POINT ** COUNTERPOINT

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The confluence of religion and science

HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

hysterical "Clash of ORGET Samuel Huntington's Civilization" theory: "Clash of Religion and Science" has now moved to centre stage, this time in a courtroom in rural Pennsylvania. The contention between evolutionists and intelligent design proponents (IDers) over the origin of life and the bitter high school biology curricula fights it has spawned in different parts of the country has become the media's new

This is unfortunate, for the ancient battle between religion and science is just that: ancient. It was in the seventeenth century that the Church imprisoned Galileo for daring to suggest that the earth was a mere player in the cosmic drama, and not its prima donna as theologians had thought. Two centuries later, Darwin published The Origin of Species (1859) in which he proposed that evolution and natural selection could account for the biological diversity of the living world, including us, precipitating a fierce clash between faith and reason

Muslims too have experienced their share of this conflict. In the 9th century, advocates of reason led by the Mutazalites clashed with the dogmatic Kharajites, and as Muslims historians often darkly summarise, this effectively closed the doors of ijtihad. The

"debate" between al-Ghazali representing tradition and mysticism and ibn Rushd representing science and reason in the 12th century was also a turning point in which Ghazali's views

way. Although there have been more ambushes and skirmishes (The Scopes Monkey Trail in Tennessee in 1925, for example), there have also been advances in our thinking, and now most of us do not see any conflict between science and religion. Science deals with the factual aspects of the natural world and religion with the transcendental questions of meaning and purpose. One deals with the "how," the other with the "why." The empirical nature of science contrasts with "belief in the unseen" nature of religion and most people, including many scientists and theologians, agree that both can work in concert to enrich our material and spiritual lives. At the very least, the twain can respectfully

There will, of course, always be scientists who view religion as an albatross around civilisation's neck, and theologians who rail at science as the new God that has driven meaning from life. There will always be reductionists who claim that life and its mysteries can all be explained by the laws of physics, and scriptural literalists who insist that the earth is only a

evidence of God's glorious self-disclosure, and many scientists whose research leads them to ask the deeper questions of life -- why are we here, why do we suffer -- that lie outside the realm of science. The unexplored land between religion and science beckons people with open minds seeking spiritual and scientific truths. Is it not Since then, we have traveled a long possible that wildflowers of insight will bloom in this land if nurtured with humour and humility?

tists will assert that an atheistic view of life is our only choice as a consequence of what they consider to be the allencompassing reality of Darwin's theory, while certain religious leaders are so defined by their certitude that they know who will go to heaven and who are destined for hell.

But they are a minority. There are many more theologians representing different faiths, for example, who find in the theory of evolution evidence of God's glorious self-disclosure, and many scientists whose research leads them to ask the deeper questions of life -- why are we here, why do we suffer -that lie outside the realm of science.

Intelligent design proponents say that because life on earth is too complex to have been created by random genetic mutation, Darwin's theory must be balanced by the recognition of an "intelligence" beyond its reach. The IDers are coy in not directly calling this 'intelligence" God for fear of being labeled fundamentalists.

But people of faith do not need to be told of "gaps" in Darwin's theory to

experience the Divine; the longing for the Divine is intrinsic and is what gives meaning to their lives. By the same token, the IDers should realise that theirs is not a scientifically-testable theory in that it does not meet the criteria of observation, measurement, experimentation and testing, and therefore has no place in a biology classroom, although it can be part of a religious or philosophy curriculum. Pleading acceptance by the scientific community on the basis of ignorance and "gaps" in knowledge benefits

It is disheartening to see dire predictions in the media about a return to the Dark Ages because of the supposedly high percentage of mindshare the IDers have captured, or about the dizzying successes of scientists in genetics and other fields that threatens to make religion obsolete.

neither science nor religion.

We can safely ignore these predictions. Instead, we should be thinking more creatively about how religion and science relate to, and reinforce,

A good starting point may be to consider the provocative question: Is coexistence the last word in the relationship between religion and science, or can there be something more?

Lessons from Islamic history help

frame an answer. From the eighth through the fifteenth centuries, Muslim scientists made discoveries based on challenges posed by religious observances. Determining the proper time of day to offer the five daily prayers, calculating the precise direction toward the kiblah, and predicting the visibility of the crescent moon to mark the beginning and end of lunar months led to the discovery of spherical trigonometry and algebra and significant advances in astronomy. Muslim scientists constructed astrolabes and observatories, emphasising observations and experiments by which to test theories and their predictive powers. Science became a spiritual quest for them, a way of sensing traces of God's handiwork in the universe. (A telling example is the astronomer, mathematician and poet

Ulugh Beg (1349-1449). Considered a genius, he established an observatory at Samarkand, and with astounding accuracy, charted the course of more than 1000 stars over a period of 18 years. Unfortunately, he was murdered by his son who felt that his "secular" interest in science betrayed

the spirit of Islam!)

