

Critical Muslim
Article by Mothiur Rahman
Bringing a Sufi and Islamic presence to Extinction Rebellion

“Are you doing ok, do you need anything?” I asked the lady whose hand was glued to the entrance of the Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. “I’m doing fine” she replied with a smile. A person below her, locked on to another person and lying on the ground to block the revolving door entrance, needed a pillow. I had a few to hand, being part of the “wellbeing” group of Extinction Rebellion on this day of action leading towards “Rebellion Day” on 17 November. The two dozen or so people super-glued to the doors and lying in front of the BEIS office were wanting to bring wider attention to the climate emergency we are collectively facing and bring social momentum to get the UK government to declare an ecological emergency and put in place measures consistent with that emergency.

Through a downpour we brought out umbrellas and sang songs together and made up chants to keep warm. It was quiet as the police held back, watching but not arresting anyone until suddenly there was an eruption of cheering as one of the initiators of Extinction Rebellion, Gail Bradbrook, clambered above the revolving doors to spray paint a message against fracking and the symbol for the movement (with a chalk based paint that washes off). As the police dashed over to crowd around the entrance, a lively energy suddenly took over those protesting as a bunch then dashed over from lying down by the building (not being arrested), to lying down on the road to sit and block it. The cheering got louder. It was getting late but now the arrests began.

This is what the Extinction Rebellion (or “XR”) protestors had been wanting to happen from the beginning of the day, prepared to face arrest and possible prison in order to bring media and civil society attention to the reality of climate collapse happening within the lifetime of children now growing up. The makeup of those protesting does not fit in with the usual suspects for climate change protest. Erika, Jess and Ros are all in my local Cornwall XR group. Erika is a grandmother of three and said she “feels terrified for [her] grandchildren’s future. How can I die without doing my best to turn things round over the next few years?” Jess agreed and said “I am not an extremist or an anarchist or someone who seeks civil disorder. I am someone who cares and a mum. I don’t want my 2 beautiful children or their children to look back and think I did nothing. I have come to the conclusion that this peaceful action is essential.” Rosalind was one of those arrested and said she was willing to be arrested because “this is the issue of our time, the issue perhaps at the end of our time and I believe this is the only way left to us to achieve real change.”

“Black Swan events” are those outlier events which, despite the best predictions of pundits in the know, happen by seeming chance and can change society. Black swan events have been happening a lot recently like the Brexit referendum and Trump’s rise to power, leading to visible shifts in the cultural discourse over power, democracy, and the linking of Islamophobia to immigration. These events hit the public world and media as if out of

nowhere, taking it by surprise and leaving it to scramble for experts to give some kind of reasonable answer to help it retain a sense of control over being able to predict the future course of events.

The way that Extinction Rebellion so quickly catalysed into action so many people across diverse places, ages, classes and professions, to join its call to civil disobedience for the first and second “Rebellion Days” on November 17th and 24th, makes me wonder whether Rebellion Day will in the future be recognized as a black swan event, shaping a civil society movement as its message takes root and spreads across diverse geographies and generations? Some predict it will be like other protest movements and die out, the status quo left to deal with its own paralysis over events like Brexit and Trump and the turn towards authoritarian politics. However, black swan events have the kind of energy that defies predictions.

Some of you may be wondering, who and what is Extinction Rebellion and what is the muslim connection to all of this talk about black swans? With the blessing of one of the founders of Extinction Rebellion I have set up a Facebook group called XR Muslims, the link is available below. I am drawn to the idea of an inclusive positive narrative for Islam away from the habitual defensive position being adopted due to the increase of negative attention muslims are facing. This article sets out a framework for what that positive story could be, with the hope that many more muslims might feel called to join or initiate XR local groups in their area and join the XR Muslims Facebook group to help co-create that positive story together.

What is Extinction Rebellion?

Extinction Rebellion’s message, and the need driving it, is this: time has almost entirely run out to address the ecological crisis of runaway climate change and mass extinctions that will follow that. A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that, under best estimates, we have only 12 years from now to take drastic action to ensure global temperatures do not go over an increase of 1.5 degrees since pre-industrial levels. We have already reached a 1 degree increase in warmth and, said Panmao Zhai one of the co-chairs of the IPCC Working Group, “one of the key messages that comes out very strongly from this report is that we are already seeing the consequences of 1°C of global warming through more extreme weather, rising sea levels and diminishing Arctic sea ice, among other changes.”

