

HUMANKIND'S RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE AND PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF CREATION BY TECHNOLOGY FROM AN ISLAMIC POINT OF VIEW

Asghar Ali Engineer

1. Creation, Human Beings, and Nature

According to all scriptures, it is God who created this universe and all that is within it. According to the Qur'an also, Allah is the creator of this universe, of nature, and of human beings. There is also the Darwinian theory of evolution. Some support the theory of evolution and reject what is called "creationism" and some people support the dogma of creation and totally reject the concept of evolution. The Qur'an also talks of creation; but the question is whether it rejects the concept of evolution? It is essentially the question of interpretation, after all. The most important question is: are the concepts of creation and evolution mutually exclusive? Most people would maintain yes. But I think they are not necessarily exclusive. They are rather inclusive. The question is: evolution of what? It is evolution of what exists. The Darwinian theory of evolution, if properly understood and interpreted, does not necessarily reject the idea of creation, though it was thought to have done so. In fact, rationalism was emerging in Europe with great verve in the 19th century and the rationalists were looking for explanations for the coming into existence of human beings and various other species. Darwin's observations and the theory he built on the basis of the empirical evidence he collected became a powerful weapon in the hands of rationalists. It is as if the rationalists were waiting for someone to theorise along these lines and Darwin became their hero, who provided them with the much-needed explanation.

Those people who held orthodox religious points of view rejected, on the other hand, Darwin's theory and dubbed it "atheistic" and damned it with all the force at their command. For them, belief in evolution amounted to interfering in the domain of God. The human being, according to this point of view, was a humble creature of God and his duty was to submit humbly to the Will of God. He could not interfere with the work of God, let alone aspire to be His partner. Thus creationism and evolutionism were on a collision course. They are even today for many believers. Both creationists and evolutionists took narrow and dogmatic views. In fact, creation and evolution are complimentary, rather than

contradictory. Both of the concepts support each other, if dogmas are discarded. The theologians take a very narrow view of creation, as if creation were a one time perfect product and, as a result of God's word "be," it "became." It is this narrow understanding of the concept of creation which is quite problematic. Similarly, the rationalists, too, took a very restricted view of evolution and totally ruled out the possibility of creation. Such a view is equally problematic – evolution of what, if nothing existed before?

Thus if we talk of human partnership in the process of creation, we will have to drastically change our thinking about both creation and evolution. However, today, according to the believers, it is God and His power of creation that is final and cannot be interfered with. In this view, the human being is a mere helpless creature without any power. The opposite point of view holds the human being as supreme, God as mere myth, and evolution as the final reality. It is very difficult to reconcile such opposing and dogmatic points of view, and the question of human partnership with the divine is not posed.

Whatever the point of view, one thing is clear: The human species is an integral part of nature. Nature can exist independently of human beings, but human beings cannot without nature. The very sustenance of human beings is derived from nature. It is nature that sustains humans. Both those who believe in religion and those who do not support this point of view. Those who believe in God maintain that God created the entire universe, and at the end human beings. Those who reject religious belief also maintain that humans are products of nature. Thus, the relationship between humans and nature is, so to say, beyond dispute.

What is Islamic point of view?

What does the Qur'an say about creation and evolution? If it is interpreted literally, as it is by orthodox believers, the Qur'an also teaches the concept of creation, leaving no place for evolution. However, if literalist interpretation is replaced with metaphorical and symbolic interpretation, there can be room for reconciling the concept of creation with that of evolution. As far as creation is concerned, the Qur'an says, "And when He decrees an affair, He says to it only Be, and it is" (2:117). The orthodox theologians maintain that once whatever Allah decrees, is created by these words. But many others, especially the modern interpreters, do not agree with this understanding of the above verse. Thus Maulana Muhammad Ali, a modern commentator of the Qur'an, observes:

Kun fa-yakun is the recurring phrase in which Allah's act of the creation and annihilation of things is spoken of in the Holy Qur'an. It is not meant by this that there is no gradual process in the creation of things: evolution in creation is in fact plainly spoken of in the very first words of the Qur'an, where God is spoken of as *Rabb* (Evolver) of worlds, the *Fosterer of a thing in such a manner as to*

make it attain one condition after another until it reaches its goal of completion.

