

About the Author

Fazlun Khalid is of Sri Lankan origin. He traces his ancestry to the Hadramut in Yemen and is a descendent of the intrepid sailors who pioneered the spice routes to the Far East in times gone by. Accompanied by a colleague of what was then known as the Ceylon Air Academy, he landed in New Haven on the south coast of England in 1953, from Dieppe in France. Fazlun Khalid has a worldwide reputation as an advocate of environmental protection rooted in religious traditions and is now recognised as one of fifteen leading eco-theologians in the world. He appeared on the Independent on Sunday list of the top 100 environmentalists in the UK in 2008 and is also listed amongst the "500 Most Influential Muslims in the World" by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre of Jordan. He founded the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) which is now established as the world's leading Islamic environmental NGO.

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SNIPPET

"The Muslim contribution to this alliance for human survival can be profound. Islam has in its teachings both an ethical perspective and a method of practical application that can at least begin to meet the challenges that we face. The Qur'an is inherently environmental and the basis of its eco theology is now being used to educate people in many parts of the world. Islamic jurisprudence contains a body of practical applications which can provide positive solutions and it has been proven to change attitudes almost overnight as in the case of the fishermen in Zanzibar. To multiply these activities to the desired levels to produce lasting and successful solutions is a priority Muslims should now be addressing. I shall be devoting the rest of this chapter to the contribution Islamic teachings can make to the success of this endeavour."

Rediscovering Nature

Excerpt from Chapter 5

Today more than half the world's population live in cities. Our increasingly urban lives have ensured our almost total disconnection from the natural world to the extent that it is not uncommon to meet children who believe that milk originates in super market shelves. It is as well to be conscious of this as much is left out in their education both religious and secular to the extent that we are continuing to cause irreparable harm to the Earth. Muslims are not an exception to this having themselves adopted urban life styles and modern modes of living quite oblivious to where this is all going. Taking children to the zoo or visiting national parks are more in the nature of recreational activities that re enforce the idea of otherness. The educational element remain lamentably superficial and the spiritual is nowhere to be seen.

In the Islamic order care for the natural world expresses itself in every aspect of personal behaviour. The guidance for this comes from the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's teachings (*Sunnah*). It is integral to life, an expression of existence in submission to the will of the Creator in harmony with the cosmic pattern. There is a code of conduct that governs interpersonal behaviour and an individual's rights and responsibilities within a community; it also deals with an individual's behaviour towards other sentient beings and the rest of the natural world. As Muslim interaction with the environment evolved, it manifested itself in a range of rules and institutions, embodying a truly holistic expression of life. It took into consideration the prohibition of waste, being abstemious, being generous, being considerate, being moderate, unselfish, caring and sharing. The qualities of love, humility, trust and justice remained preeminent. Over the centuries, these values have been elaborated upon by a succession of mystics, scholars, jurists and

teachers responding to real problems experienced by the growing community of Muslims in various parts of the world.

However, this Islamic mode of expression is now severely attenuated, having been swept aside by the forces of history, like the other older traditions, into a domain which treats the natural world exclusively as an exploitable resource. As what we now understand by modernity advanced, as the secular ethic progressively seeped into the Muslim psyche and as industrial development, economic indicators and consumerism became the governing parameters of society, there has been a corresponding erosion of the Muslim perception of the holistic and a withering of its understanding of the sacred nexus between the human community and the rest of the natural order:*

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

As the Islamic tapestry unfolded in its expression over the centuries, we discover that there are no references to the environment or its isms as we now understand them in the Qur'an. The context in which we discuss this subject today originated as recently as the second half of the last century and Rachel Carson is recognised as having given impetus to this movement since her research was published in 1962 (see A Delayed Reaction, Chapter 2).* Neither can the word "nature" which is an abstraction be found in the Qur'an. The closest term in modern Arabic usage is *bi'ah* which connotes a habitat or a surrounding. Nevertheless, the Qur'an is inherently environmental in its approach. It speaks of creation (*khalq*) and it contains over 250 verses where this word is used in its various grammatical forms derived from the root *kh-l-q*. It is used in many ways to describe what we see, feel and sense in the world. They contain references to the natural world from herbs and plants, to trees and plants, from fish to fowl, to the sun, stars and skies.* *He (Allah) created everything and determined them in exact proportions (25: 2)*. The human community is but an infinitesimal part of the natural world but we have now lost sight of this through our proclivity for dominating it. The Qur'an observes, *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)*. Creation is the fabric into which the tapestry of life is worked.*

An Islamic approach to the environmental quagmire we now face provides us with a three layered response:

The first is to approach the Earth as sacred and identify how through abusing it we have desacralized our understanding of it and so rediscover what it is that we have lost in the process. The second is to formulate an ethical understanding of our relationship with the natural world and build a knowledge base that would enable us to resolve the immediate crisis and motivate us to lay down a basis for long term behavioural change.

