

Draft

The Environment and Islam

Where modern science's Judeo-Christian origins are feted expect to find some disgruntled Muslim complaining that Islam was not invited to the party. And this person would be correct to point out the obvious: that without the schools (madrassahs actually!) of Toledo and Granada, the translations of Galen and Aristotle from Latin into Arabic, and the pioneering works of Avicenna and Averroes in the natural and the rational sciences, the miracle that is modern science would not have occurred. But in fairness to those partygoers unwilling to share the limelight, human beings all too often, take more credit than is their due, and allot more blame than is due others.

Talking of blame, notice that no one seems willing to cast blame on science and its theological progenitors for the mess that is the environment. And yet, let's face it, without science there would be no plastic! And without plastic there would be no flotsam the size of Africa floating in the Pacific somewhere between Hawaii and California!¹ What a price to pay for bottled water! But even knowing this, we're not quite ready to curb our appetite for gizmos to play with. We're not quite ready to go through another migraine without painkillers, or find our way through unknown neighborhoods without GPS! Mine however, is not the first tilt against the windmill that is technology, nor will it be the last. Henry David Thoreau, the 19th century Transcendentalist, asked himself and any one else willing to listen if all this progress was worth the cost? His reply, no: "they are but improved means to an unimproved end", he said. In 1844 when the telegraph was first used to communicate rapidly across America Thoreau again said: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." Few today pay much attention to Thoreau and the New England Romanticists railing against America's pursuit of its Manifest Destiny through material conquest. This was, after all, a tilting point of global proportions, a defining moment in our history when the agrarian economy of human history was being upturned perhaps forever by the very technology that Thoreau so disdained.

But that was then, at a time when nothing but praise was heaped on the products of science and technology, when human control of the environment saw no end, and when none knew that engine smoke would clog our lungs, and oil spills the biosphere. In that early euphoria only the purchase price determined the costs of technology and not the price of environmental degradation. But now, just when the entire world has been convinced by us that it too should pursue its own Manifest Destiny through material progress, we dither! The costs to the environment is too high, we mutter embarrassedly, our natural resources insufficient to fuel many more technology based economies, and

¹ National Research Council (U.S.). *Clean Ships, Clean Ports, Clean Oceans: Controlling Garbage and Plastic Wastes at Sea*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995. Also see: Miyazaki, Nobuyuki, Zafar Adeel, and Kouichi Ohwada. *Mankind and the Oceans*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2005, and for alternate perspectives, see: Gerdes, Louise I. *Endangered Oceans: Opposing Viewpoints*. San Diego, Calif: Greenhaven Press, 2004.

more ominously, our position as first among equals is up for grabs! As a result, we send mixed signals to others convinced by our progress if not by our philosophy to abandon their wayward economic policies in favor of ours. China, previously a communist threat to US power, continues to be treated that way precisely because it is now an emerging capitalist economy in competition with the United States for the world's natural resources and its growing consumer base.

Meanwhile, as criticism of material progress through technology grows louder its supporters offer two counterpunches, one that more not less technology is needed to eradicate poverty, and the other that environmentalism is to blame for sending energy costs sky high. In his recent book Vaclav Klaus, president of the Czech Republic, argues that environmental change—not degradation—is the price we have to pay to sustain current levels of development. Short of a miracle, he says, nothing will eradicate poverty, improve health conditions, and enhance the quality of life, without affecting the environment. The environmental movement, therefore, is not just jeopardizing efforts to improve conditions in the developing world, but also the individual's rights in the West to freedom and liberty. And it is this very freedom that nurtures the creative thought needed to make new discoveries that solve current problems. So, while it may be true that the environment is being altered through technology, the liberty to think freely and creatively should not be curtailed through greater restrictions on personal freedom, for in the final analysis, it is this freedom that gave us technology and it is this very freedom that can be counted on to address its deleterious effects on the environment.

Another approach gaining credence is to blame environmentalism for high energy prices. This is exactly what vice President Cheney said in 2001 when commenting on the electricity crisis in California. But as critics pointed out, energy prices in California were being artificially inflated by energy producing companies withholding electricity supplies. These days John McCain's presidential campaign is advocating the exploitation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a way to bring down energy costs. Most experts however argue that this source will have a negligible impact at best on the overall energy situation and more importantly, that drilling in the Refuge now will have no impact whatsoever on the immediate energy crisis.

