

# KEEPING UP WITH CHANGE

## THE ENVIRONMENT AND MUSLIM RESPONSIBILITY

**Fazlun Khalid**

### ON THE EDGE

No one, not even, the most brilliant scientist alive today—really knows where science is taking us. We are aboard a train which is gathering speed, racing down a track on which there are a number of unknown switches leading to unknown destinations. No single scientist is in the engine cab and there may be demons at the switch. Most of society is in the caboose looking backwards.<sup>i</sup>

The futurist Alvin Toffler used this quotation in his discussions on “technological backlash,” which he concludes by saying, “The horrifying truth is that, so far as much technology is concerned, no one is in charge.”<sup>ii</sup>

The world appears to many people to be run by well-balanced individuals in expensive suits, yet the renowned Harvard biologist Edward Wilson observes that the human species is actually “an environmental abnormality,” and suggests that intelligence has a tendency to extinguish itself. And he asks, what other species would deliberately destroy its habitat, within a supposedly rational framework that justifies such actions?<sup>iii</sup>

But the indications are that as we have caused the extinction of other species we are also contriving our own demise much before our allotted time. Michael Boulter observes in his book, *Extinction*:

But if human behaviour cannot evolve (for the better), the response to fast changes in the environment will be very different. There will be no reprieve, no stopping the progress of mass extinction, and man surely will be a victim within that. Our most damaging behavior is selfishness and aggression, and unless they can change rapidly there is no hope for the ecological destruction to be halted. Our power to do damage has grown to make our aggression terminal, not just dangerous.<sup>iv</sup>

### FAST FORWARD

Toffler, writing in 1970, estimates that man has existed on this planet for 800 lifetimes and that of this, 650 were spent in caves. Effective communication between succeeding generations was only possible from about the seventieth lifetime. Only in the last two has anyone used an electric motor anywhere. “The overwhelming majority of all the material goods we use in daily life today have been developed

within the present, 800<sup>th</sup>, lifetime.”<sup>v</sup> We are by Toffler’s reckoning now in our 801<sup>st</sup> lifetime, very late comers to what was and still is in many ways a bountiful earth. We managed to co-exist in harmony with the natural world for eons. Progressing, regressing, prospering and decaying, but advancing a little step at a time with each succeeding civilization and each epoch during our very brief time on this planet. Change, though perceptible, was subtle until, as Toffler remarks pointedly, “Western society for the past 300 years has been caught up in a fire storm of change.”<sup>vi</sup> It has dragged the rest of us (non-Westerners) with it. In terms of the historical epoch of the human species, the events that created our present global predicaments have occurred in the twinkling of an eye.

Changes to society were taking place in front of our very eyes with lightning speed: people having less and less control of their lives, the tendency towards gigantism, the remoteness of the ruled from those who rule. The outward signs of these phenomena are the growing cities and their anthill-like nature; rural depopulation that sucks the life out of the land to feed the soulless cities with their human flotsam and jetsam; the destruction of cohesive communities and the emergence of the nuclear family as a poor substitute; the seductive tendencies of the cult of the individual and the increasing number of atomized people it appeared to produce; alienation sedated by rampant consumerism; and an increasingly degraded environment.

Pursuit of prosperity, it seemed, was based on creating discontent: consumers seduced to vie with each other in the ownership of the latest gadgetry, television and advertising hoardings constantly making one feel inadequate, the media exploited as an instrument of manipulation. Our global civilization looked very artificial, resting on industrial and financial systems in singular pursuit of profit. The very human ecology was collapsing. Tradition and the wisdom of the ages spurned, replaced by an iconic modernity based on the enslavement of man to machine.

The two truths I discovered for myself, however, were that the human race was faced with a common threat of unprecedented proportions and that *we* are the threat itself. I increasingly began to feel that there was something profoundly unreal about what we have now come to loosely define as “modernity,” and some if not all the answers I was looking for would come from a clearer understanding of this phenomenon.

Until quite recently the human race, both rebels and conformists, the ignorant and the enlightened, whether in small self-governing communities or vast empires, barbarian tribes or points of high civilization, functioned unconsciously within natural, unwritten boundaries. This was an existential reality, neither idyllic nor utopian.<sup>vii</sup> However expressed, all the religions whether major or minor, traditional cultures whether “Native American” or “Aboriginal Australian,” are deeply rooted in the natural world and draw their inspiration from it. Given this, how was it possible for them, for us, to mount the kind of sustained attack upon it that we have been carrying out since the advent of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century? It is as if

we have excised the umbilical cord that had anchored us to the natural world ever since we came into existence as a species. To compound our alienation we are now devouring, with unmitigated ferocity, the very womb that continues to nurture us. In our eager push for universal prosperity we have lost sight of the finite and delicate nature of planet Earth and our place in it.