The third is to look at this through the prism of political economy and discover what it is that an Islamic approach to this subject can do to both improve our understanding of the current malaise and provide some answers as to how we can create a model of well being without having to subvert our own existence.

Sachiko Murata and William Chittick have an interesting approach in that they deploy traditional Islamic learning to teach modern courses on Islam. They chose as their model 'a famous and authentic hadith [Prophetic teaching] that Muslim thinkers [and teachers] have often employed for similar purposes in classical texts.* Specifically, they cite a hadith popularly known as the Hadith of Jibril (Gabriel) narrated by Umar ibn al Khattab, the second caliph to succeed the Prophet after his death. This was the occasion when a stranger dressed in white sat by the knees of the Prophet, laid his hands on his thighs and began to question him about Islam. When the stranger had left the Prophet told them that, "He was [the Archangel] Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion". The Arabic word the Prophet used for religion is *din** (sometimes spelt *deen*)

and the answers to the stranger's four questions contain the basis of the *Din* of Islam. The questions were about submission, faith, doing what is good or beautiful and about the last day.

The word 'Islam' is understood by two integral components. The first is the name attributed to the faith as a whole and the second as submission, that is, submission to the will of the Creator, meaning living in harmony with the natural order. The Hadith of Jibril shows that *islam* (submission) in its verbal form is one part of a tripartite model of expression alongside *iman* (faith) and *ihsan* (doing what is good or beautiful). Leaving aside the Prophet's responses to the fourth question the other three responses can be viewed as a three-dimensional geometric image (see below) in which each dimension is considered independently but understood as an integrated whole.²⁴ In taking advantage of this method, these terms can be further defined to help us understand this matter more clearly in relation to our current-day dilemmas. I have attributed the sacred to *islam*, ethics to *iman* and political economy to *ihsan*. Each of these dimensions influences the other two in many profound ways. In emphasizing the integrated nature of this model it is understood that sacredness is all pervasive in that all of creation is sacred; ethics is not an exclusive domain as it is about maintaining human relationships and defining how we relate to other sentient beings and the natural world; and political economy sits comfortably with this as it is about how we conduct our affairs in the name of a just order.

[Illustration – The tripartite elements of the *din* of Islam]

The *din* of Islam is about the natural order and *islam*, *iman* and *ihsan* is firmly embedded in its matrix. What follows is an overview to this approach.

The Sacred²⁵

There is a well established tradition in Islam that the whole Earth is a place of prayer: A sacred space where one might contemplate the Divine. Our daily activities which are thus carried out in this space require exemplary behaviour as our every act is expected to be in the nature of a prayer. Prayer and the natural world are irrevocably connected.

The term in the Qur'an used to describe the verses it contains is *āyah* (plural *āyāt*). It means signs. This term is also applied to everything in the natural world, as in

*There are signs on the Earth for people with certainty.
There are also signs of the Creator in yourself as well. Do you not then see?*
(Qur'an, 51: 20, 21).

This would allow me to say that abusing the natural world and one's self is not a great deal worse than doing the same to the Qur'an itself.²⁶

As Nasr observes:

Muslim sages who referred to the cosmic or ontological Qur'an ... saw upon the face of every creature letters and words from the pages of the cosmic Qur'an. ... They remained fully aware of the fact that the Qur'an refers to phenomena of nature and events within the soul of man as *ayat* (literally signs or symbols) a term that is used for the verses in the Qur'an. ... For them (the sages) the forms of nature were literally *Ayat Allah*.²⁷

These verses also urge us to consider the integration of the self with the cosmos. In times gone by when human beings did not differentiate between the self and the natural world nature was integrated into the human psyche. There was no separate environmentalism, intellectualism, capitalism and consumerism to drive wedges between us and the natural world. Having once had close and unconscious affinity with the natural world we now need to become conscious of the

fact that we are deeply and irrevocably interwoven into the fabric of the natural world, that we are causing it grievous bodily harm and that we will have to contend with the consequences of our actions. We need to gain a fresh understanding of what the sources, the Qur'an and the Sunna (practise of the Prophet), tell us about creation, the Creator's expectation of us and the responsibilities we have to shoulder.*