In our times, this scientific-spiritual quest animates many Muslim scientists, but one who stands out is the cosmologist Abd-al-Haqq Bruno Guiderdoni, a director of research at the Paris institute of astrophysics and the director of the Islamic Institute for Advanced Studies. Guiderdoni's main interest is galaxy formation and evolution. Exploring the universe is, in his words, "an act of worship," (It is remarkable how so many of the leading cosmologists of the world of differat heart.) A passionate advocate of the global dialogue between science and religion, Guiderdoni finds inspiration for his quest for truth in the Quran: In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are signs for people of understanding (3:190).

An article written almost four decades ago in the IBM journal 'Think" by physicist Charles Townes also provides insights into the evolving nature of religion-science relation-

After building the case that religion and science shared fundamental similarities -- revelation in one is epiphany in another, for instance --Townes concluded that the two will eventually converge. "I believe," he wrote in 1966 in The Convergence of Science and Religion, "this confluence is inevitable. For they both represent man's efforts to understand his universe and must ultimately be dealing with the same substance.'

Townes's idea caused a renewed stir after he won the Templeton Prize for "Progress toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities' in March this year. A devout Christian. he is also one of the greatest scientists of the twentieth-century, winning the Nobel Prize in physics in 1964 for inventing the maser and the laser.

But Townes also tempered his speculation: "Perhaps by the time this convergence occurs, science will have been through a number of revolutions as striking as those which have occurred in the last century, and taken on a character not readily recognisable by scientists of today. Perhaps our religious understanding will also have seen progress and change. But converge they must, and through this should come new strength for both."

Convergence does not mean a magical fusion of faith and reason; it means, as Townes implied, a symbiosis that can enrich our practical, intellectual, and ethical lives. Such a confluence may, for instance, inspire more nuanced views on hot-button issues like embryonic stem-cell research, and deepen our understanding of how love, justice, cruelty and forgiveness shape human affairs. It may force us to rethink our ideas of "predictable" and "random" events in a scientific context, thereby uncovering if there was indeed something to Einstein's intuitive objections to the probabilistic foundation of quantum mechanics when he said, "God does not play dice with the universe" and "God is subtle but He is not malicious.

The unexplored land between religion and science beckons people with open minds seeking spiritual and scientific truths. Is it not possible that wildflowers of insight will bloom in this land if nurtured with humour and

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Morality, sex and corruption

R H KHANDKER

Y journalist nephew wondered aloud in my presence why corruption was so rampant in Bangladesh. I was not sure what was on his mind, but it could be that, since his chacha traveled all over the world and observed various societies, he thought he might have some opinion to offer. This surmise led me to reflect what my thoughts were or could be on this ubiquitous subject. Through expansive reflections, I have made a construct but, since at least a part of it being awkward to be communicated directly to a nephew, I resort to the print media, which my nephew may

I may state the conclusion first, which is that human beings in all societies are alike in some basic instincts, though they may differ in colour, ethnicity, or social conditioning. As regards corruption, their instinct is similar -- to go for it if they can get away with it. "Getting away with it" is the determining factor.

We have heard and read in media in the past years about the financial scandals in high places in the US and other western countries. Remember

Enron or WorldCom? The CEO of the latter was convicted recently. Even Vice President Dick Cheney was talked of being involved in corrupt practices at Halliburton, of which he was a past CEO. If he were really involved in corruption, he has so far got away with

There was a story about the late Senator Jacob Javits, who was chairman of a Senate committee. He was Republican but was equally regarded by the Democrats for his grace and integrity. In the 1970s, when the landscapes of the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries were transforming with oil money, contractors form the western countries flocked there for lucrative business. Senator Javits represented a company soliciting such contracts and succeeded. It was later reported in the American press that hefty bribes were paid to the ruling family of the country to get the contract, which was a rule of the game. The Senator's name was also mentioned, but no accusation was made against him. But the report was enough to damage his reputation permanently. He did not run for the next term in Senate. The Senator did not get away with the alleged corruption and paid dearly in prestige and