In a [letter](#) signed up to by 96 academics, politicians and other leaders (including Dr Rowan Williams as moral leader through his position as ex-Archbishop of Canterbury) a challenge was made to any further governmental prevarication given the short timescales to make unprecedented changes at a political and economical level: “we will not tolerate the failure of this or any other government to take robust and emergency action in respect of the worsening ecological crises. The science is clear, the facts are incontrovertible, and it is unconscionable to us that our children and grandchildren should have to bear the terrifying brunt of an unprecedented disaster of our own making.”

There are 3 demands Extinction Rebellion makes:

- The Government must tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens.
- The Government must enact legally binding policy measures to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 and to reduce consumption levels.
- A national Citizens' Assembly to oversee the changes, as part of creating a democracy fit for purpose.

Why I am involved with Extinction Rebellion

As a lawyer working with a number of communities resisting fracking, Extinction Rebellion to me feels like an eruption out of what has been troubling many residents over a number of years in the background. In 2013 I was supporting Falkirk communities in Scotland resist coalbed methane extraction and one of the first questions to me by a resident was, “why is the law not protecting us?”. These were ordinary citizens who wanted to lead lives as good responsible citizens but were beginning to question matters that previously had been the remit of activists.

Thus, to me Extinction Rebellion is not only a collective manifestation of an impending fear of climate collapse in the near future, but also of a realization that the political and technocratic status quo liberal order is showing itself incapable of responding in a meaningful way to such looming crises within the timescales needed. By paying only lip service to the values it ascribes to itself, it is arguable the liberal western order has hollowed itself out, its values no longer holding sufficient substance and traction in wider society to prevent the rise of Trump and the turn towards authoritarian politics. Extinction Rebellion to me represents our collective existential struggle as civil society attempting to remake itself and take ownership over our responsibility to future generations, to institutionalise a culture of climate collapse adaptation at a meaningful societal level.

However, there are many experts in the field who think that the system of capitalist economics and governance we have collectively created has too much momentum to change direction in the short window available to avoid climate collapse. Jorgen Randers, a professor emeritus of climate strategy at the BI Norwegian Business School believes global society does not have the capacity to “rise to the occasion of solving the climate problem during this century, simply because it is more expensive in the short term to solve the problem than it is to just keep acting as usual”. This view is similar to social scientist Professor Donald McKay, whose research on previous civilizational collapses points out that the common barrier to transformational change was not that the means weren’t available to make the changes nor that the need to make them weren’t known at the time, but it was because the short-term interests of those who hold power and have an interest in holding onto power (what he calls “oligarchical authorities”) are radically different to the long-term interests of society.

However, through my work with communities, I have begun to feel another site of agency and power to those of corporations (which Jorgen Randers focuses on) and those with power through state or “oligarchical” authority that Donald McKay speaks of. That is the

power of civil society when it collectivises itself to claim necessary rights when the need for such rights becomes great enough, such as happened during the civil rights movement in the US or, later back still in English memory, the Charter of the Forest in 1217 (see link to article below on Community Charters). Thus, civic-orientated action could be a counter-movement to forces that maintain the status quo of market capitalist economics.

However, the kind of “civic-orientated thinking” needed to really galvanise such action is unfortunately dissipated in modern western society, or so argues journalist Martin Lukacs, as the “result of an ideological war [...] against the possibility of collective action ... Neoliberalism has not merely ensured the agenda [of climate change demands] is politically unrealistic: it has also tried to make it culturally unthinkable. Its celebration of competitive self-interest and hyper-individualism, its stigmatization of compassion and solidarity, has frayed our collective bonds.”

So, from where is to come this power of civic-orientated collective conscience? Extinction Rebellion has started that call with direct action networked into communities criss-crossing the country, with groups forming in local distinct geographies connected to their place and united by a form of “life orientated thinking” contrasting with the market-orientated thinking which governs much of our current public life. But it may need more than this, in order to make the “quantum leap” through the cultural resistance that the neoliberal project has engendered in terms of what a collective conscience means.

