

# Carl Pope

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We live in a world we did not create, we could not reproduce, we do not understand. The very air we breathe is produced by processes we are utterly incapable of ourselves. Our bodies each day are dependent on gifts from millions of species, many of which we have never seen or named. We are rather helpless without the rest of creation, and it is extremely difficult to understand how those who are utterly dependent on millions of other species can claim for themselves the right of ownership.

Environmentalism as a movement and as an ethic has done a rather bad job dealing with the implications of our dependence. Environmentalists have tended to bog down into ultimately sterile debates over the relative priority of different facets of justice. The claims of the future or the obligations of the present to that future—inter-generational equity—are posed as in conflict with the needs of the powerless and the dispossessed among us. All of this is somehow portrayed as being in conflict with the call and the needs of the rest of creation upon which we depend, at least in the view of some deep ecologists.

But I want to go back now in history, because this dilemma we are dealing with is not new or recent or unique.

Neither our ideas, nor our failures are our own. It is the tenth century. Across the Arab Empire the Prophet Mohammed's original call to justice has been corrupted and degraded by the dynasties which succeeded him. Their enormous material and military successes have led to a civilization widely viewed by its own people as morally and spiritually corrupt. The united community of Islam that the prophet, peace be upon him, envisaged has been divided between Sunni and Shia, Ali and his son Hussein martyred. The prophet's revolutionary insistence that women be admitted as participants in his community has been subverted and supplanted by the patriarchal oppression of the Christian and Zoroastrian empires that preceded and surrounded Islam. The insistence of the early community on social equality has been corrupted by privileges, pleasures, and abuses of imperial power and military triumph.

The moment may seem familiar. It is a time when people crave spiritual rebirth. In Basra, Iraq, just south of the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, where Hussein and Ali were martyred, a group of spiritual leaders and intellectuals calling themselves the "the Brethren of Purity" set out to purify Islam through the pathway of knowledge. They set out to complete a universal encyclopedia, a work that will capture all of human wisdom within a spiritual context.

Knowledge for the Brethren is not divorced from God but rather flows from Him. Knowledge properly described and connected to belief is the tool with which the Brethren believe they can restore the community of Islam to its true callings.

At the center of the crisis that afflicted the Arab Empire was the enduring human dilemma of justice. All great traditions command us to justice, and the followers of all great traditions fall short of responding to that call. In response to this crisis of justice, the Brethren seek to go deeper. Islam is still in its intellectually open phase, so the Brethren go beyond the commandments of the Koran and the traditions of the faith as they inherited them; they seek to revive their faith by adding new understandings.

The encyclopedia they prepare has eleven volumes. One entire volume is devoted to the Brethren's new understanding of justice. They do not follow the tradition of Old Testament prophets like Isaiah or Ezekiel who denounce oppression; they do not speak truth to power as Daniel might have done; they do not preach the inevitable cruelty of life in the fashion of Siddhartha; and they do not focus on love like Jesus did. Instead, in a stunning and breathtaking ethical act of imagination, they extend the Muslim concept of justice to include not only humanity, but the entire animal kingdom. Much as George Orwell was to do much later in *Animal Farm*, they do this through a fable. This volume of the encyclopedia depicts an island in which animals have lived in a state of nature for hundreds of years because there are no human beings. There are only jinn—like the genie we know from the story of Aladdin. These spirits don't need to eat or drink, and hence have no need to enslave other creatures or each other.

The animals live in peace and contentment, each accord-

ing to its own nature and its own needs. But a ship arrives on the island. The humans on board immediately attempt to enslave the animals if they are useful, and to persecute and hunt those that are not. The animals rise in protest. “By what right,” they ask, “do people come and take away our freedoms?” “Here’s what the animals say to the king of the jinn: “Your Majesty, the verses the humans cite as the basis for our slavery point only to the kindness and blessing that God gave to mankind. For God said that he made them your servants just as he made the sun and the moon, the wind and clouds your servants. Are we to think, Your Majesty, that these too are their slaves and chattel and that men are their masters? No, God created all his creatures on heaven and earth. He let some serve others either to do them some good or to prevent some evil. God’s subordination of animals to man is solely to help men and keep them from harm, not, as they deludedly suppose and claim, in order that they should be our masters and we their slaves.”