I may state the conclusion first, which is that human beings in all societies are alike in some basic instincts, though they may differ in colour, ethnicity, or social conditioning. As regards corruption, their instinct is similar -- to go for it if they can get away with it. "Getting away with it" is the determining factor. position. Fear of effective law keeps

one away from financial corruption not moral value as much. Any opportunity to get away with it tends to bring in corruption. Credit card frauds are so extensive in the US that the cardissuing banks charge exorbitant interest from the honest users to recoup the loss caused by fraudulence. Police officers are not known to demand bribes (for fear of being caught), but it is not so uncommon that an officer would leave an eating place without being presented a bill. One does not dare offer a bribe to a police officer because, even if one were otherwise innocent, offering a bribe itself would be a reason to get arrested. Although it is rumoured that shop owners in New York's Chinatown regularly pay tolls to the police to remain out of trouble, such instances are infrequent and hard to prove to make corruption an issue. In the European countries, too, the

same scenario prevails. The degree of corruption varies with the degree of

freedom to get away with it. In Italy, the widely publicised charge of corruption against Prime Minister Berlusconi was not proved in court (which people suspect he controlled). Nevertheless, he is still widely believed to be corrupt But he got away. Now come to Bangladesh, where the corrupt get away regularly. No greater proof is needed than the statement of Finance Minister immune from corruption, and if corrupt officers were removed, the NBR would be empty. In plain words, every corrupt official in Bangladesh usually gets away with it. If the Chancellor of Exchequer made such a statement in the British Parliament, his head would have rolled for acquiescence of corruption. The political power in Bangladesh is directly correlated to the power to amass money. Politics is therefore a business in corruption. Any control on scarce product or service also makes corruption almost inevitable. Take a phone line or gas line, for example. If,

however, two or more private companies compete to provide the same services, bonuses perhaps would replace bribes. Look at the competition among mobile phone companies.

Who is not involved in corruption in

Let me confess that when I was in a high position, my PA could get my personal matters done over the phone he might have got done some of his own using my name. After retirement, my personal appearance worked for some years, but not without hassles. Later, only my agents could do the same paying "costs." Some ten years ago, I appeared before a deputy commissioner of income tax, who was respectful to me. He assessed my tax correctly, but at the end pleaded for my kindness to pay some small amount to those who would type my assessment paper. The next year a different officer demanded some redundant documents, asked impolite questions and finally sent me back for a future appearance. To avoid

further harassment, I sent a tax lawyer. who returned with a nil assessment, but with a bill of "incidentals." I need not dwell any further on corruption in Bangladesh, since my nephew said it

Let me now turn to another phase of "getting away with it." Corruption is a matter of moralityfinancial morality. There is also a matter of sexual morality. Perhaps sexual urge is more intense than the desire for money. Yet sexual corruption is not rampant in Bangladesh. Here the picture is the reverse. In many eastern countries like Bangladesh, sexual relationship outside wedlock is both a sin and a punishable crime. For a Muslim it is zena, a sure reason to be thrown to Zahannam. Similar restrictions prevail in other religious groups in our and other countries. The threats of the law and Hell are enough to keep one moral and away from sexual corruption. Even then, reports of rapes are more frequent in our countries than in many

western countries. Many men and women in Bangladesh would engage in sexual acts if none could detect, threats of legal or religious punishment notwithstanding. It is only a matter of getting away with it.

The picture in the western world is very different, where consensual sexual relationship between unmarried adults is not unlawful. Even a rape case can get dismissed if one partner can prove even implicit consent of the other partner. Living together is not only commonplace, but is also entitled to similar rights as for being legally married. In such a scenario, sexual corruption does not conceptually or legally exist, if neither of the partners is a minor or married to someone else or forced to the act. In this context "getting away with "sexual corruption is effortless.

Sexual relationship can be viewed also in the context of social values, irrespective of law and religion. In the days of Emperor Haile Selassie, I saw pretty young women in Addis Ababa physically entertaining men in high official and social positions. Nobody frowned at such popular practices. These pretty women were not hurt by any social stigma. They would accumulate substantial funds and end up

similar scenes, though less noticeable, in Somalia, a Muslim country but with African values. Senior officials and gentry would gather in desert spots not far from the capital city, where young women entertained men with dance of physical contacts under the influence the women had any sense of shame or guilt. That was in the mid-sixties. However, the scenario changed remarkably afterwards, when money started to flow as aid from the rich Arab countries. Somalia transformed its social culture from African to Arab in the years before I visited it again in 1980. Men or women could no longer get away with what they could some fifteen years ago. Sexual morality entered the realm of corruption.

marrying their favourite suitors. I saw

I could go on but I suppose my nephew got the message. Bangladesh ranks highest in the list of corrupt freedom to get away with it is also the

Dr. RH Khandker is an elderly economist who returned home after a long stay abroad.

science information. The

resultjournalists are under-reporting

As for the "compromised activists'

(the author's term for the environmen-

tal lobby), they have missed the boat.