This is where muslims brought up in the west could bring something needed for climate change demands to spread to wider civil society. My re-encounter with Islam through sufism has begun to show that, sourced from outside western hegemonic values (as to which see below), Islam is rooted in a conscience that is collective in spirit as opposed to individualistic and, secondly, benefits from not dividing reason from emotion in the same way that western thinking has. Rather, as I am beginning to understand from a sufi lens, the attributes of attention, will and reason are applied to one’s emotional states (or nafs) in order to open one’s heart to experience the underlying unity of reality.

I explain below something of my journey towards a re-encounter of Islam towards this radically different vision to the one I was brought up with as a child. It has not been an easy journey through the thorny bushes of my own judgments shaped through childhood experiences, as well as those now being provided through media channels.

Re-encountering Islam

Probably like with many others of ethnic backgrounds that have made their way into English and British culture more recently than the Normans, the way in which Brexit and Trump’s rise to power have dragged along with them a heightened consciousness around immigration and terrorism made me begin to question and explore some of my core stories around identity, in my case my habitual response to my Bengali and Islamic upbringing.

The habitual response that formed part of my core identity was one of shrugging off both my Bengali and Islamic heritage as somehow “inferior” to the qualities of truth, justice and equality bound up in the project of western modernity that so caught my imagination when

I began learning about it at school. However, a number of experiences over the last few years began to make me question whether there is now anything of substance behind these words in terms of how life is actually being encountered by the everyday person. The Brexit decision to separate the UK out of the European Union brought a visceral feeling in my body of fear, making me become conscious again of my colour as a point of difference, something that had more or less submerged itself after childhood. However, change is a necessary part of democracy I told myself and perhaps it would not be as bad as that first visceral feeling in the pit of my stomach made me fear.

Yet, whilst trying to get used to the changed experience of my identity as a consequence of democracy playing out its course, it was difficult not to start feeling that some politicians were showing moral duplicity in their conduct towards Brexit and using it as a means to personal goals for garnering power rather than in service to the people they governed. Coincidentally at around this time, Radio 4 was celebrating the 70th anniversary of the partition of India with programmes explaining some of that history. It was on one of these programmes that I learnt that the Boundary Commissioner tasked with drawing the partition line between India and Pakistan (a line that had the consequences of forming the roots of my identity through my parents who were then born into what became East Pakistan) had never even been to India before drawing the line. The lack of care this seemed to imply by government over those who would be most impacted by that line astounded me. Something began to crack inside me, my faith in the western modernist project as the only way to truth and justice. The following poem was something I wrote to unfold the feelings swirling inside me.

UnBeing Me

My mother told me I was a good muslim boy
that was a lie from her.
My teachers made me believe I had no colour
that was a lie from them.

So I saw no colour
painting myself out of existence.
That was a lie from me.

Who, then, am I?
I am not a terrorist.
I am not Bangla.
I am not Muslim.
I am neither Christian
Hindu nor you.

I am just me.
Britain is breaking
creaking under the weight
of lie on lie untold
generation on generation.

I am neither English
nor Welsh
Scottish nor Irish.

So do it then
explode me
tear me to bits
throw me to the hounds
till chewed and digested

I can become
something I never was.

When something cracks, there is the potential for new life to come through the cracks. The shoots of that life have come to me as a transforming sense of what Islam is about, which has for me begun to help shape a new conscience of truth and justice integrated with this perspective. Whilst for most of my life I have had this undercurrent feeling of a sense of shame to my Islamic heritage, that did not mean the longing for a more spiritually centred way of being in the world left me. I explored earth-centred and Buddhist perspectives through self-development workshops and courses and, as Brexit began to burst its way into British life, I was happening to be reading a book by Pema Chodron, a Buddhist monk, called "The Places that Scare You". I found it gave a way to meaningfully encounter difficult emotions arising in me through Brexit and, as the core elements of my constructed identity began cracking, to become conscious of what I was resisting as a fertile place of learning.

My first meaningful experience with a mosque from this new perspective came on "visit a mosque" day in 2017. I belong to a group called "Wild Monastics", run by Rev. Sam Wernham in Dartington where I was living then, to explore what contemporary contemplative practice could look like in everyday life. She invited me to go along with her to the Plymouth Mosque on visit a mosque day and my instinctive response was to decline, but as I turned away I felt such strong emotions I wondered whether these were the kinds of feelings that Pema Chodron had been giving guidance about for exploration. It was only due to my desire to explore through Pema Chodron's guidance that I decided to go to the Plymouth Mosque. I was so surprised by how different my adult experience was of the mosque from everything I was projecting onto it through my childhood experiences that I felt it worth exploring further. When I explained this to Rev. Sam Wernham she said that she had had a similar tussle and struggle with Christianity, that she had spent many years running as far away from Christianity as possible, becoming involved with paganism and Buddhism until something pulled her back, to see whether what she longed for in those far distant faiths could also be found deep down in the roots of the Christian western mystical tradition that she had been born to. This parallel story gave me the curiosity to want to explore further whether there were rooted elements to the Islamic faith that could speak to me as an adult.

The Threshold Society

My explorations led me to a book by Kabir Helminski, a Sufi sheikh of the Mevlevi Order, called “The Sufi Path to Mindfulness and the Essential Self”. I was drawn to the book because Kabir was a living person one could question, also because it came with a living tradition called “The Threshold Society” with a gathering every summer in the UK, and because my Buddhist leanings made mindfulness a concept I could understand and follow. However, what drew me the most was something written in the first few pages of the book. It spoke about “will” as an attribute leading to an awareness of God, something that I had not associated with Islam before. I had been brought up to hear the words “inshallah” at the end of most sentences (Allah/God willing) and understood that the word Islam meant “submission” (which my Islamic teachers as a child seemed to take to mean submission before their will). Such narrow experiences and understanding meant I had grown up with a feeling that Islam meant accepting what I was told, in conflict with the freedom that made me feel alive. I went to the Threshold summer gathering and managed to find a moment or two to ask Kabir, how did he square human will with the concept of submission in Islam? He did not give me a black and white answer which I liked, but opened up for me an exploration for myself as to how human will can lead one to be able to be conscious of one’s state of attention and that, by travelling along that path, there can come a place where will gives way to surrender. Another of the Threshold teachers, Mahmoud, told me that both reason and will were central to the Islamic and Sufi traditions, leading towards the attribute called Al Haq, truth or reality. I have only begun the first few steps of this journey back towards a re-encounter with Islam through sufism, something which I am finding is a rich unfolding. Below is a poem I wrote as I began these first steps, called “Munajaat” after I came across this word for a Sufi practice in an [article](#) written by Mahmoud on Patheos, a Sufi practice that explains the journey towards truth not in terms of a debate, but like “a secret discourse between lovers”.

Munajaat

Who are you my Islam?
I have seen you only
in borrowed clothes?

Will you undress before me
reveal to me your form?

I hear you breathing
how do I cleave myself
to your warmth?

They call you surrender,
commander of submission -
only – close like this to you –

you call forth humility
from this breath of mine.

What can Muslims contribute towards Extinction Rebellion?

Extinction Rebellion for me is a movement that is being built from a willingness to face the fear and grief of what all the science is pointing towards, in terms of the likelihood of civilizational crises from climate collapse and, from having the imaginative capacity to bring into the present moment before it has happened the intenseness of the suffering of people and animals in a future world of climate collapse and species extinction, to feel the moment alive and pregnant with the intensity of the potential to change course through actions we collectively take now.

The Extinction Rebellion Declaration has had many hands contributing to its development as a document co-created democratically. I feel it encapsulates both the grief and determination of the moment well. Some small suggestions I made were to help try evoke a lineage with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1947) which states at Article 1 that human beings are endowed with reason and conscience as fundamental qualities. It should not be forgotten that that historic document arose out of a world-wide recognition of the need to make meaning out of the intense suffering of people through two world wars and the deaths of millions of people. It was a document that made meaning out of the lived experience of grief and love of those times. Extinction Rebellion has made its Declaration in the hope that we can now use both our reason and our conscience to guide us away from taking us to “tipping points” in temperature change which, if reached, will then be too late to turn back from leading to far worse catastrophe than those two world wars.

These two qualities of reason and conscience are what all the nations of this world were able to agree to in 1947, as fundamental qualities or attributes to being human. It seems to me that many of the spiritual qualities that Kabir and Mahmoud have written or spoken about as being fundamental to the sufi path could be embraced by this word “conscience”, particularly the concept of “raab” which Mahmoud explains in his article as a quality of relationship to our hearts which leads us towards the truth of reality as is. However, like in a squabble between lovers, what can get in our way is the quality of consciousness we give to our emotions. Crucially, Sufism does not say emotions are something to be avoided in order for reason to hold sway, rather that we use our reason to help us navigate our way through our negative emotional states (or nafs) towards seeing the unity of love that is the reality that is.

In a recent Guardian article which interviews Hilary Clinton and Tony Blair entitled “[why we lost and how to fight back](#)”, like many others of the status quo liberal order trying to gain control back over what it lost, there is a confusion and distaste in their reaction towards modern politics which, it is said, follows emotion rather than reasoned debate. Hilary Clinton is quoted as saying, “there is this tension – I don’t fully understand it, I think it’s as much psychological, maybe more than political – as to what people are yearning for.”. Whilst I would agree with one of the article’s conclusion that “detailed, reasoned arguments stand little chance against the antics of the populist”, it feels to me that Islam might have something positive to offer to help provide a third way out of this conundrum of reason v emotion, one arising out of its spiritual conscience that is also a civic and collective conscience that has perhaps not such an ancestral divide between reason and emotion that drives western epistemology.

In an email exchange with Gail Bradbrook, I asked if she would set up a XR Muslim group to help to begin to shape an inclusive and participatory muslim-focused contribution to the Extinction Rebellion movement. Buddhist and Christian groups have already taken action and Rowan Williams (ex Archbishop of Canterbury) has lent his moral and spiritual authority to the Extinction Rebellion call. Gail was delighted at the idea. Below are the questions I have initially posed, which draws together some of the threads of inquiry written about here.

- How can Islam give strength and a moral compass to the multiple extinctions being faced on our planet?

- Where is the legitimacy of an Islam born from western soils which say no more to the endless destruction and moral duplicity we see all around us, in Islamic and non-islamic governments?

- If the rise of Islamophobia is connected to people's fears around their future and ecological destruction, how can XR Muslims resist the alt-right demagogues whose desire for "power over" others is leading to separation, rather than unity in the face of these crises?

This is a space for muslims of all shades and shapes to meet with each other (including those who identify with muslim heritage but do not hold islamic belief) under the common shared goal of expressing our love and passion for the gift of life that is also the Reality of Being that is expressed in the Qu'ran and reflected too in other sources of moral and ethical belief.

Whether you are Hanafi, Salafi, Sufi, Shia, or Sunni, man woman or gender non-conforming, muslim or "Islamicate" (i.e. those of muslim heritage but without islamic belief themselves) this is an open inclusive space in service to the healing of our wounds in the service of life.

If you feel called to join the XR movement then you can join through a link on its website and find your nearest local XR group. Please also join the XR Muslim facebook group if you would like to contribute to co-creating a pluralist, inclusive positive Islamic contribution to Extinction Rebellion. As we join together we can discover new horizons to our capacities. Rosalind who was one of the arrestees said "my heart was blown open by the Extinction Rebellion movement and its been open ever since." I leave with a poem that is my prayer and vision for how we can stand strong and rooted in our rich and diverse identities without finding that a source of conflict but of joy and determination.

India's song to the West

Your ancestors saw a bird
and decided to dissect it
to understand it.

You did not do it

but you are not free from it.

My ancestors saw the arc
of a bird swooping in
over the width of a wide river,
marvelling at such beauty
singing songs ardent and sweet
to the rice harvest rhythms.

I do not feel it
but I am not free from it.

Let my ancestors meet your ancestors
in the love of that which is lost and
born in the dark shadow of our longing
let our young walk again in balance and beauty.

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