



ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS OR CRISIS OF THE HEART?

Muzaffar Iqbal

 On December 7, 1972, three human beings found themselves at a distance of some 45,000 kilometers from Earth. Eugene Cernan, Ronald Evans, and Jack Schmitt had left their planet that day at 05:33:00 Coordinated Universal Time (UTC) in spaceship Apollo 17. Five hours and six minutes later, one of them took a photograph which was to become the most widely distributed photographic image of the Earth in the years to come. The Blue Marble, as the photograph was unofficially called (official designation AS17-148-22727), was the first clear image of a fully illuminated Earth. The South Pole, incidentally, was at the top of the photograph, which is how al-Idrīsī (492-560/1099-1165) had drawn his famous *Tabula Rogeriana* in 1154.

The Blue Marble tied to an image the ethos of the newly realized environmental crisis and the activism of the early 1970s and extended the range of human understanding of the planet. The Earth appears in extreme isolation in its full frailness and vulnerability in a vast galactic expanse. The already known fact that, out of the eight planets of the Solar System, the Earth is indeed the one and only planet where life is possible gained new meaning.

Despite its importance and beauty, humanity did not need the Blue Marble to know that Earth is the only planet providing the delicate combination of

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water, the right temperature, and other parameters for life to be possible. The distance of the Earth from the Sun as well as its orbital eccentricity, the rate of its rotation and its axial tilt were already known to have been critically mapped to allow a sustainable atmosphere and a protective magnetic field for life to exist and flourish on this planet.

It was also known that approximately 71 percent of Earth's 510,072,000 square kilometer surface is covered with salt water oceans; that its interior consists of a thick layer of a relatively solid mantle made up of a liquid outer core and a solid inner core about 2,890 kilometers thick; that the Earth interacts with other objects in space; that it orbits the Sun once for every 366.26 times it rotates about its axis; and that the axial rotation of the Earth, tilted at 23.4° away from the perpendicular to its orbital plane, produces seasonal variations on the planet's surface.

This basic information about Earth is theoretically available to every one of the 6.8 billion human beings who now lives on this planet in 201 independent sovereign states. More than half of these men, women, and children now live in urban areas where the utilization of non-renewable resources leaves a very large environmental footprint. By 2030, the soaring cities of South America, Asia, and Africa are expected to become home to 81 percent of the population in those regions of the world. This means that the accumulated urban growth of that part of the Earth during the whole span of its history will be duplicated in a single generation! The UN forecasts that today's urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5 billion by 2030, when three out of every five people will live in cities.

This is a uniquely contemporary phenomenon: In 1800, only 3 percent of the 978 million people then living on Earth inhabited cities. By the end of the twentieth century, the world population had increased to 5.97 billion and 47 percent lived in cities. In 1950, there were 83 cities with populations exceeding one million; by 2007, this number had risen to 468. The emerging megacities are mostly in that part of the world where urban planning is at its lowest level of sophistication: Mumbai (33 million), Shanghai (27 million), Karachi (26.5 million), Dhaka (26 million) and Jakarta (24.9 million people). These cities contain hugely overpopulated slums and disease-ridden epicenters of suffering where every sixth person lives in unsanitary conditions.

This was not the case prior to the emergence of the modern world. Baghdad, Córdoba, and many cities in Imperial China of previous centuries each had over a million inhabitants who lived surrounded by green pastures and orchards. What was so different then can be understood simply by their material parameters: there were no motorized vehicles and no chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) depleting the ozone layer; there was no way to pollute the air in the manner we do now; no one had air conditioners, fridges, and the thousands of

other gadgets that we now use—and yet the necessary things to live life to its full measure in grace and harmony with nature were sufficiently present.

Of course there existed then poverty, hunger, and disease, but they were present at a different order of magnitude. Certain diseases which now ail millions of human beings did not yet exist. Humanity did not suffer from the catastrophic environmental disasters which now surround us. It has become commonplace to say that the damage done to the environment during the last three hundred years is far greater than what happened during the thousands of years which preceded the modern era.