'Around the country, environmental

advocates are working to get people to

drive less, turn down their thermo-

stats, and reduce their energy use,"

Gelbspan writes. "Unfortunately,

though many environmental prob-

lems can be addressed through life-

style change, climate change is not one

Gelbspan's investigation is well

written and fast paced and that would

the biggest story of our lifetime.

Root causes of modern jihadism



writes from Madrid

OW that the initial anger aroused by the July 2005 bombings in London has to some extent subsided, time has come for us to analyse these attacks in a manner as cool-headed and dispassionate as possible.

My heart bleeds in sympathy and solidarity with the innocent victims. It would be easy here, simply to brand the attackers as lunatic Jihadists or fanatic purveyors of an "evil ideology" who are hell-bent on destroying the Western "way of life" without any reason whatsoever. Some in the West feel that they have "moral clarity" therefore, they must wage a "crusade" to destroy these forces of "evil." It is, in my opinion, a simplistic way of looking at a complex issue. At best, this attitude is tantamount to hiding one's head under the sand. In order to deal with the problem properly, it is necessary to go beyond the rhetoric and examine the root causes of this form of

According to Prof. Ayoob of Michigan State University, the United States currently occupies an enormously "privileged position in economic and security arenas" and wants to retain this position "by concentrating wealth in the global North, controlling access to strategic resources, and retaining a global military advantage."

Through the Security Council, the IMF, the Word Bank, and now increasingly the G-8, the US controls all major

LETTER FROM EUROPE My heart bleeds for the innocent victims of London, but I must add that I also grieve for

the far more numerous deaths caused by Western interventions in Muslim countries apparently to "spread democracy." I find both methods equally reprehensible. Now that the US has come to realise the limits of its military power, perhaps it should look at other options to deal with the jihadist problem, for example, start redressing some of the Muslim grievances.

political and economic affairs of the world. In military matters, "the US accounted for nearly half of the world's total military expenditure in 2003" (Stockholm International Research Institute). Technologically, it is also the most advanced country in the world. Although it does not militarily occupy and rule distant lands like the former European colonial powers, it uses its vast military and economic power to exercise hegemonic control over most of the globe. It has truly become a world empire.

In order to reach this hegemonic position and then to maintain it, the US has set up military bases around the world, deployed hundreds of thousands of troops, stationed powerful fleets in the seas, engineered coups, changed regimes, invaded countries, set up puppet governments, and even launched pre-emptive wars. And who have been the victims of this policy? The answer to this question is clear -among others, the Muslim countries of the world, because of their natural resources and strategic positions.

No wonder, American interventions, coming after centuries of European colonial rule over most of the Muslim world, which caused untold suffering to millions, entailed economic exploitation on a massive scale, and led to cultural and political subiugation of many nations, is perceived as a continuation of the West's long onslaught against Islam. This policy has created a pervasive sense of

injustice, humiliation, and outrage

This sense of humiliation has been further aggravated by unconditional American military and economic support for Israel, its actions in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other secret torture centres, and the desecration of the Koran by its military. Hence the birth of a global political movement called Al Qaedaism or modern Jihadism, whose principal aim is to break the West's stranglehold on the Muslim world. For this, it wants the destruction of the apostate regimes and the withdrawal of all Western combat troops from these areas. This movement is focused passionately on Muslim suffering at Western hands.

The followers of this movement (the lihadists) do not consider the attacks in London as terrorist acts. They argue that they are waging a war against a technologically superior enemy. Since they do not have the capacity to confront the enemy militarily they must resort to guerrilla tactics. And for this cause they are prepared to sacrifice their lives as suicide bombers, which method is generally considered immoral in the West. However, the jihadists point out that from a moral point of view, invading countries and killing civilians is equally wrong, if not more. When they are reproached for deaths of innocent victims caused by their activities in

Madrid and London, they mention the

names of Falluya, Navaf, Kaim, Yenin,

Tal Afar, and so many other places What is even more awful is the West's apparent lack of concern for these deaths, John Slodova, an author of a recently published report on the Iraq war, said recently in London, "It remains a matter of gravest concern that nearly two and a half years on, neither the US nor the UK governments have begun systematically to measure the impact of their actions in terms of lives destroyed." I started this article by saying that my heart bleeds for the innocent victims of London, but I must add that I also grieve for the far more numerous deaths caused by Western interventions in Muslim countries apparently to "spread democracy." I find both methods equally reprehensible

In the Muslim world, there is much scepticism about Western democracy, which preaches human rights and rule of law yet returns Bush and Blair to power in general elections, who in the opinion of many Muslims are the greatest violators of these principles. According to them, the Western concept of democracy lacks international justice, and is based on hypocrisy and double standards.