Man made substances chemicals, such as dioxin, have entered the food chain, ultimately seeping into breast milk with the result that mothers pass on toxins to their infants.<sup>viii</sup> Heavy metals now form part of the sediment of the oceans and rivers, thus poisoning the food chain of which we are the final link. Scientists have warned pregnant women in Norway not to eat whale meat because of high levels of toxic mercury found in them.<sup>ix</sup> There are disturbing reports of the decline in the male sperm count in northern Europe because of the effects of persistent organic pollutants (POPs). The chickens of prosperity are coming home to roost.

In the last fifty years global water withdrawal has quadrupled, while the world's human population has merely doubled.<sup>x</sup> As a result of our addiction to the automobile we pour millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and yet, because of our voracious appetite for timber, we destroy the very forests that act as sinks for the greenhouse gases we generate. We perpetrate acts of self-flagellation in the name of progress.

## **LOOKING THROUGH AN ISLAMIC PRISM**

Two philosophers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer, wrote in the 1940s<sup>xi</sup>: Since the Enlightenment (roughly 17th, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19 centuries) a way of thinking evolved that was seen as liberating men from fear (meaning religion) and establishing their sovereignty over everything they see, hear and touch. Men's lives are controlled by men by sets of rules determined by men. Mankind is apart from nature and nature becomes an object that is manipulated, controlled and exploited. This is done for the benefit of mankind. The result of this confrontation with nature is alienation of the human from his own nature. The struggle to control external nature results in the struggle turning inwards on the species itself. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr observes, "there is near total disequilibrium between modern man and nature as attested by nearly every expression of modern civilisation which seeks to offer a challenge to nature rather than to co-operate with it"<sup>xii</sup>.

At its very basic the philosophical formulations of Descartes turned the human race into a predator. For what he was "proposing was a new religious revelation, a radical revision of nature that had not really occurred to any other social animal"<sup>xiii</sup> or to any previous civilisation in human history. The *Qur'an* shows us where we belong –

*Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind.  
There is no changing Allah's creation*

Humankind was created within the natural patterning of nature and being of it, its role is defined by this very same patterning. This is at one and the same time both a simple and lucid ecological definition of our place in the natural order -

Allah created humankind as part of His original creation to function within His original scheme. We were then subjected to Allah's unchangeable laws as was the rest of creation, making us – at the biological level – equal partners with the rest of nature. The different elements of the universe working together keep nature in balance. We can modify the environment to suit our purposes up to a point but we cannot change its basic make up. The environmental problems we experience today could be described as adjusting mechanisms that keep the earth in order. Like the human body the earth is a self-healing entity and it will tend to close the wounds inflicted upon it. Also like the human body the earth will react drastically to the deeper levels of injury we keep subjecting it to. But we have yet to understand these processes.<sup>xiv</sup>

Fitrah in Islam describes the origination of the human species within the bosom of the natural world. It is a profound reminder of our place in the natural order. Fitrah has been described as the natural state. Some translators of The Qur'an call it the natural pattern, others the original state or pattern and yet others describe it simply as nature. Some scholars describe fitrah as the pure state or the state of infinite goodness and point to the possibility that everything in creation has a potential for goodness, the conscious expression of which rests uniquely with human kind. It is commonly held that the real meaning of The Qur'an in Arabic is untranslatable into any other language but we may conclude that fitrah denotes the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation including the human in its new born state. The term fitrah is a noun derived from the root F T R and occurs once in The Qur'an. It appears in its verb form, fatarah, fourteen times. The key verse in The Qur'an in which both the noun and the verb form occur is in Surah Rum (The verse on the Romans)

Set yourself firmly towards the Deen [the way, the life transaction],  
 As a pure natural believer,  
 Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind.  
 There is no changing Allah's creation.  
 That is the true Deen –  
 But most people do not know it – (30:29).

The part of this verse that concerns us here is the one that reads “Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind.” Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, the translators

of The Qur'an used in this essay, render fitrah as natural pattern and fatarah as made. Here is how two other translators see it: Yusuf Ali: "The nature in which Allah has made mankind." Fitrah is translated here as nature and fatarah as made; Arberrey: "Allah's original in which He originated mankind." Fitrah is translated here as original and fatarah as originated.

As the translators grapple to convey the meaning of this verse, there is simplicity inherent in this message that conveys two things to us. The first is a sense of where we belong in the pattern of Allah Ta'ala's creation. The human race was originated, indeed like all other sentient beings, in the bosom of creation Allah Ta'ala originated. Humankind was made part of a vast natural pattern, which cannot be changed. Secondly, it could be said that taken together with the rest of the verses in The Qur'an on creation this lays down the foundation for the deep ecological principles inherent in Din al Islam. An appreciation of this should lead us to addressing the environmental concerns of today at its root. The Qur'an comprehensively defines our place and our relationships within this pattern as the following verse further demonstrates –

The creation of the heavens and the earth  
is far greater than the creation of mankind.  
But most of mankind do not know it (40: 56).

Muslims start every one of their five daily prayers with this verse acknowledging the Creator –

. . . I have turned my face to Him  
Who brought the heavens and earth into being [fatarah]  
A pure natural believer.  
I am not one of the mushrikun [Mushrikun plural of Mushrik – one who  
ascribes divinity to any thing other than Allah] (6:80).