They placed this appeal with the king of the jinns, and a trial convenes between animals and humans, which takes up the bulk of the book. The sides are well matched, but the modern reader, at least, has the definite sense that the animals have the best case. Humans argue that their gifts and culture make them the superior party. The animals quite convincingly demonstrate that each of the talents and technologies of people can be matched and over-matched by some member of the animal community. The camel, for example, despite his long legs and neck, finds his footing along the most arduous and treacherous pathways in the dark of night, while humans could not see without a lantern or a torch. The horse too sees in the dark, or at least hears distant footsteps in the dead of the night, and often wakes his master from sleep by nudging him with a foot to warn him of an enemy or a beast of prey. An ass or a cow is frequently observed to return to his familiar home when its master has led it away on a path that it did not know. Yet there are men who may travel the same road any number of times, still stray from it, and lose each other.

The animals also argue quite successfully that, viewed morally, they are the superior species. They do not make war upon each other. They do not accept bribes. They do not oppress each other. They do not ignore the commandments of their Lord. In fact, in the Muslim tradition, it is only human beings who decline the commandment to submit to the Lord. So it looks like we’re going to end up without any animals to work with at the end of the trial. But upon its conclusion, the Islamic holy man rescues the humans’ side of the case. However, his rescue is an ambiguous one, as the Brethren clearly intended. He makes a claim for humanity’s right not to oppress animals, but to make reasonable use of their services. And the claim is that only humans have the potential for choosing between spiritual decay and spiritual growth. It is this potential, which in the Christian tradition is free will to choose between good and evil, that separates humans from both animals and jinn. The king of the jinn finds this argu-

ment convincing, as do the animals. He reaffirms a hierarchy in which humanity has superiority and some claim over the services and assistance of animals.

Stated boldly, this may sound like the same old story. The story that Christians and Jews know from Genesis, the story we encounter in our society today. But if you examine the ending of the trial more closely, what the Brethren attempted is breathtaking. It is the potential for spiritual growth, and only the potential for spiritual growth, that sanctions and warrants a hierarchy in which humans enjoy the services of animals. These Muslim Brethren appeared to have discussed and even devised the concepts we know today as “deep ecology”—the idea that other species have dignity, value, and hence, intrinsic rights. They viewed all of God’s creations as fundamentally equal. In the narrative of the trial, the concepts of both dominion and stewardship, which flowed from Genesis for Muslims as well as for Christians and Jews, are transformed from entitlements granted by God unconditionally to humanity into contingent rewards that must be earned by human spiritual growth. We are not entitled to enjoy the services and assistance of other species unless we devote the benefits we derive to the task of spiritual ennoblement. This effectively stands the conventional Judeo-Christian understanding of the relationship between humans to the rest of creation on its head.

This reading of our role in nature has important consequences for understandings of work. Islam, as I comprehend it, does not view work as punishment meted out at the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Earning a living is not a punishment for sin in the eyes of the Brethren, but a reward for virtue. But it is a reward that must be earned, because if work depends upon the labor of animals, as it did in tenth-century Iraq, and the use of animals is contingent upon spiritual growth, work too necessarily becomes contingent upon spiritual growth. Thus, in effect what the Brethren did was sanctify humanity’s relationship with nature, and to include within it the concept of work. They didn’t do this for the benefit of horses, camels, or gazelles. They did it to redeem God’s commandment to be faithful, to submit to the divine order laid out in the Koran and stated by the Prophet, peace be upon him.

The Brethren sought to reform the Arab empire in the Muslim community, and they concluded that the only way to do this was to broaden their dialogue around justice. They found it necessary to extend their concept of justice to the natural world. They did not succeed. The Arab empire they sought to redeem was overwhelmed by new peoples, ultimately by the Mongols, who didn’t embrace the Brethren’s goals or vision. Their concepts of deep ecology and sacred relationships with nature were effectively lost for centuries.

We’re gathered here today at another moment of empire. We too have lost the sacred connection between work and nature. We too are debating how to find the wellsprings of justice that seem to have been silted and clogged. I want to

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suggest as we go forward that we may do well to try to set our sights as high as the Brethren of Purity, and to look to the place where our relationship with the natural world will redeem not only the ecological sphere but the human as well.