Now that the US has come to realise the limits of its military power, perhaps it should look at other options to deal with the jihadist problem, for example start redressing some of the Muslim

The author is a Daily Star columnist

The road to ecological Armageddon

RON CHEPESIUK

THE Bush administration may be in denial about global warming, but people who believe that it is the single most urgent threat to mankind's survival will find plenty of ammunition in this wellresearched investigation. But what make Ross Gelbspan's book explosive is his charge: everyone involved with the issue of global warningfrom the oil industry lobbyists to the politicians, journalists, and even ardent environmentalistsare responsible for

Gelbspan is no irresponsible doomsayer. He is a long-time editor and reporter, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and the author of one other respected book on climate change: The Heat is On. He also covered the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the World Economic Forum at Dayos in 1998.

Gelbspan has used his background and reportorial skills to put together a body of evidence that documents how doing nothing about climate change is putting us on the road to catastrophe. Consider these chilling developments discussed in Boiling Point

Scientists have found that since the year 1000, the decade of the 1990s was the hottest in history. Indeed, 1998 was the hottest in the last 1,000 years!

Climatologists reveal that climate warming was progressing at the rate of one degree centigrade per century, but that rate began changing in the mid 1970s when research showed that the warming rate had increased to about three degrees centigrade.

In 2001, researchers found that the

world's oceans had warmed by about one-tenth of a degree centigrade to a depth of almost two miles in the last five years. Gelbspan quotes one of the researchers, the distinguished Sydney Levitus of the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, as noting, "I believe our results represent the strongest evidence to date that the Earth's climate system is responding



skeptics "criminals against humanity."

Boiling Point: How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists and Activists are Fueling the Climate Crisis

Ross Gelbspan

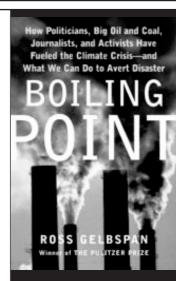
Basic Books (2004) Pps. 254, \$22

now know for a fact that the Arctic has thinned dramatically over the past two decades. In 1980, an Arctic ice shelf was 150 feet thick. By 2003, the same ice shelf had thinned to less than half that depth. This is chilling information, indeed

to human-induced forcing." Scientists

but if we are headed to ecological Armageddon, climate-wise, why have so many otherwise rationale human beings adamantly maintain that global warning is a figment of the treehugging lobby's imagination.

First, Gelbspan fingers the expected suspects. Not only is the fossil fuel industry financing the climate change skeptics, it is also directing the Bush administration's climate policies as a reward for backing Republican elections bids. Exxon Mobil alone is giving \$1 million annually to the Competitive Enterprise Institute, The Frontiers of Freedom and other climate change



In reading this book, it becomes a no-brainer figuring out why the US has stonewalled

on the Kyoto Protocol and other environmental initiatives. Gelbspan labels the

donated \$3.8 million to the presidential elections, which was three times the 1996 contributions. About 88 percent of it went to Republicans.

In reading this book, it becomes a no-brainer figuring out why the US has stonewalled on the Kyoto Protocol and other environmental initiatives. Gelbspan labels the skeptics "criminals against humanity." But equally criminal, as Gelbspan points out, is the way the media has handled the climate change issue. As the author explains: " The US press has basically played the role of unwitting accomplice consistently minimising the story, if not burying it from the public altogether." Most scientists write clearly, Gelbspan notes, but many journalists are lazy, and tend to shy away from perusing articles appearing in the scientific peer-reviewed literature, the primary and most valuable source of climate

skeptics. In 2000, the coal industry

be reason enough to read this book. But the author also offers a concrete

plan to avert the catastrophe. First, he dissects the three major plans put forth in the past several years: Contraction and Conversion (C and C), Sky Trust, and the Apollo Project. Gelbspan's conclusion: "None of them would really limit the political stranglehold of the fossil fuel lobby on our political system-and none would propel the industry into the kind of transformation that a sustainable future

He touts the World Energy Modernisation Plan, which is designed to cut carbon emissions by 70 percent while creating millions of jobs worldwide. Read this timely book to find out the plan's details and how we can save the planet. As noted scientist Paul Ehrlich wrote in assessing Boiling Point's merit: "While the facts in this splendid book are terrifying, the opportunity it reveals is truly thrilling."

Daily Star columnist Ron Chepesiuk is a Visiting Professor at Chittagong University and Research ociate with the National Defence College.