It is obvious that we cannot return to times less prone to environmental disasters, nor is mere nostalgia for ages innocent of oil spills and radioactive contamination useful in addressing our current predicament. Indeed, it may well be counterproductive, lending the soothing balm of bad conscience to the continuing environmental degradation. What is rather necessary is something far deeper: a fundamental reconsideration of our relationship with the natural world.

To compare and measure our present with the not-too-distant past prior to the rise of monstrous machines and the mass-production of material culture may well be a route to understand and reflect on our present vanishing at breakneck speeds into a future fraught with looming disasters of epic scale. The first thing one notices through such comparative reflection is the fact that our modern era exists in stark isolation from the hundreds of years of previous human habitation. This isolation, in a way similar to the galactic isolation of our Earth, is both in the mass subjectivities cultivated by the material practices of our age as well as the operational details of how life is now lived on the planet. These have affected some of the most fundamental aspects of life ranging from the way we produce food to our attitude toward going from one place to another. For instance, prior to the emergence of our modern rationality, travelling from one place to another was taken as part of life and the time spent in this movement continuous with the other spheres of one's existence. Therefore the urge to shorten the duration in an artificial manner was not an overriding imperative. The slower-moving caravan had its own meaningful logic and, even as it too was guided by the desire to reach a certain destination, it was not regarded as an interstitial time out of time as our contemporary journeys so often are. The fastest-flying aeroplane is not fast enough now and even a short delay in its departure or arrival causes overbearing annoyance. This mental change, which has produced a myopic vision of life in utter disconnect with everything that existed prior to the sudden rush of the machine-psychology that now governs so many human practices, is seldom recognized as one of the main causes of the present environmental crisis, but it is a significant contributor as it has produced a new mass psyche propelling an unending race to

reduce and shrink the time required to do any task. Broadly considered, it is this mental attitude which insists on ever-aster machines with no consideration for their impact on the human psyche or physical environment, even though a growing number of human beings are becoming conscious of the latent connections between these inventions and the looming catastrophe.

To understand the full impact of the massive changes which have taken place on Earth in just the past fifty years, some common observations need to be restated: Everyone knows that the things now being sold in stores for everyday use simply do not last as they used to. As a result, millions of cheap gadgets, appliances, kitchenware, and basic household items being produced in huge factories in China and shipped around the world in containers crowding the vast oceans are routinely thrown into city dumps within days of their packages being opened. They need to be thrown out precisely because the materials used in manufacturing them were not suitable for the function which these appliances and gadgets are supposed to serve. It does not require a genius to tell manufacturers that the low quality materials they have used have already signed the death warrant of their products already condemned to end up in the city dump. Yet, what is it that has led them to neglect this fundamental aspect of their whole operation? What instigates planned obsolescence? Likewise, everyone knows that every year millions of plastic toys are thrown into landfills the world over. These are assembled through processes which themselves have a built-in capacity to destroy the environment. They are packaged in a plastic that neither decomposes nor decays, as if trying to wreak dark vengeance upon humanity for bringing it into existence. What would it take to stop this massive assembly line production even though there is a growing realization that something must be done?

The realization that something must be done has produced several global initiatives. The new multi-disciplinary field of environmental science has emerged as a distinct academic area of study. Many reports (such as the State of the Environment publications and the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, with input from 1200 scientists) have been released and environmental issues have become a permanent agenda item of numerous national, regional, and international forums, conferences and summits. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), founded in 1948 as the world's first global environmental organization, is now the largest professional global conservation network in the world, with more than 1000 member organizations in 140 countries including 200 governmental and 800 non-governmental organizations and almost 11,000 voluntary scientists and experts, grouped in six Commissions; it also has an official Observer Status at the United Nations General Assembly. The United Nations Environment Program, set up in 1972, is also engaged in finding ways to curtail the damage being done to the environ-

ment. Concern for the environment has further prompted the formation of Green political parties which seek to address environmental issues. An increasing number of films are being produced on environmental issues, especially on climate change and global warming.

