

REVIEW ARTICLE

Man and Nature: Domination or Submission

Cosmos and Psyche – The Intimations of a New World View. Richard Tarnas, The Penguin Group, New York, 2006. Pp. 569, ISBN 0-670-03292-1, (HB).

The Fall – The Evidence for a Golden Age, 6000 years of insanity, and the Dawning of a New Era. Steve Taylor, O Books, Ropley, Hants., UK, 2005. Pp. 336, ISBN 1-905047-20-7, (PB).

Evening Thoughts – Reflecting on Earth as Sacred community. Thomas Berry, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 2006. Pp. 171, ISBN 1-57805-130-4, (HB).

A New Earth – Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose. Elkhart Tolle, Penguin Books, London, 2005. Pp. 313, ISBN 13: 978-0-141-02759-3, (PB).

Faith in Conservation – A New Approach to Religion and Conservation. Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, World Bank, 2003. Pp. 166, ISBN 0-8213-5559-7, (PB).

The Atlas of Religion – Mapping Contemporary Challenges and Beliefs. Joanne O’Brien and Martin Palmer, Earthscan, Brighton, UK, 2007. Pp. 128, ISBN 978-1-84407-308-5, (PB).

A STATE OF AFFAIRS

The human race is on the edge of momentous but uncomfortable events if all the scientific evidence is to be believed. Report after report (see for example the UN’s Millennium Ecosystems Assessment, 2005) by experts threaten dire consequences if we do not mend our ways and the responses to this by the international community it would seem, is the Kyoto Protocol and its attendant proposals for controlling carbon emissions. This writer is of the view that the Kyoto initiative is a placebo too little too late.

In fairness to the scientists one needs to differentiate between them as unbiased producers of fact on the one hand and politicians and economists on the other who determine responses. The vested interest of the politician is power and that of the economists (Islamic or otherwise) growth. This is proving to be an unholy synergy the disastrous consequences of which we are only now beginning to comprehend. The Kyoto initiative, in spite of all the good intentions behind it, is a lame attempt at dealing with an economic growth model programmed to self-destruct.

China, India and Brazil who together have a total population of over 2.5 billion approaching 40% percent of the world’s population, have alarming rates of economic growth that are going to be unsustainable even in the short term. Global warming has not

stopped rich nations from curbing their excesses. OPEC countries, Saudi Arabia the most vociferous among them, are not willing to look beyond self interest. And, well meaning people are attempting to make “poverty history”. Thus, the human race continues its suicidal assault on a planet that has already exceeded its carrying capacity.

Global warming has been monopolising the headlines and at the time of writing there has been a perceived minor intrusion into the front pages of our daily newspapers. The news concerning the extinction of the fresh water Dolphin whose habitat was the Yangtze River Delta warranted a twenty four exposure in the media. This particular species of Dolphin had survived previous violent planetary changes for over twenty million years and ultimately succumbed to accelerated human activity. Not to minimise global warming, but this matter is only the tip of the environmental iceberg as it tends to overshadow equally alarming concerns such as species extinction, air and water borne pollution, deforestation, soil erosion and other parallel issues.

At a dramatic moment at the State of the World Forum the writer attended in San Francisco about ten years ago, the head of a research team exclaimed punching the air at the distinguished gathering, “Do you know there are more than two hundred poisons in your bodies your grand parents did not have?”(See Theo Colburn, *Your Uncertain Futures*). Uniquely in our time no one appears to be exempt from the changes that are taking place all around us, not the writer of this article, nor even the reader.

This then is the shortest possible summary of our environmental concerns intended as background to this review article. Unlike any other epoch in our history this human induced “cataclysm” is all pervasive. It permeates every nook and cranny of the planet, it has dramatically effected major eco systems such as the carbon exchange mechanism by carbon overload, consequently putting every living species, including the human, under threat of extinction. In the narrative of the Qur’an (55:7,8,9) we have disrupted the *mizan* (balance) of creation. This then leads us to ask if there is not something fundamentally wrong with the construct of a hegemonistic global civilisation we have all been sucked into post enlightenment, post imperialism. The connection between this capitalistic model that can only function by the creation of bank debt, and the environmental debacle, is a political system that relies exclusively for its survival on economic growth and the consequent emptying of the planet of all its resources.