Another, more ethereal discussion emerging brings religion more prominently into the debate. Al Gore's 'inconvenient truth' and other such environmental campaigns have so rattled the cage of humanity that even those traditionally preoccupied with saving human souls now show great concerns about saving mother earth. Conservative preachers who once found nothing salubrious in the environmental movement to talk about now form movements of their own, or joined hands with adversaries to address environmental issues. Who would've thought that Al Sharpton and Pat Robertson, of all people, would one day create a public service announcement together to protect the environment! This is testimony not just to a pivotal shift in public opinion, but also to a propensity in religions—some more than others—to adjust to those very shifts.

In this regard, eastern religions clearly enjoy an advantage over others, in part, because their theology is decidedly earth friendly. Take, for instance, Jains: their essential belief is

that every material thing is alive in its own way, that all living things are inherently equal, that all living things, great and small, are to be respected, and that one's very salvation lies in attaining perfect harmony between the world in us and the world around us. This belief gives Jains and to a lesser extent other eastern religions the kind of sublime, compassionate attitude to nature that may well be denied other faiths. But today, the very societies that made the essential teachings of Mahavira their own—Hinduism in the case of India and Buddhism in the case of South East Asia—are now plunging headlong into developmental projects that violate the essence of ahimsa.

There are several factors that distinguish eastern and western religions, including the use of the term religion itself. Eastern religions in their traditional texts speak less of belonging to religion than to doing religion. Seen as such, religion is less a group signifier, a body of dogma and rites designed to establish individual identity and social distinctiveness, than it is an approach to life, to accepting one's station in creation, and to being fascinated by as well as fearful of the powers that govern our lives. The power of nature is preeminent in this regard. Not much reflection is needed to recognize that humanity is utterly dependent on nature's creative impulse for its overall survival—on oxygen for fueling energy, on the sun for facilitating photosynthesis, and on proteins for building bodies—and utterly fearful, at the same time, of nature's seemingly capricious destruction of that which it helps build.

Religions like Christianity with close historical and ideological links to scientific thought are clearly at a disadvantage in this regard. But try telling that Alvin Plantinga, the prominent Christian philosopher who reminds us that "Modern science was conceived, and born, and flourished in the matrix of Christian theism". But what of the environmental degradation that came with it? Is there some place in that same matrix willing to take blame for so polluting our water ways, depleting our natural resources, and of course, melting our ice caps? But while much of the world's pollutants until quite recently, came from countries with Christian majorities, this means not that Christianity got that ball rolling as well. Air pollution for instance, was evident in the Paleolithic communities that existed some forty thousand years ago, lead pollution, probably created by the smelters that the Romans built, polluted the lower Arctic some 2500 years ago, and London's use of soft coal made its atmosphere smoggy as early as the 13th century. But Industrialization as we know it institutionalized three revolutionary changes that profoundly influenced the environment. Firstly, it created inorganic and synthetic products such as plastic and pesticides which either poisoned the environment or resisted organic decay. Secondly, in becoming part of the market economy it widened the harmful effects of these products far beyond their immediate areas of production and consumption. And thirdly, it turned perpetual progress, the myth that drove technological production into a new global way of life, the *raison detre* if you will, of all mankind. Since the industrial revolution therefore, all human activity has been pressed into mass producing and marketing products that arguably do more harm than good. Given this, the credit that Christianity, and to a lesser extent Islam, want to claim for spawning science and technology must surely be counterbalanced with responsibility for damaging the environment.

Eastern religions by contrast, can lay claim to a philosophy of living that sets them apart from religions and philosophies that harm the earth. In the eastern scheme of things there are no gaps between the natural and the supernatural, between creature and creator, and between humans and all created things. Thoreau much admired the teachings of eastern religions, and in his work *Walden* tried mingling his transcendentalism with the cosmogony of the Hindu sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. In western religions man is central to all creation and all things created are there to serve man . All of the following verses bear testimony to Allah making all things created subservient to the human will.