The following verses from the Qur'an tell us more about the signs of God:

*Allah sends down water from the sky
And by it brings the dead earth back to life.
There is certainly a Sign in that for people who hear.*

*There is instruction for you in cattle.
From the contents of their bellies,
From between dung and blood,
We give you pure milk to drink,
Easy for drinkers to swallow.*

*And from the fruit of the date palm and the grapevine
You derive both intoxicants and wholesome provision.
There is certainly a Sign in that for people who use their intellect.*

*Your Lord revealed to the bees:
'Build dwellings in the mountains and the trees,
And also in the structures which men erect.*

*Then eat from every kind of fruit
And travel the paths of your Lord,
Which have been made easy for you to follow.
From inside them comes a drink of varying colours,
Containing healing for mankind.
There is certainly a Sign in that for people who reflect.
(Qur'an, 16: 65 - 69)*

There are signs on the Earth for people who hear, use their intellect and those who reflect.

The Qur'an describes creation in numerous ways and the first revelation* came in the following form to Prophet Muhammed, *Read! In the name of your Lord who created; Created man from clots of blood* (Qur'an, 96: 1, 2). In recounting this episode Özdemiş reminds us that the Prophet responded by saying he didn't know how to read; tradition has it that he was not literate. There was also no text to read but this signifies a completely different way of looking at the world. The key notion is that this reading should be in the name of our Sustainer* who gives existence and meaning to everything else. This reading is from the texts, *āyāt*, that make up the natural world. All life emerges from the Creator and all natural phenomena are to be read as if they were from the book of the Creator. The revealed Qur'an signposts us to the ontological Qur'an thus:*

The cosmos: *It is He who appointed the sun to give radiance; and the moon to give light, assigning it in phases; in the alteration of night and day and what Allah has created in the heavens and earth there are signs for people who have awareness* (Qur'an, 10: 6).

Animals from water: *Allah created every animal from water, some of them go on their bellies, some of them on two legs and some on four. Allah creates whatever He wills ...* (Qur'an, 24: 45).

Water: *And We send down water from the sky and make every generous species grow in it* (Qur'an, 31: 10).

Plants and crops: *It is He who produces gardens, both cultivated and wild, and palm-trees and crops of diverse kinds* (Qur'an, 6: 141)

Almost every page one turns to in the Qur'an has some kind of reference to the natural world. Its approach is holistic, and it deals with the natural world on the basis of the human as integral to it. This has however been taken for granted and there is now a disconnection between ourselves and the natural world to the extent that we treat it as the "other". We have become observers in the life experience we are integral to, and have formed a subject/object dichotomy between ourselves and the natural world where one does not exist. This gap is more acute now than it has ever been and we almost invariably see nature as a resource to be exploited. We do just that when we leave our crowded urban centres and go looking for pristine nature on our holidays. We once took from it for our survival but now we exploit it for our pleasure and aggrandizement. Paradoxically, the gap widens as we come to know and understand more about natural phenomena from subatomic particles to the distant galaxies.

The following verse in the Qur'an gives us a succinct description of our origins -

*So set your face firmly towards your din
As a pure natural believer
Allah originated you in His original creation
There is no changing Allah's creation
That is the true din
But most people do not know it.*
(Qur'an, 30: 30)

The human species was created in the womb of the natural world in a favourable period in its vast history. The Earth rotates on a finely defined axis at an optimal distance from the Sun. The ozone layer protects us from the Sun's dangerous cancer-inducing radiation. The air allows us to breathe in a finely balanced mix of gases, while the photosynthesis process produces the oxygen we cannot live without. The right proportion of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere gives us equitable weather. The tropical rainforests acts as massive air conditioners. The rhythms of the seasons are in place. The moon's orbit controls the tides. In the temperate zones the mountains store the winter snows and their springtime meltwater feeds the rivers that water the pastures. In the warmer zones the rain cycle feeds the rivers copiously enabling us to plant crops. And there are fish in the sea, fowl in the glades and sheep in the meadows. And the bees pollinate our next harvests of grain and fruit as they buzz away their brief lives.