None of this, however, has produced a visible change in the continuous degradation of the environment: study after study, humanity is being reminded of the same general situation: a vast disequilibrium now exists on, above, and below Earth. Global warming continues to bring chilling future scenarios into conferences and symposia where politicians and other world leaders try to find escape routes in a blame game that has made a mockery of the crisis. While these games are being played, industrial carbon dioxide emissions continue to increase the rate at which glaciers and ice sheets melt, producing extreme temperature ranges on both ends of the scale, major changes in weather patterns, and a dangerous rise of average sea levels.

All of this and much more has been known to both scientists and political leaders with increasing clarity and force at least since the middle of the twentieth century, yet all efforts to curtail losses have resulted in the opposite: the list of environmental issues has been continuously lengthening and it now includes neologisms such as anoxic waters, nanotoxicology, and nanopollution which did not exist twenty years ago. Likewise, the list of environmental disasters keeps lengthening, one of the latest being the April 20, 2010 Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion off the coast of Louisiana, which killed 11 platform workers, injured 17 others, and which—as of this writing—continues to pour between 20,000 and 40,000 barrels of oil a day into the Gulf of Mexico.

Of course, the question remains: what is to be done? But before that question can be answered, one must clearly identify the causes which have brought humanity and its sole available habitat to this state. The need to first understand the root cause of the deterioration of the state of the world is especially important because of the prevalent belief in progress, which contains a teleological notion of progress and improvement across all realms of thought and action: evolutionary biology tells us that the struggle to survive leads to the survival of the fittest; our scientific and technological knowledge is said to have increased manifold over the last three centuries; our life spans are said to be longer; we now have the ability to go to the Moon and, en route, take marvelous pictures of the Earth like the Blue Marble. But, let us pause here and ask: is it really true that humanity is on the path of progress?

It must be recognized from the continuously lengthening list of disasters that there is a fundamental flaw in the oft-cited causes of environmental degradation: “over population”—as if someone already knew that the Earth was made for a certain number of human beings—; high emission levels, toxic wastes, and the rest of the outcomes of modern living—which, although they

indeed have a direct relationship with the environmental crisis, are tertiary causes at best, being themselves consequences of choices industrialized moderns have made. The real causes of the crisis need to be sought elsewhere because flawed diagnoses can lead only to flawed solutions. Attempts to curtail environmental damage through emission controls and other such measures is to make of cancer a mere headache and seek its cure in aspirin. The state of the world demands a far deeper and far clearer realization of underlying causes before lasting solutions can be found.

Once we are willing to discard, or at least suspend, our presumed knowledge of the real causes of the environmental crisis, we may be able to open ourselves to discomfiting queries. Once asked, such questions may allow us to penetrate deeper to note in the crumbling heap of the promises of modernity two primary causes which then yield all other subsequent causes: greed and heedlessness.

Greed and heedlessness are not usually found among the reasons oft-cited as producing the current environmental crisis. They are off the radar, not only because they are beyond all statistical units but also because they fundamentally challenge the widely-held notion of progress and demand that we redirect our gaze away from the lachrymose litanies about the depleting ozone layer, the enormous plastic soup in the Pacific Ocean exceeding 3 million tons in weight and covering an area roughly twice the size of Texas, as well as the sickening but true photographic images of the Northern Fulmars dying with hundreds of pieces of plastic in their stomachs and the unflattering fact, highlighted by a study of the United Nations Environment Program, that the plastic we discard to the oceans is accountable for the deaths of more than a million seabirds and more than 100,000 marine mammals such as whales, dolphins and seals every year.

What if the fundamental cause of the decay and destruction now written in bold and large letters on the face of the Earth is, in fact, rather the result of an ailment of the human heart due to its capitulation to a consumer culture with destructive and capricious proclivities? What if our inquiry into the causes of the environmental crisis really shows that, ultimately, it is the contamination of the human heart that is the main cause of the crisis?