## **MONEY AND THE GLOBAL CONFIDENCE TRICK**

The renowned American economist J.K. Galbraith referring to the activities of the banks said, "The process by which we create money is so simple that the mind is repelled."<sup>xv</sup> In spite of the prohibitions in the Qur'an on usury (riba) this hasn't stopped Muslims from wholeheartedly participating in the global banking system, which has not left any nook or cranny anywhere in the world untouched by its influence. In the end, fictional money underwrites "democracy" and destroys the planet. I first got wind of this in my youth when I was studying economics. Fredric Benham, a writer of standard economic textbooks observed, "it seems like a gigantic confidence trick."<sup>xvi</sup> But, having made this observation, Benham went on to defend the system on the grounds that "it works" and no questions are asked about its ethical validity. A more recent book says this -

In spite of all its fervid activity, money remains a naked symbol with no intrinsic value of its own and no direct linkage to anything specific.<sup>xvii</sup>

Money has come to be recognised as mere tokens and

there is something quite magical about the way money is created. No other commodity works quite the same way. The money supply grows through use; it expands through debt. The more we lend, the more we have. The more debt there is, the more there is.<sup>xviii</sup>

These tokens of value that we create from nothing and use every day grow exponentially ad infinitum. But we know that the natural world, which is subject to drastic resource depletion, has limits and is finite. This equation is lopsided and the question is for how long can we continue to create this infinite amount of token finance to exploit the real and tangible resources of a finite world. Looked at from this perspective, money, as the modern world has conceived it, assumes the characteristics of a virus that eats into the fabric of the planet. The consequences of this become visible as global environmental degradation.

This magical system underwent a metamorphosis in 1971 when President Nixon unilaterally abandoned the gold standard. The background to this event is discussed below. It suffices to say now that, by abandoning the gold standard he also moved the world into a new standard: the interest standard.<sup>xix</sup>

It is generally known that Islam prohibits usury or the taking of interest and the term used in the Qur'an for this is *riba*.<sup>xx</sup> This term has wide connotations. Simply put, it means one cannot have something out of nothing. Thus, *riba* is also seen as prohibiting the free creation of credit. The Qur'an denounces these practices vehemently and we can see why from the foregoing discussion.

*Those who practise riba will not rise from the grave except as someone driven mad by shaytan's (satan's) touch*

Al Qur'an 2:274

Also,

*You who have iman (faith)! have taqwa (awe) of Allah and forgo any remaining riba if you are muminun (believers). If you do not, know that it means war from Allah and his Messenger*

Al Qur'an 2:277,278

No other proclamation in the Qur'an matches this degree of trenchancy and the problem for us as Muslims is that we are now living our lives in a way that the most

forbidden act in Islam, above that of murder and adultery, has become part of our daily lives.

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Fazlun Khalid is the founder and director of the Islamic Foundation Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Birmingham, UK.

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<sup>i</sup> Ralph E. Lapp, *The New Priesthood*, Harper & Row, 1961.

<sup>ii</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (p.390), Pan Books, London, 1971.

<sup>iii</sup> Edward O. Wilson, "Is Humanity Suicidal?" *New York Times Magazine* (p.26), 30 May 1993.

<sup>iv</sup> Michael Boulter, *Extinction, Evolution and the End of Man* (p. 182), Fourth Estate, London, 2002.

<sup>v</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (p.22), Pan Books, London 1972.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid*, (p.18).

<sup>vii</sup> Fazlun Khalid, "Guardians of the Natural Order", *Our Planet*, Journal of UNEP, Vol. 8 No. 2, July 1996.

<sup>viii</sup> Theo Colburn, Dianne Dumanski, and John Peterson Meyers, *Our Stolen Futures*, Dutton, New York, 1996.

<sup>ix</sup> *The Independent*, UK, news item - 13 May 2003,

<sup>x</sup> Rory Clarke, *OECD Observer*, 19 March 2003. See <http://www.oecdobserver.org>

<sup>xi</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, O New York Continuum, 1993 (originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklarung*, 1944). Also see *Encyclopaedia of Life Support Systems* 6.23.3.3, Simo, Imperialism, Resistance and Culture, Section 4.2, Mankind and Nature.

<sup>xii</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature*, Unwin Paperback, London 1990.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gough, John, (see essay) Rene, "What Have You Wrought?" in *The New Internationalist*, No.333 (UK: April 2001).

<sup>xiv</sup> Khalid, Fazlun, *Qur'an, Creation and Conservation*, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, Birmingham, UK, 1999.

<sup>xv</sup> Anthony Sampson, *The Money Lenders*, Coronet Books, London, 1988. Galbraith is quoted in p. 29.

<sup>xvi</sup> Frederic Benham; *Economics*; Pitman, London, sixth edition, 1960; p.426

<sup>xvii</sup> Kurtzman, J., *The Death of Money*, Little, Brown & Co, Boston, USA, 1993.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>xix</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>xx</sup> For an appraisal on interest see Diwaney T .E. El (1997) *The Problem With Interest*, Ta Ha, London.