The primordial condition of the Earth within which humankind was brought into being is described as the *fitrah* in the Qur'an. Some translators describe this as the natural pattern, others the original state or pattern, and yet others simply as nature. Other 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 humankind. It is often said that children are born in a state of *fitrah*, unspoilt and pure.²⁴ *Fitrah* denotes the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation including the human in its newborn state. The term *fitrah* is derived from the Arabic root *f-t-r* and occurs once in the Qur'an. It appears in its verb form, *fatarā*, fourteen times.

The key part of the above verse in which both the noun and the verb form occur tells us, *Allah originated you in His original creation*. In this part of the verse Arberry translates *fatarā* as originated and *fitrah* as original. And here's how two other translators see it. Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley translate *fatarā* as made and *fitrah* as the natural pattern. Yusuf Ali's translation reads, *The nature in which Allah has made mankind*; *fitrah* is translated here as nature and *fatarā* as made. *Fitrah* is a feminine noun which allows us to consider nature as mother. As the translators grapple to transmit the meaning of this verse, there is simplicity inherent in this message that conveys to us a sense of where we belong in the pattern of Allah's creation. The

human race was originated, indeed like all other sentient beings, in the bosom of the creation that Allah originated.

This verse continues, *There is no changing Allah's creation. That is the true din but most people do not know it.* Try as it might, the human species cannot change the natural world. It would be like a car mechanic attempting to modify a nuclear reactor but the scale is beyond comparison. Yes, we have modified the environment to gain temporary advantage as is our wont but we have now exceeded the limits. Humankind was brought into a vast universe functioning within a natural, primordial, unchanging patterning but most people do not understand this. This verse taken together with the rest of the verses on creation lays down the foundation for the deep ecological insights of the Qur'ān. An appreciation of this would lead us to address the environmental concerns of today at their root.

This could also take us to interesting places when we explore the terms that emerge out of the root *f-t-r* that appear in the Qur'an. For example:

Futur – a rent, fissure, flaw as in ... *return thy gaze; seest thou any fissure?* (Qur'an 67: 3).

Tafattara – to be rent asunder as in ... *the heavens well nigh are rent above them* (Qur'an, 42: 5).

Infatara – to split open, be cloven asunder as in ... *when heaven is split open* (Qur'an, 82: 1).

The Qur'an is telling us that creation occurs by splitting like the seed that splits to produce plant life and like the sperm that splits the egg to produce sentient life forms. When the Qur'ān says that Allah originated the heavens and the earth could it be telling us that the universe as we know it came into existence when the heavens were rent asunder? The big bang perhaps? This is a matter for reflection.™

The following verse from the Qur'an is said at the beginning of the standing position in the first cycle, of the five daily prayers: *I have turned my face to Him who originated (fatara ...) the heavens and the Earth, a pure natural believer ...* (6: 79).

Islam and Environmental Ethics

Following our integrated model *Iman* (faith) was described by the Prophet Muhammad as knowing with the heart, vocalizing with the tongue and acting with the body. This requires the profession of faith in God and accept that life in all its expressions emanates from the Divine source. The difference between *islam* and *iman* is expressed in the Qur'an thus; *the desert Arabs say, "we have faith", tell them "you do not have faith, rather say we have submitted", for faith has not yet entered your hearts* (49: 14). Submission is not the same as faith as one can submit outwardly without knowing anything inwardly. Faith grows in the heart through knowing and inspiration.

Iman is the inner conviction that provides one with an ethical basis for the conduct of Islamic society. And more specifically, *We did not create heaven and earth and everything between them as a game* (21: 16). This spells out the human relationship with the natural world. As Ismail and Lois Faruqi explain:

All Muslims therefore agree that nature was meant to be used for a moral end. It was not created in vain or sport (as a game) but as the theatre and means for moral striving. ... [I]t was made by God both good and beautiful to the end of serving man and enabling him to do good deeds. Its [nature's] goodness is derived from that of the divine purpose. For the Muslim, nature is *ni'mah*, a blessed gift of God's bounty, granted to man to use and enjoy, to transform in any way with the aim of achieving ethical value. ... Nature enjoys in the Muslim's eye a tremendous dignity.™

It was observed earlier that we are all in the belly of a hegemonic beast. In keeping with the times this beast is obese to the extent that it is now in its terminal phase. But there is no saying when it will breathe its last or whether it will linger on for a while helped by the kind of complacency we

now witness, for example, regarding climate change in spite of the Paris agreement. This provides the beast with the opportunity to become further bloated, making its final demise even more difficult to bear. Climate change scientists predict a disastrous feedback loop but this loop has already been present in the financial system for some time, fed by our greed, vanity and covetousness. On the other hand the altruistic side of our split personalities sees the dangers and demands a response to mitigate the damage we are inflicting on the planet. Short of hoping that we can all change to a more equitable way of conducting our affairs, we are left, as the Faruquis put it, with transforming our lives in the hope of "achieving ethical value".