If we are willing to set aside our preconceived notions about the causes of the environmental crisis and inquire as a possible cause into the nature of greed and the appetites of which it is productive, we may find that greed is the locomotive that runs the contemporary corporate and political culture. It is the engine operating a huge and complex structure consisting of—among other things—boardrooms (where decisions are made which affect millions of human beings as well as the physical state of the planet); huge factories (where meaningless gadgets are produced); marketing managers (who invent ways to sell these products); and politicians and business leaders whose decisions con-

strain the choices available to the rest of humanity and results in environmental disasters of epic proportions. This very complex structure is global even though it is largely driven by the so-called rich nations; its impact reaches the far corners of the Earth.

Greed, in turn, is produced by heedlessness (*ghafla*), which is a state of the heart in which one is unmindful of the most basic and fundamental realities of life and living. This heedlessness also entails neglecting the covenant all humanity established with the Creator when *He took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness to themselves*, asking, “*Am I not your Rabb?*” To this emphatic question, we all replied, “*Indeed, we bear witness*” (Q 7:172). This covenant, recognized by all religious traditions, further establishes the legal and moral aspects of the relationship between humankind, the Earth, and all that has been bestowed to humanity as a trust (*amāna*) by God Who made humanity vicegerents (*khulafāʾ*) on Earth—and, like all vicegerents, ultimately and absolutely answerable to the One Who appointed us.

Heedlessness—which al-Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 298/910) once declared to be the pathogen that yields all other diseases of the heart such as miserliness, rancor, wantonness, and so on—and the resultant greed are regarded as major sins in both the Qurʾān and the Prophetic tradition. To be heedless of the nature of things in their essential harmony is not merely to *forget* them but to habituate oneself to such unawareness, opening the way for covetousness to rule all aspects of life. Thus, the Earth and all that exists on, above, and below it has, in fact, been granted us humans as a trust and needs to be treated with full awareness of the legal and moral dimensions of that inherent relationship.

This realization entails that greed and heedlessness be placed on the top of the list of causes which have produced the environmental crisis—even though those who discredit this primary relationship may find it outrageous that the entire order of the contemporary world has been shaken and restructured in relation to the state of the human heart. Yet it is this spiritual relationship that best explains both the true nature of our relationship with Earth and the malady from which the contemporary world is suffering.

It is fruitful to note, as a parting reflection, that there is no escape from the recompense we receive as to what we do to the Earth, as just our burials into it do not end the tale we leave behind—for there will come a day when the Earth itself will speak: *When the Earth is shaken by a mighty quaking, when the Earth throws out its burdens, when man cries, ‘What ails her?’ On that day she will tell her tale, because your Lord will inspire her. On that day people will issue forth, separately, to be shown their deeds. Whosoever has done an atom’s weight of good will see it, and whosoever has done an atom’s weight of evil will see it* (Q 99:1-8).

The Earth is mentioned 461 times in the Qurʾān, sometimes along with what has been created upon it. The Qurʾān invites us *to travel through the Earth*

to see for ourselves the many signs, both in the natural world as well as belonging to human history, in order to awaken to the essential reality of our existence which is none other than that one anchored in the covenant we established with the Creator at the beginning of time, the one which defines all other relationships and heedlessness to which corrupts all other relationships. It is in the recovery of that fundamental relationship that humanity can hope to find a true, real, and lasting solution to the enormous crisis which now surrounds us. It is so because in that remembrance lies the only possibility of an awakening of the heart from its heedlessness, an awakening, which, in turn, will inspire us to find new ways of living which are in harmony with the original imprint (*fiṭra*) upon which we have been created as well as with all that surrounds us.

WaʾIlāhul-mustaʿān, wa mā tawfiqī illā biʾIlāh

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Muzaffar', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Wuddistān
28 Jumāda al-Thānī 1431/8 June 2010