It is, in fact, an answer to those who think that the creation of things by God is dependent on the previous existence of matter and soul and the adaptability of their attributes. The argument given here in the word *badi'* is that man, who stands in need of matter to make things, also stands in need of a pattern after which to make them, but God stands in need of neither. The verse seems particularly to refer here, however, to the revolution that was to be brought about by the Prophet. It seemed an impossibility to men but Allah had decreed it. And in fact, the revolution brought about in Arabia by the Prophet was so wonderful that the old heaven and earth of the peninsula may be said to have been changed into new ones.¹

Thus it will be seen that there are many shades to the word "*kun*" ("be"). Allah's command to create human beings can certainly play a role in further shaping things. It is for man to rise to the level both through perfection of technology and value orientation, where he can play a role of partnership with Allah in perfecting or re-shaping the process of creation. A noted poet of Urdu Muhammad Iqbal says: Raise thyself to such level that Allah, before shaping the things will consult thee what thy opinion is! Is human partnership in divine creation possible and desirable? Can the modern technology support the process of creation? Well there are differing points of view. Some maintain that human beings, since they are themselves created, cannot become partners in creation or participate in the process of creation. The other point of view accepts such a possibility. In every religious tradition, be it Christian, Hindu, or Muslim, there is no single point of view. The orthodox viewpoint always differs from the liberal and progressive one.

Before we deal with this question, we would like to throw light on the concept of creation in the Islamic scripture, i.e. the Qur'an. The Qur'an uses two terms for creation: *ibda'* and *khalafa*. Both have distinct meanings. *Bada'* refers to creation out of nothingness. Such an act of creation does not require any imitation of others and anything so created is called *badi'*. Allah is called *mubdi'*, who creates without any pre-existing material or without any tools or without space and time. Such an act of creation is only for Allah; no one can assist him or participate with him in this process of creation.²

Khalafa, on the other hand, also means to create; but it has a different shade of meaning. It means creation with tools, with assistance, with pre-existing material and in time and space. When it refers to Allah, however, *khalafa* could be synonymous with *ibda'*, i.e. creation without any assistance, without any tools or outside time and space. Thus Allah has created this universe, the heav-

¹ Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 6th Ed. (Lahore: AAI Publishers, 1973), p. 51-52, f.n. 163.

² Cf. Imam Raghīb, *Mufradat al-Qur'an*. Urdu trans. Sheikhul Hadith Maulana Muhammad Abdahu (Lahore: Ahle Hadith Academy, 1971), p. 76.

ens and earth, and for that the Qur'an uses both *bada'* (2:117) and *khalaqa* (3:16). But as for humans, the term *bada'* cannot be used, because human beings cannot create without assistance, without tools and outside time and space.³ Thus no human being can participate, as far as Allah's creation in the first sense is concerned, i.e. human beings cannot be *badi'*, but they can be *khaliq*. It is in this sense that the Qur'an describes Allah as *ahsan al-khaliqin*, i.e. best of the creators (14:23).

Thus, in the later sense, human beings are also creators and can become participants in the process of creation. Here it will be important to point out that creation cannot be isolated from sustenance, and that sustenance is not possible without deep concern (compassion) for the creation. Allah is, therefore, described in the Qur'an not only as creator but also as sustainer (*rabb*) and as *Rahman* (1:2-3). Allah creates this universe, sustains it, and feels deeply concerned for His creation. Human beings thus also participate in the process of creation by participating in the process of sustenance and caring for the creation of Allah. To preserve and protect this earth, which we inhabit and which is the creation of Allah, and to feel deeply concerned for it is very important for us humans. Allah has taken upon Himself to be Merciful and Compassionate. The Qur'an says, "He has ordained mercy on Himself" (6:12). Thus, He cannot but be Merciful. Mercy is His very nature. It is this nature of God that sustains the universe. Thus, human participation in sustenance of this universe – this earth as far as human beings are concerned – is participation in the process of creation. Human beings have to design technology to further the process of sustenance of this earth.