How could Homo sapiens allow this to happen? When did the species lose its way? Where did we go wrong? Are there new directions? It would appear that the Muslim intelligentsia are in the doldrums concerning these issues and there has so far been minimal engagement on their part of what we would call cutting edge analysis. (A notable exception to this is Syed Hossein Nasr who has been writing on these themes since the 1960’s.) As these issues are getting close to being a matter of human survival there is no evidence that the increasing number Islamic Universities and the established theological seminaries are getting to grips with this area of study. Are they aware of the underpinnings of Western society? Do they teach philosophy of which there is a rich tradition in Islam? Have they made the links between society, politics, economics and the environment?

It takes a Western philosopher to tell us that at a pivotal point in the modern epoch man's "psychological allegiance shifted from the divine to the human". Richard Tarnas in his *Passion of the Western Mind* (not reviewed here) was referring to Rene Descartes the enlightenment philosopher who proclaimed that man was "lord and possessor" of nature. Is this idea not at total variance with the Islamic outlook, which proclaims the one Lord: "Praise be to Allah the Lord of the worlds" (Qur'an 1:1)? The point is that this is not merely a philosophical or theological position and if it were the matter could quite conceivably be allowed to rest there or, if the inclination takes discussed and debated. The fact however, is that the world is run on the basis of this conjecture and we are all, Muslims included, without exception, subject to it.

This is not so much a clash of civilisations as a clash of values: Between one that is built on the domination of creation and the other that requires submission to the will of the Creator.

This review article is an attempt to give the reader a taste of the material contained in six separate books. This is but a small sample of the kind of material that is now being produced by thinkers and writers outside the fold of Islam in an attempt to get to grips with the dilemmas of our times: Loss of religious faith, loss of spirituality, the defilement of the natural world, responses to the threats facing the planet and consequently to the human species itself. For the purposes of this review article the books are arbitrarily divided into three broad categories: The first two listed as Transformation, the second two as Spirituality and the last two as Religion.

TRANSFORMATION

Richard Tarnas is a cultural historian and professor of philosophy and depth psychology. A brief reference should be made here of his critically acclaimed *Passion of the Western Mind* as "the best intellectual history of the West in one volume". This work was first published in 1991 and Tarnas says in his preface to *Cosmos and Psyche* that *Passion of the Western Mind* was a preparatory foundation for the current work which has been thirty years in the writing. He adds, that whilst the first volume examined the history that led to the current situation, "*Cosmos and Psyche* addresses more precisely the crisis of the modern self and modern world view and then introduces a body of evidence, a method of enquiry, and an emerging cosmological perspective that I believe could help us creatively engage that crisis and our history itself, within a new horizon of possibility".

In focusing on the "Western" situation as he puts it, he acknowledges that this is now "variously and acutely affecting the entire human community", and also it needs to be said Muslims wherever they live. Tarnas observes three fundamental factors that affect the human community. The first of these is a profound metaphysical disorientation and groundlessness that pervades contemporary human experience; the second, the deep sense of alienation that affects the modern self; and thirdly, the critical need for a deeper insight into the positive and negative forces that drives the human species. Tarnas sees a compelling paradox inherent in these problems, which have been "subtly interwoven

with, the very qualities and achievements of our (Western) civilisation ...”. He further asserts, “the achievement of human autonomy (disconnection from the divine) has been paid for by the experience of human alienation”.

As the preceding lines indicate Tarnas mounts a compelling analysis of the Western intellectual tradition, although brilliant in its unfolding has led to the crisis of the spirit and transformed the human from subject to observer, to the shaper of his own environment to the extent that he is threatening his own existence. Tarnas’ approach may be seen by some as unusual in that he proceeds to examine Jung’s interest in astrology and archetypal psychology, followed by a re-evaluation of astrological traditions. His research encouraged him to examine the “possible existence of historical correlations with planetary cycles” with a caveat that detaches his work from “ancient astrology”. He thus finds interesting correspondence between planetary movements and epoch making events in human history from the French revolution down to our time.

He states in the concluding part of his work that the evidence he has gathered points to a cosmic ordering principle. But if this is so the paradox still remains: what prompts the human psyche to create such havoc in the midst of such brilliance? Is the period we are going through an aberration? Are cosmic patterns responsible for our disconnection from the natural world? Are we not then responsible for our own actions?

