

In the northern regions of the Earth the arrival of spring is marked by golden rays of early morning light passing between the leaves which have just burst forth on branches of trees awaking from their winter hibernation. Bidding its long winter slumber farewell, the Earth becomes receptive to seeds already pregnant with all manner of fruits and flowers. This happens every year and has been happening for centuries. The Earth's imperceptible rotation suddenly brings back that season of spring when every tiny branch and twig becomes a marvelous display of the hidden order of the cosmos: a phenomena most residents of Earth are fast forgetting, because they live in an artificial world largely made possible by technologies that create a nearly impassable barrier between humanity and nature. Most people do not even notice when the last snowbank disappears and the southerly edges of the meadow become green with the first blades of grass.

This divorce between human beings and their environment is not accidental; it has occurred through a series of radical shifts in the human understanding of nature over the last three hundred years. These shifts have produced attitudes which consider the vast cosmic realm of nature no more than an aggregate of matter which can be manipulated and exploited in whichever way humans deem fit. This view of nature, in turn, is a product of yet another severance which has destroyed the true understanding of the relationship between the Creator and the created.

None of this has been the result of any sudden change. Rather, these shifts in relationships between the Creator and the created, the Earth and its residents, and humanity and the vast cosmic order of nature have all taken place in small increments. The fundamental drift of this

change, however, has been in the same direction ever since the Scientific Revolution produced a new body of knowledge allowing humans to understand and manipulate nature in a manner and to an extent that no previous era had allowed.

Modern science, and technologies developed on the basis of new scientific discoveries, is a unique and perhaps the most powerful enterprise in human history, casting a large shadow on all domains of human existence. Science and technology wedded to the state and industry, an alliance that emerged in the Western world with full force in the twentieth century, have reshaped the physical contours of the Earth to such an extent that if those who lived at the dawn of the modern era were to return to Earth they would not recognize their former abode.

At the dawn of the twentieth century many of these changes—brought about by a radical shift in human attitudes toward nature—were still restricted to a relatively small part of the world. It was then possible for many remote regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to remain enshrouded in their centuries-old lifestyle. Then men and women could be in tune with the slow and imperceptible movement of the Earth around its axis and be witnesses to the Divine order of nature which brings forth verdant springs and long winter nights during which translucent moonlight shines over sparkling particles of snow.

While it may still be possible for some residents of Earth to be part of that wonderful cosmic order of nature which acts as a pointer and a sign to the existence of things beyond the empirical realm, it is becoming increasingly difficult for humans to live in a spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological space not dominated by an artificial order created by technologies which are radically redefining parameters of human existence.

The extent to which modern technologies have penetrated the natural order of existence can be judged from the fact that almost 80% of newborns come into this world through some kind of intervention based on modern technology and a greater number depart from Earth after having been subjected to one or another technological device—be it a medical instrument in a hospital or an explosive dropped from a B-52 bomber flying over a sleeping city.

The advent of this world shaped by technologies which destroy the natural world is largely due to the scientific enterprise which emerged in the Western civilization. Its global spread is due to the unrestrained and uncritical awe it has created in non-Western civilizations. This yet-to-be-fully-understood attitude of non-Western societies toward modern

science and technologies is mainly responsible for their unprecedented reach, although their rapid global spread has also been assisted by the economic and political clout of certain Western nations. This power-leverage is not, however, the main reason for the general acceptance of modern science and technology in non-Western civilizations; there must be another more convincing force at work which has allowed modern science this unique privilege. The general acceptance of the notion that modern science is the sole possible way of studying nature is restrained only by a few ethical concerns regarding its specific applications. These concerns are related to both the practice and utility of modern science, but are insufficient to produce an impetus for a different kind of science which will view the natural world in a qualitatively different manner.

This lack of any desire to recast the entire framework of science is understandable in the case of those who view nature as an aggregate of dead matter having no relation to the Creator, but those who believe in the inalienable transcendent relationship between the world of nature and its Creator cannot accept the validity of a science which does not accept this fundamental relationship as its matrix. Such men and women exist both in the East and the West, but, surprisingly, their voices are muted, their concerns do not produce any real change, and there are no visible movements striving to offer an alternate to modern science. Even pious and dedicated men and women whose lives are characterized by devotion to the Creator and His commands do not seem to be concerned about the desecration of nature being perpetuated by the unrestrained spread of modern technologies to the remote regions of the Earth, as if this rapid destruction of the order of nature is happening on another planet.

While the environmental movement is gaining support in many parts of the world, it is often not about a new kind of science and technologies but merely about the visible destruction of the eco-system, the rising levels of greenhouse gases, and the increasing fractures in the ozone layer above us. The fundamental corrective needed for the reestablishment of the sacredness of nature is neither the main concern of the environmental movement nor the main agenda of religious leadership anywhere in the world. This means that even if some corrective measures reduce the damage to the environment, the world of nature will not regain its rightful place in the order of things and will remain divorced from the Creator for most members of our fragmented humanity.

This attitude toward the present environmental crisis is based on an understanding of modern science which views it as a beneficial enterprise

requiring only minor ethical correctives. It sees nothing wrong in the metaphysical assumptions of modern science which construe the object of its investigation—nature—as no more than a collection of atoms and molecules which have come into existence through some mysterious big or small bang in the cosmos at a remote time.

Even the most pious Muslim scientists often regard modern science as a universal enterprise without any religious content pulsating behind its structure. This misconception has received considerable attention by a small number of thinkers who have exposed the belief-content hidden beneath the supposedly objective and value-free modern science. Their work has been instrumental in clearly showing the disconnect between modern science and the religious view of nature, but their efforts have not yet led to the emergence of networks of Muslim scientists dedicated to the task of evolving a new science based on the Qur'ānic view of nature. This long-overdue process is one of the most important challenges faced by Muslims today.

What is needed is not merely a cosmetic remedy and pious sprinkling of Qur'ānic *āyāt* onto modern science but a thorough restructuring of its theoretical and practical frameworks. This effort may gain a solid foundation if small groups of philosophers, thinkers, and practicing scientists are established for the purpose of producing a new kind of science. These small groups of dedicated men and women can benefit from the work of scholars who have created a body of literature which critiques modern science from an Islamic perspective, but they need to go beyond it and lay the foundation of a new kind of science. These small groups also need to understand the failure of previous attempts and false starts which have created an attitude of distrust about the possibility of a new kind of science. These hurdles notwithstanding, the need for embarking upon this long overdue task is urgent.

Wa mā tawfīqi illā bi'Llāh

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

Wuddistān

27 Rabī al-Thānī, 1428/May 14, 2007