As pointed out above, human beings cannot create out of nothing, only out of existing material and with the help of tools. And modern technology is the most powerful tool that human beings have designed. However, since technology is a tool, not an end in itself, it has to be such as to strengthen the sustenance of human beings on this earth and the earth itself. Modern technology can be destructive as well as creative. The question is: is our technology such as to enable us to participate in the process of creation and sustenance? Or is it otherwise? There is no categorical answer, because there is much ambiguity in human action. There is no such ambiguity in Allah's action, as He has ordained mercy on Himself. Among His names in the Qur'an we find *Nur* (light), *Rahim* (Merciful), *al-Hadi* (The Guide), *al-Wahhab* (Generous who gives in plenty), *al-Razzaq* (Provider and Sustainer), etc. All of these names are Allah's attributes, which indicate how He looks after His creation and how He is the Benefactor of His creation. But for Him the creation would not survive.

This is not true, however, as far as human beings are concerned, even though they aspire to be participants in the process of creation. Allah creates and sends

³ Ibid, p. 316.

His guides for human beings to guide them to enhance the value of His creation. However, human beings give greater importance to their selfish interests than to the creation of Allah. He even devises utterly destructive technology to promote his selfish ends. He has created nuclear technology in order to destroy God's creation? Nuclear technology not only wreaks havoc and destroys all that is here on earth, but also destructively affects future generations of human beings, plants, water resources, etc. through radiation. Yet human beings, despite being fully aware of the destructive nature of nuclear technology, do not desist from creating it. Not only that, but several countries have nuclear weapons which together can destroy this earth several times over and also destroy all future possibilities of creation of life for millions of years.

For human beings to participate in the process of creation with God, they have to devise technologies which will be life enhancing, not life destroying. To accomplish this, human beings must rise above selfish interests and imbibe positive values contained in the Divine Attributes. As I wrote above, human actions are, unlike God, ambiguous and capable of both enhancing and destroying life. It can be said that Allah also destroys life, in the sense that He ordains death – the death of all species. This destruction, however, is not for the sake of destruction, but for fresh creation. Human destruction, on the other hand, is not only for the purpose of destruction, but also for destroying all possibilities of life to come into existence. Allah in His Mercy has gifted humankind with the precious gift of intellect, which has tremendous life-enhancing, creative potential. This potential can be actualised only when humans rise above selfish interests and devise technologies that can help humanity to flourish.

Intellect is not only a precious divine gift, but also a powerful tool of human creation. As pointed out above, divine creation does not depend on any external tool, whereas human creation does. But God Himself has gifted humankind with the power of reason, so that it can assist Him in the process of creation. Thus it becomes the sacred duty of humankind to make the best possible use of intellect and to become a part of the divine process of creation. It is in fact Allah's will that humankind assists Him in the process of creation by preserving His creation through devising appropriate technology. That is why the Qur'an says, "We created human being in the best make." (95:4). This implies that human beings are endowed with all the positive qualities, physical as well as mental, corresponding to the functions that this particular creature is meant to perform. It is for man to make the best possible use of these innate qualities given by God. But the next verse also describes his innate evil tendencies, when it says, "Then We render him the lowest of the low." (95:5). A similar statement is made in verse 91:7-8: "He reveals to it (i.e. human soul) its way of evil and its way of good."

Thus human beings have potentialities for good as well as for evil in them. It is for them to decide – and human beings are free agents in this sense – whether



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-0188-8>

Nature and Technology in the World Religions

Koslowski, P. (Ed.)

2001, X, 155 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0188-8