The Fall by Steve Taylor takes a radically different route in examining the causes of human transformation. He relies on history and archaeology and his main theme is that climate change that occurred six thousand years ago changed the species from a cooperative, cohesive group centred being to an egocentric war like species. Whilst Tarnas’ work examines the impact of intellectual shifts over the past five hundred or so years, Taylor looks at social change over the past six thousand. He suggests that there are basic differences between the people who experienced a “collective psychological shift” which gave them “a more defined sense of individuality and a new way of experiencing life and perceiving the world” compared to the aboriginal peoples like the native Australian and American who had escaped this trauma, until of course the Eurasians embarked on their expansions.

Taylor defines us, the majority of the human race, as having inherited an over developed sense of ego. He argues that there is a basic sense of discontent inside us allied to alienation and a sense of incompleteness. We are prone to the pathologies of war, male domination, oppression of the weak, inequalities, exploitation and environmental destruction far removed from the cooperative life styles of the aboriginal peoples. Our sense of ego is so all embracing that we have lost any sense of community and our connection with the natural world. He argues that to overcome our present problems we need to transcend separateness, that is to heal the pathology of our ego isolation, to go beyond self gratification, to serve the world and to enter into a sense of well being with all creatures and the cosmos.

Taylor concludes on an optimistic note - “After six thousand years of psychosis, we may finally be regaining our sanity”. But, it can only be hoped that this is an accurate

assessment of the future. If Taylor's assessment of our fall from grace six thousand years ago is correct then we have to face the facts of an even more rampant ego, cultivated to be even more possessive, chasing after resources that are getting even more scarce.

SPIRITUALITY

Thomas Berry, a Roman Catholic monk, is a cultural historian of both Western and East Asian traditions. He is described as the "most provocative figure among the new breed of eco-theologians" and has been an inspirational figure in recent decades to those committed to re-examining humankind's place in the cosmic order. *Evening Thoughts* is a collection of essays written over a period of time, which should appeal to readers from all traditions. These essays explore new ground and in a profound way expose the human folly of committing ecocide that threatens the entire planet and the human species itself. At the same time this volume is also a challenge to the human race to re-evaluate its relationship with the Earth and find a way back to regaining a semblance of eco-sanity.

Those who are puzzled over Islam's concern with politics should read this book as it shows conclusively that no spiritual tradition can eschew politics, which is about power, which is about competing for scarce resources and which in the end is the exploitation of the earth itself. Berry ranges from the sacredness of the human earth connection, to the nation state, to fossil fuels, to global warming and invites us to make connections between how the human community has set about managing its affairs and the destructive course it has been taking in recent times.

The damage we are causing "major bio systems is obviously the consequence of a deep cultural pathology". Berry does not hesitate to look at his own spiritual tradition: "How did Western civilisation, deriving as it does from the biblical Christian humanist matrix, provide the basis for the aggressive commercial industrial culture that grew from it", he asks.

Berry said at a spiritual summit commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the UN in 1975, "... we note that the greatest danger to the human community may be the loss of its will to carry on the cosmic and numinous intentions within itself". Has much changed since then?

There are two universal aspects of the human that are in crisis today. The first is the manifest disconnection of the individual from the natural world. ("There are certainly signs in the earth for people with certainty; and in yourselves as well. Do you not then see?" - Qur'an 51: 20, 21). The second, an outcome of the first disconnection - an alienation of the self. It is the discovery of the self that the Sufi orders in Islam inculcate as a means of recognising the Divine. Elkhart Tolle's *A new Earth*, is about the crisis of the modern self and its reconciliation with primordality (The Fitra of the Qur'an). He asks: "Is humanity ready for a transformation of the consciousness ...?"; "Can human beings lose the identity of their conditioned mind structures ...?"; "Can they defy the gravitational pull of materialism and materiality and rise above the identification with

form that keeps the ego in place and condemns them to imprisonment in their own personality?”.

An aspect of the collective dysfunction of the human mind argues Tolle, is its collective assault on the planet which could “only result in their own destruction”. This dysfunction is “magnified through science and technology”. As a way out of this conundrum we need “a transformed state of human consciousness”.

This book is about self-discovery and the illusion of forms; of how modern man’s preoccupation with externalities may lead him to his own destruction. However, he remains optimistic and in the last part of his work he takes the reader through a series of steps that deals with the ubiquitous ego; a teaching on self-discovery and personal spirituality.