Consumerism has become so all-pervasive that we even consume religion in which it takes the sole form of ritual. It comes in the nature of insurance for the time we have to give an account of our actions to the Maker. But if this ritual is lifeless and does not connect us to the world that is the "blessed gift" of the Creator then we are left with the mirage that our consumer lives provide. What we are shoring up is a model of progress and prosperity that lures us like a *mirage in the desert. A thirsty man thinks it is water but when he reaches it, he finds it to be nothing at all; there indeed he finds Allah...* (24: 39). So how do we reconnect with the Earth even as we tear it apart? Traditionally we have all been unconscious environmentalists long before this word came into fashion, but having lost this connection we now desperately need to regain it.

Allah gives each thing its created form and then guides it (20: 50). The basis of Islamic social action is to establish the good and prohibit the bad. *Let there be a community among you that calls for what is good, urges what is right and forbids what is wrong; those are the ones who have success* (3: 104). This establishes a caring relationship with the natural world. Conservation in Islam is associated with good behaviour, which is the principle by which Muslims are expected to be conducting their affairs and managing their surroundings. *Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit and pay their due on the day of their harvest. And do not be wasteful. He (Allah) does not love the wasteful* (6: 141).

The human species is the primary beneficiary of the Creator's handiwork. The Qur'an asserts ... *be thankful ...* (45: 12) as *He has subjected all that is in the heavens and the earth for your benefit as a gift from Him ...* (45: 13). But Creation is not a playground as *We did not create heaven and earth and everything between them as a game* (21: 16). There was a purpose in creation since *We did not create the heaven and the earth and everything between them to no purpose* (38: 27). This purpose is to test believers, ... *He wanted to test you regarding what has come to you. So compete with each other in doing good* (5: 48).

What we now refer to as Islamic environmentalism was a natural way of life when Muslims lived in a way that emulated the example of the Prophet. '*The character of the Messenger of Allah was the Qur'an*'. The verse on waste above demonstrate how he exemplified this: The Prophet discouraged any wasteful action amongst his Companions as this hadith shows:

When the messenger of Allah passed by Sa'd as he was performing his ablutions he said, "What it is this extravagance?" Sa'd asked, "Can there be any extravagance even in ablution?" The messenger of Allah replied, "Yes, even if you are on the bank of a flowing river."-

The Qur'an emphasizes the value of trees and other vegetation, ... *the stars and the trees all bow down in prostration (to Allah)* (Qur'an, 55: 6). The lesson that is driven home by the Prophet regarding this is contained in the following hadith:

There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him.-

The Qur'an states on the treatment of animals, *There is no creature crawling on the earth or those that fly, who are not communities like yourself* (6: 38). The following hadith is a narration about an incident near a well:

A thirsty man went down a well to quench his thirst. On his return to the surface he saw a dog licking mud to quench its thirst. The man felt sorry for the dog and returned to the well and came back up again with some water for the dog in his shoes. The Companions asked the Prophet about the merits of this action and if there was recompense for serving the dog. The Prophet replied that there was a reward in serving all living beings.²⁴

These examples demonstrate the depth of the material and remind us of the need in the Muslim world to once again reconnect with the natural world and give expression to what the texts asks of us. The task then is not just one of reexamining the material, but to present it in such a manner that it can be readily understood, absorbed, and applied. I will deal with this in some depth in the section below under the heading Producing Results.

²⁴ Fazlun M. Khalid, *'Islam and the Environment'*, p. 332. In *Encyclopaedia of Global Environmental Change*, vol. 5: Social and Economic Dimensions of Global Environmental Change. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK, 2002.

²⁵ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Press, Boston, 1962.

²⁶ Op cit Fazlun Khalid, p. 334.

²⁷ Op cit Fazlun Khalid, p. 335.

²⁸ Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, p. xxv. I.B. Tauris, London, 1996.

²⁹ 'It has often been observed that Islam cannot ordinarily be described as a "religion" and that it prescribes a way of life that goes beyond the performance of rituals. The word used in the Qur'an for religion is *din*, and it appears in this context in over seventy different places, often in circumstances that place it outside the domain of ritual. *Din* in essence describes an integrated code of behaviour that deals with persona...