natural world while aligning themselves with non-Western religious ideals thought to be more spiritually and ecologically aware than those provided by the consumer-driven Western society (e.g., idealized visions of Irish Celtic Pagan and Native American relationships with the spirits of nature, or Buddhist and Daoist notions of the interconnectedness of all life). Valorizing non-Western ideals, these “modern primitives” not only work to provide ecologically oriented ethics but they also promote awareness of the spiritual aspects of traditional forms of body modification and their potential value in modern contexts.

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Further Reading

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See also: Feminist Spirituality Movement; Men's Movement; New Age; Polynesian Traditional Religions.

SP Tawhid (Oneness of God)

Tawhid literally means “making one” or “unifying,” and generally refers to the Islamic doctrine of the oneness of God. In the Qur'an, *Tawhid* implies both belief in God's unity as well as the corresponding conduct demanded by such belief. *Tawhid* therefore has a doctrinal as well as an ethical dimension.

As the most basic premise of Islam, *Tawhid* finds its expression in the first half of the testimony of faith: “There is no god but God.” The meanings and implications of this deceptively simple statement are far-reaching and manifold. *Tawhid* can be seen as the very life-force of Islam, for all aspects of Islamic belief, thought, and practice are rooted in its unifying and integrating vision. In any epistemology based on *Tawhid*, for instance, knowledge of nature cannot be divorced from knowledge of God's oneness.

Lynn White's critique of Christianity has been taken as an indictment of the entire Abrahamic tradition, including

monotheism's Islamic manifestation in *Tawhid*. A single transcendent God is necessarily outside of nature, making the latter appear as a profane object, fit for human manipulation and domination. The description of God in the Qur'an and its reception and development in the subsequent Islamic tradition present a more complex picture. To begin with, the God of the Qur'an is both transcendent and immanent. In the Islamic tradition, the proponents of classical theology and jurisprudence typically emphasized the former aspects of the divine due to their reliance on discursive reason and concern with the maintenance of social order. The proponents of the sapiential and mystical traditions, on the other hand, often emphasized the latter aspects of the divine because of their interest in inculcating a close personal relationship between God and the human individual.

In short, *Tawhid* embraces divine transcendence from and incomparability with creation (*tanzih*), as well as divine immanence in and similarity to creation (*tashbih*). Consequently, the God of the Qur'an, while not identical with nature in any simplistic or pantheistic way, is not far removed or separate from it either. While the former perspective opens up the possibility of legitimately making use of nature, the latter perspective sets ethical limits on such use. In the vision of *Tawhid*, nature is anything but a profane object.

The key Qur'anic term that must be emphasized in order to apprehend the relationship between God and nature is *ayah*, or sign. The word appears in the Qur'an as referring to miracles of prophets, to the beings and phenomena of nature, to the realities found in the human soul, to major historical events, and to the verses of the Qur'an itself – all of these are signs of God. The Qur'anic position seems to be that even though there may not be any adequate rational proof for the existence of God, there are more than enough signs that point or allude to the Ultimate Reality. According to the vision of *Tawhid*, everything other than God is a portent or pointer that signifies God. In this context, the Qur'an puts particular emphasis on directing the reader's attention to the innumerable and easily accessible beings and phenomena of nature as so many signs through which God may be known.

By positing all existing things as signs of God, the Qur'an brings sacredness back into nature. By using the same word for the verses of the scripture and the beings and phenomena of nature, the Qur'an indicates that the book of nature is as sacred as the scripture itself, each representing a modality of divine speech. For those who forget God, both the Qur'an and nature can serve as reminders. The supernatural revelation of the Qur'an and the natural phenomena of the universe disclose and unveil the same truth, indicating the unity of Ultimate Reality. The ordinary distinction between natural and supernatural becomes irrelevant in this context.

How is the relationship between the signs and the Sig-

nified understood? From one perspective, the beings and phenomena of nature point toward God just as a work of music or painting indicates the qualities of the artist who created it. From another perspective, God's being forms the very essence or reality of everything that exists. According to Indian philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the universe does not confront God as its other; time, space, and matter are not independent realities but only interpretations or intellectual modes for apprehending the creative energy or life of God. What mind perceives as a plurality of things in nature is actually one continuous and dynamic divine act. Nature, in Qur'anic parlance, is the habit of God. By observing nature in the *Tawhidic* frame of mind, human beings come in close contact with the behavior of Ultimate Reality, thereby sharpening their inner perception for its more direct and deeper vision.

The ethical attitude demanded by *Tawhid* may be understood in terms of *cibadah* and *khilafah*, two central Qur'anic terms that define the consequences of accepting the oneness of God. The first can be translated as servanthood, or the attitude of loving obedience and humility that human beings ought to display toward God. The second may be translated as vicegerency, or the privileged capacity for exercising God-like authority with respect to the world. In the *Tawhidic* framework, vicegerency presupposes servanthood; human beings cannot become partners in God's creative work without first humbling themselves before their Creator-Lord. While the ethic of dominion is inherent in the notion of vicegerency, the Qur'an views the exercise of human powers without genuine servanthood toward God as illegitimate. The Qur'anic notion of vicegerency includes the understanding that human powers are not their own but have been delegated to them from a higher authority, for a limited time and for a specific purpose. Human beings must exercise these powers within the limits set by the Real Sovereign, or they will be seen as criminals and rebels (*taghut*), no longer acting in accordance with the demands of *Tawhid*.

Tawhid implies that everything in the universe belongs to God – a frequently repeated Qur'anic theme. Consequently, the idea of material possessions and natural resources as constituting a sacred trust (*amanah*) from God is also built into the notion of vicegerency. Human beings have been temporarily bestowed with certain “possessions” through which they are being tested; this is true of individuals as well as communities and humankind as a whole. Ultimately, there is no such thing as human property. This understanding calls for an attitude of careful and vigilant restraint (*taqwa*) on the part of human beings *vis-à-vis* nature, which is divine property under temporary, partial, and conditional human stewardship.

These ethical implications of *Tawhid* are not limited to individual morality but extend to the dynamics of the collective order as well. In addition to religious beliefs and

ethical norms, the Qur'an provides the outlines of a social order through which these beliefs and norms can be actualized in concrete human reality; the social order established by the Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia constitutes a paradigmatic model for Muslims in this regard. The Qur'an recognizes that human beings are rarely able to act in accordance with their professed beliefs and norms if these are not simultaneously supported by social structures and institutions. Consequently, the actualization of *Tawhid* in a given community remains incomplete and precarious if it is confined to the individual's consciousness as a doctrine but does not shape the collective order.

The present-day ecological situation in the Muslim world is a forceful reminder that the chasm between ideal and reality will exist whenever professed beliefs and norms are not embodied in the collective order. *Tawhid* is no longer the central principle in the various social orders prevailing in the Muslim world, where the role of Islam in shaping public policy is itself a fiercely contested area. Moreover, any secularizing trend in the Muslim world further weakens Islam's ability to be ecologically relevant at a collective level. It is hardly surprising that the ecologically beneficial imperatives of *Tawhid* have only a limited impact in everyday reality. *Tawhid's* great potential in this regard, however, may be tapped through Islam-based environmental movements at the grassroots level.

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- See also: Islam; The Qur'an; Sufism.

Technological Immortality

Suffering death is the price that humans pay for their intelligence, yet through intelligence humans have long sought to overcome death, by means either of religion or technology. A single-celled animal such as the amoeba is in a