RELIGION

Has religion got to say anything about man’s relationship with the natural world and hence his respect for and protection of the environment? A multi-faith movement dedicated to the protection of the environment was inaugurated in 1986 by HRH Prince Philip, who was at that time the president of WWF international. This inauguration took place in Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of St. Francis the Patron Saint of nature. The five major faiths – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism were represented at this gathering out of which emerged the Assisi Declaration. This Declaration was an endorsement by the five faiths of Prince Philip’s initiative and an affirmation of their commitment to deal with the environmental crisis.

Martin Palmer, one of the editors of *Faith in Conservation* was a key to the success of this gathering and ever since then he has worked indefatigably drumming up support from as many faith groups and traditions he can gather. The end result is that he has managed to increase the number of faith groups involved to eleven adding the Bahai Faith, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism and Zoroastrianism thus creating a powerful coalition of faiths working under the umbrella of the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC).

Faith in Conservation, which Palmer has co-edited with Victoria Finlay, encapsulates the positions the different faith traditions take on the human connections to the natural world and consequently respect towards it. It should come as no surprise to the reader that although their rootedness in nature is expressed in their own different ways they speak with one voice for its protection.

The Atlas of Religion in which Palmer collaborates with Joanne O’Brien, in many ways supports the themes in *Faith in Conservation* and highlights the potential in faith groups for massive positive change. It is a unique collection of material described as “religious data” which could be invaluable to researchers and writers in academia and the media. If you want to know more about Christian Finance, Ethical Investment, Islamic Banking, the involvement of religious groups in environmental protection this is your reference point.

SUMMARY

In the six books that I have chosen for this review I try to identify three trends that attempt to provide answers to the environmental and social collapse of our times. In reverse order, taking religion first, the trend which Palmer and his colleagues in the Alliance of Religions and Conservation exemplify is the coming together of various faith traditions in proclaiming their empathy with the natural world and consequently its protection from the ghastly damage that our modern life styles are inflicting on it. This is a sort of environmental ecumenism, which is finding an increasing number of adherents but it leaves the Alliance of Religion and Conservation, which is a small organisation, with an impossibly large outreach.

There are also, as in the scheme of things, a growing number of faith groups taking the lead in this area of human concern, within their own spheres of influence. For example, following a Colloquium on Islamic Law and the Environment in Indonesia in July, scholars from that country have just passed a *fatwa* against deforestation indicating a growing sense of awareness in environmental issues in the Muslim world, albeit belatedly.

The third and fourth volumes reviewed under the heading of spirituality are examples of the kind of searching that is taking place in the West led by eminent eco theologians of the calibre of Thomas Berry. Thinkers like Berry and Tolle range outside the traditional theological framework in a search for answers to the current human malaise and investigate the processes of inner spiritual change that might hopefully return society to some form of equilibrium within itself. It is often said that there is a gaping spiritual hole in the West and it is no accident that one of the most popular works of poetry in the United States for the past twenty or so years has been that of the thirteenth century Sufi mystic Jalal Uddin Rumi.

Tarnas and Taylor in their own separate ways write about seismic shifts in human history. The former concerns himself with intellectual change in the past five hundred years driven by the enlighten movement in Europe and the latter, sweeping social changes that had occurred in the past six thousand years. Of the two it is likely that Tarnas' *Cosmos and Psyche* may be seen in future years as a unique contribution to human thought that broke the back of modernity. This volume contains a critique par excellence of the subject/object dichotomy the Western mind had boxed itself into since the enlightenment and the scientific revolution. Tarnas seeks a way out of this through a seemingly unusual process which on first reading may look anything but scientific as we have come to define this term. This probably is his intention and one cannot deny his intellectual rigour as he presents his findings as tentative and open to scrutiny. He presents data that he has collected for thirty years and argues that there is relationship between planetary conjunctions with cosmic archetypes and seismic events in human history. This is both an unexpected and unusual approach. His study leads him to conclude that the cosmos is intrinsically meaningful to and coherent with human consciousness and that it (the cosmos) as a living whole appears to be informed by some creative intelligence. Tarnas

was not seeking to affirm the existence of a transcendent deity but it would be useful to ask what lies behind this intelligence.

Fazlun Khalid

Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences