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## **Islamic Ethics for Sustainable Development and Developing Social Conscience: An Islamic Response to the Challenge of Ecology Today**

**Isham Pawan Ahmad\***

### **Abstract**

This paper aims at examining the issue of sustainable development and its ecological implications from religious perspectives. The author focuses on the importance of religious ethics, especially from the perspectives of divine religions such as the Abrahamic faiths, in offering viable solutions to those issues. He narrows the scope of discussion onto Islamic response to the challenges of ecology today and the role of Islamic Ethics in dealing with the issues. The author employs a qualitative methodology that covers critical and textual analyses on materials related to the issues. The research finds that the real problem of sustainable development and ecological issues lies in one of man's character traits—greed. Efforts to understand the concept of morality falls under the ambit of Islamic Ethics.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, development, environment, Islam, ethics, religion.

### **Introduction**

The world population has crossed the seven billion mark. Distribution and sustainability of earth resources has become the principal question confronting the survival of mankind and the planet itself today. Fairer distribution of resources and recycling is no longer a luxury but an absolute necessity. The question is how do we constraint man's baser instincts of greed and short-sightedness if the human race is to survive.

Man is the cause for devastation of nature. Man is also the solution to saving the planet, the only possible solution. Man pollutes the air, land and water, devastating nature. Human actively bulldoze wetlands and cut down forest. Overgrazing and groundwater pumping damage the land. Overgrazing is one cause of soil erosion, turning grassland into desert where soil is eroded and becomes harder for plants and trees to grow in that area.

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The scientific consensus is that the Earth's climate system is unequivocally warming, and that it is *extremely likely* (meaning 95% probability or higher) that this warming is predominantly caused by humans. It is likely that this mainly arises from increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, such as from deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels, partially offset by human caused increases in aerosols; natural changes had little effect.<sup>1</sup>

### **Islam and Nature**

Muslims form at least one fifth of the human community and those of their activities that contribute to the harming of the planet must now be re-evaluated, its future direction redirected and their contributions must be directed to not harm and to save the earthly home.<sup>2</sup>

Even with the additional increase of human population on earth making greater demands on the planet limited resources, it still seems to be able to meet human needs but certainly not human greed. The question is how do we constraint man's baser instincts of greed and short-sightedness has become the key to the survival of the human race. Fairer distribution of limited resources and recycling is no longer a luxury but an absolute necessity we cannot live without.

### **Influence of Religion in General**

Religion historically has had positive influence to curb and constraint man's excessive, turning man from thinking only of his immediate wants to think of the morrow, from himself to communal needs. However to be an effective force, religious understandings and teachings must go beyond formalist ritualization, instead transcend, learning how religious worldviews inform, shape and influence men and thus shape their interaction with the world they live in.

### **Islamic Worldview on Nature**

The Islamic contribution and response to the challenge of sustainability of Nature is to make man stewards and thus responsible for the well-being of the earth. The earth had been created as a place for man to develop through overcoming his trials and tribulation, thus, learning, improving and developing virtues. This relationship of man to nature is

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<sup>1</sup> Bianca Nogrady, Can business save the world from climate change?, Tuesday, September 5, 2017. <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/can-business-save-world-climate-change>

<sup>2</sup> Eco-Islam pioneer: 'Every single thing we do affects others';

<http://www.dw.com/en/eco-islam-pioneer-every-single-thing-we-do-affects-others/a-16714734>

symbiotic. Man needs the earth not only for his immediate physical needs but more importantly to develop his spirit and soul. However, man because of his unconscionable greed has harmed the earth almost beyond repair must draw again and again on religion to restraint man short sightedness and thus save the earth from him and affirmed the rights of future generation upon men of today. Therefore, saving the earth is saving one's self, and saving one's children and their right to breathe clean air and drink clean water.

The current dire condition nature is cause by man. Climate change is a man-made phenomenon. Thus it will require man's ingenuity, compassion and concern enough to change his harmful lifestyle choices and instead seek ways and means to survive in sustainable manner in harmony with the planet.<sup>1</sup>

Raghu Murtugudde analysis of the problem is accurate but in her conclusion that man is the problem but he alone is the solution. He needs to add not only must change his harmful lifestyle but more importantly exercise self-restraint and expunge his harmful, wasteful and selfish lifestyle. Instead, man should seek to live in harmony with the planet always with one eye for the rights of the future generations.

### **Islam and Nature**

The relation of man and nature in Islam is symbiotic. The World or Nature had been created by God for man and thus like all of God's creations it has a beginning and an end but more importantly, a purpose. Not only is the world dependent for its existence on God but also its continuous functioning order. Thus, nature is created not in chaos but with an orderly manner that man can comprehend and thus utilize to man's benefit since nature is created for him.

The Qur'ān makes a clear and distinct difference between the Creator and the creation. God created the world. Thus, the world has a beginning and it will have an inevitable end necessary to demonstrate its dependence on God and in order to fulfil its ultimate purpose to educate man. The Qur'ān says, "It is He who has created all that is on earth for

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<sup>1</sup> Raghu Murtugudde, Who Will Save Earth? The Ingenious Human Mind (Op-Ed). University of Maryland. <https://www.livescience.com/47119-humans-can-figure-out-climate-solutions.html>



you (man) [or: has created what is in the earth for you]]”<sup>1</sup>

That the world is created and has a beginning is a fundamental concept in Islam. This is because the world is not an end in itself but rather its serve not only as a sign of its Creator but also as the place and means to serve and develop man. The Qur’ān states that that entire God decides to create comes into existence by His conscious choice<sup>2</sup> and sheer will. Similar to the biblical command for creation, “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.”<sup>3</sup> The Qur’ān states the same formula, “The Originator is He of the heavens and the earth: and when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, “Be” - and it is.”<sup>4</sup>

There a a clear distinction between the Creator and His creation. The Creator is infinite and has no limitation. However, everything else, creation comes to existence and thus owes its existence to God, but every creation is finite, limited instil in it innate potentialities never able to transcend its bound. Fazlur Rahman defines the distinction between Creator and creation as:

The most fundamental disparity between God and His creation is that, whereas God is infinite and absolute, every creature is finite. All things have potentiality, but no amount of potentiality may allow what is finite to transcend its finitude and pass into infinity .This is what the Qur’ān means when it says that everything except God is “measured out” (*qadar*, or *qadr*, *taqdīr*, etc) and hence dependent of God, and that whenever a creature claims complete self-sufficiency or independence (*instighna*, *istikbar*), it thus claims infinitude and a share of the divinity (*shirk*).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur’ān, 2:29.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to the controversy of the emanation theory espoused by Plotinus which was later adopted and modified by the Muslim Philosophers and others. Plotinus’ emanation theory can be interpreted in two ways. One that everything overflow from God by necessity of His Goodness, therefore not by conscious choice or the other by His conscious choice even though, the world was not created in time. Refer to Bello, I.A. (1989) *The Medieval Islamic Controversy Between Philosophy and Orthodoxy, Islamic Philosophy and Theology Texts and Studies* vol. III, Leiden: Brill and Goodman; L.E. and Goodman, M.J. (1983) 'Creation and Evolution: Another Round in an Ancient Struggle', *Zygon* 18 (1): 3-43.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 1:13.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Qur’ān, 2:117.

<sup>5</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999) p.67.

Thus, the distinction between the Creator and creation is absolute. God is infinite, absolute and independent. Nature and man is finite, created and dependent on God not only to come into existence but also for continued existence. Creation's absolute independence is mere illusory.

God creates everything and also puts in it, creation innate limitations, potential and laws of behaviour. Thus in all created things has a potential and are in still into it a manner or law of behaviour.

"Who, now, is this Sustainer of you two, O Moses?" He replied: "Our Sustainer is He who gives unto everything [that exists] its true nature and form and thereupon guides it [towards its fulfilment]." <sup>1</sup>

These powers or laws of behaviour which guide, command and measure all of creation's functions and actions makes creation work in orderly manner. Thus, of creation obeys God by necessity without choice or volition except for man which God had given choice. Therefore, the Qur'ān regards the whole universe as "Muslim," because everything therein has surrendered itself on to God's will.

Do they seek, perchance, a faith other than in God, although it is unto Him that whatever is in the heavens and on earth surrenders itself, willingly or unwillingly, since unto Him all must return." <sup>2</sup>

Not only that, all creation submit to God's will but their very existence glorifies God.

"ALL THAT IS in the heavens and on earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise." <sup>3</sup>

Nature's stability and regularity of natural phenomena are stressed in the Qur'ān to demonstrate God's greatness.

"He it is who has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with [an inner] truth. He causes the night to flow into the day; and causes the day to flow into the night; and He has made the sun and the moon

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur'ān, 20:50.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'ān, 3:83.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qur'ān, 57:1.

subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a term set [by Him].”<sup>1</sup>

Such verses that show the regularity of how nature works and is orderly appears throughout the Qur’ān in numerous verses. Not only does God create nature to follow a regular pattern or order, but nature is ordered in such a way that man can understand and comprehend how it works which is necessary in order for man to utilize nature for his use and benefit. Thus, man is asked to observe nature and not only see its magnificence and glory but to look for patterns on how nature behaves so he can learn not only of the glory of its Creator but how God has created the world as a mercy and benefit for mankind.

Because nature is created not in chaos but in an orderly manner, it works as a “gigantic machine, the universe, with all its causal processes, is the prime “sign” (*aya*) or proof of its Maker.”<sup>2</sup> God had made the world subservient to man. Not only has God made universe in an orderly manner but gave the world such a nature that man can comprehend how it works and be able to utilize it for his benefit.

“ARE YOU NOT aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, both outward and inward.”<sup>3</sup>

Because it is created in orderly manner thus, any man who makes the effort can understand nature. Therefore, all and anyone, believer or not can comprehend how nature works. Thus, because of this, some may think that nature is autonomous and is independent because it behaves the same way for either believer or non-believer.

Fazlur Rahman aptly summarizes the Qur’ānic view on nature and its order.

“People belittle or ignore or rebel against God, because the view the process of nature having self -sufficient causes, normally regarded by them as ultimate. They do not realize that the universe is a sign pointing to something “beyond” itself, something without which the universe, with all its natural causes, would be and could be nothing.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur’ān 39:5

<sup>2</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, (Kuala Lumpur: IBT, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qur’ān 31:20.

<sup>4</sup> *Major Themes*, p.69.

Instead of the orderliness of nature pointing to and proving an external creator who organizes the world, instead many mistake the orderliness as nature having organizes itself, as having self-sufficient causes, even calling it as sentient being like mother nature.<sup>1</sup>

The contradiction however, is that men do not take the ordered universe to be a sign or miracle of God but instead it is when interruption or suppressions of natural processes happen that all men find miracle of God or seek God. It is in the violent actions of nature such as storms, hurricanes, earthquakes, that causes all men to seek console and respite in God. Fazlur Rahman says;

The first problem is people do not take the ordered universe to be a sign or miracle at all, but rather look for the interruption or suppressions of natural processes in order to find miracle of God. Secondly, and far more importantly, the universe as a sign vanishes into nothing when "put besides" God, for besides God there is nothing at all has any inherent warrant to exist. That the earth supports people and does not sink, and the heavens holding this immense space do not shred is itself a miracle and all the verses that speak of the heavens and earth having been firmly built and well-knit. Indeed, there could have just been empty nothingness instead of this plenitude of being, pure inanity instead of this richness of existence except for the primordial act of God's mercy.<sup>2</sup>

The orderliness shown not be misconstrued to prove that nature is independent or autonomous, but nature is integral, a unity because it is created and organized by One being. When nature acts in a chaotic manner producing hurricanes, storms, earth-quake etc., nature is also acting in an orderly manner because it is reacting to climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> Mother Nature (sometimes known as Mother Earth or the Earth-Mother) is a common personification of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature by embodying it, in the form of the mother. "Natura", and the personification of Mother Nature, was widely popular in the Middle Ages. As a concept, seated between the properly divine and the human, it can be traced to Ancient Greece, though Earth (or "Eorthe" in the Old English period) may have been personified as a goddess. The Norse also had a goddess called Jord (or *Earth*).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother\\_Nature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Nature)

<sup>2</sup> *Major Themes*, 69.

### **Man and *Fiṭrah***

Although God's creation of man is like any other of God's creation since man is created from a natural creation, baked clay, however, his potential and abilities make him unique. When the angel protested to God against the creation of man because they protested that man will create mischief and will shed blood on earth. Instead of God disagreeing with the prognosis of the angels against man, God sets up a challenge, a competition to identify and define objects through naming them. The angels failed but man is able to name the objects because God had given him the ability for creative knowledge, the ability to discover new knowledge, thus making man superior in it.

This ability in knowledge of man is never in doubt in the Qur'ān, but what comes to question is their ethical slackness or moral irresponsibility. Thus, the Qur'ān holds man responsible to develop himself through making him responsible for his actions. In order to hold man to account, he must have freedom to choose. Thus, the Qur'ān acknowledges man ability and right to choose even if he chooses incorrectly.

So let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve; surely We have prepared for the iniquitous a fire.”<sup>1</sup>

Since man also regrets some of his actions, he must assume he could have done otherwise. He acts and behaves as if he has a choice. Since we praise and commend people who do good deeds and rebuke and censure those who do evil, we also must assume that these people had a choice in how they behave and therefore, have earn our praise or censure. Thus, the Qur'ān only condemns man because of his wrong actions.

They will cry out to them: Were we not with you? They shall say: Yes! but you caused yourselves to fall into temptation, and you waited and doubted, and vain desires deceived you till the threatened punishment of Allah came, while the arch deceiver deceived you about Allah.”<sup>2</sup>

However, God does not leave man alone without help or guidance. God's help or guidance comes through two means, man's primordial human disposition, *fiṭrah* and through the reminder of revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur'ān 18:9.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qur'an, 57:14.

“Surely We have shown him the way: he may be thankful or unthankful.”<sup>1</sup>

Even with God’s help and guidance, it is ultimately man who has to decide which way he wants to choose.

### Criticism

The Abrahamic faith including Islam has an anthropocosmic rather than an anthropocentric perspective. Could this be the reason that they have been accused of de-sacralizing nature and therefore, in a way depreciating it and making it devalued? It is true that Islam has instrumentalized nature to human ends, but this alone does not necessarily demean or harm nature in the end. Lynn White Jr. attacks religious anthropocentric views and accused it that it must bear the substantial burden for contemporary environmental crisis.

Historian Lynn White, Jr. first made the argument in a 1966 lecture before the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, subsequently published in the journal *Science*, that Western Christianity, having de-sacralized and instrumentalized nature to human ends, bears a substantial "burden of guilt" for the contemporary environmental crisis. White's essay stimulated a flurry of responses, ranging from defenses of Christianity to qualified admissions to complete agreement with his analysis.<sup>2</sup>

However, on closer examination, the religious anthropocentric view in the end is actually dependents on the earth. It is here on earth through the earthly trials and tribulations that man develops himself. Thus, man needs the environment as much as man is a part of the earthly environment. Therefore, the relationship is mutually beneficial or mutually destructive. Their destiny is mutually interdependent and mutually intertwined. Thus, man saving and working with the

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Qur’ān 76:3.

<sup>2</sup> Refer also to Lynn White’s book “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” (1967) linked ethos of medieval Christianity to the emergence of what White called an “exploitative” attitude toward nature in the Western world during the Middle Ages. Thus, in modern times we have the reference of man’s conquest of the nature when we say when Edmund Hillary climbed Mount Everest that he had conquered Everest, proving man’s dominance over nature.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_and\\_environmentalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_and_environmentalism).

environment saves himself and saves the rights of future generations, the rights of his children's children. The antropocosmic perspective is arguably incorporated into the Islamic religious anthropocentric perspective. Thus, the Islamic religious view does not devalue nature but rather makes nature an essential and necessary means to perfecting man. Therefore, it is supports and is clearly in line with the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development.<sup>1</sup>

Confucious tradititon adopt an antropocosmic perspective and argue for a self-generating, interconnected universe. This sense of holism is characterized by the view that there is no Creator God behind the universe. Chinese thought is less concerned with theories of origin or with concepts of a personal God than with the perception of an ongoing reality of a self-generating, interconnected universe described by Tu Weiming as a "continuity of being."

Although these two positons, antropocosmic and anthropocentric perspectives have serious theological differences but as far as how to treat the earth, how man needs the earth, here these differences dissipate and are minimal. Both are that the earth is essential for man survival and development, and therefore, the well being of the earth is important and arguably that sustainability must be part and parcel of both perspectives. The only clarification required after the accusation that this anthropocentric perspective de-sacralizes the earth and therefore, causes the earth to be depreciated is incorrect and misleading. Without the earth, the anthropocentric perspective of the ultimate aim of man could never be achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> Religion and Environmentalism;

In Judaism, the natural world plays a central role in Jewish law, literature, and liturgical and other practices. <sup>1</sup>Within the diverse arena of Jewish thought, beliefs vary widely about the human relation to the environment, though the rabbinic tradition has put Judaism primarily on an anthropocentric trajectory. However, a few contemporary Jewish thinkers and rabbis in the USA and Israel emphasized that a central belief in Judaism is that the Man (Ha Adam - האדם whose root comes from Haadama (earth) - האדמה, in Hebrew language), should keep the Earth in the same state as he received it from God, its eternal and actual "owner" (especially for the land of Israel), thus the people today should avoid polluting it and keep it clean for the future generations. According to this opinion, Judaism is clearly in line with the principles of environmental protection and sustainable development.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_and\\_environmentalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_and_environmentalism).

**Differences and Similarities between Islam and Confucianism on Nature**

Islam is a religion that claims its origin not with Muhammad but with the first man who is also the first prophet, Adam. The God that had created the world and had sent man down to the earth, had continuously sent man help and guidance in the form of prophets guided with divine revelation culminating with Muhammad. Man had been sent down to earth to be *khalifa*, stewards of the earth making him responsible for the earth in lieu of the earth giving him the opportunity to develop himself. Compared to Adam's life in Paradise, life on earth is difficult providing the necessary challenge and trials to enable man to develop himself and attain virtues. The earth and everything in it is created for man to use but not to abuse for the earth is a necessary place for man to become man although forever imperfect but improved by overcoming this earthly trials and tribulations. Thus for Muslims, the earth is not a place sent for punishment but rather for development. However difficult life on earth maybe, the experience is soul building. Because the earth is the necessary place for soul building, the earth itself must be used but never abuse. Man sees himself as part and parcel of the eco system. Thus, taking care and sustaining the planet is part and parcel of the Islamic teaching.

Confucianism on the other hand, does not rely on divine guidance instead places its *raison d'être* and foundation on family and social harmony, rather than on an otherworldly source for spiritual values. Confucianism regards the ordinary activities of human life and especially human relationships as characteristically sacred because they form the expressions of our moral nature that is in a way anchored in Heaven and an appropriate respect for the spirits or god.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the personal God of Islam, God or *Tiān* in Confucianism is primarily an *impersonal God more similar to the absolute principle*, like the *Dào* or the *Brahman*.

Both the origin and the worldviews of Islam and Confucianism are different. Islam's origin lies in the divine but its worldview is focus on the human earthly life which will develop and shape man's soul determining what he becomes and his fate in the afterlife.

On the contrary, Confucianism plants both feet firmly in this world. Its origin is not divine but is based on human relationships with its perfection in creating human order. God and heaven exist but plays a supporting role.

Both Islam and Confucianism place great importance in taking care of Nature. For the Muslims, they are caretakers, *khalīfah* (*stewards*) of the earth. Therefore taking care of the earth is a sacred

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<sup>1</sup> Adler. Joseph A. Confucianism as a Religious Tradition: Linguistic and Methodological Problem. [www2kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Stills%20Hazy%20Minzu.pdf](http://www2kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Stills%20Hazy%20Minzu.pdf)



duty because earthly life is essential for the development of the human soul. Thus, the relationship is symbiotic, man needing the earth and the earth needing a caretaker. For the Confucianism, man is part and parcel of the natural eco-system.

Although their worldviews are different, both their attitudes and response towards nature are positive that can be accredited and fashioned by their religious worldviews.

Does this mean that these two religious traditions actions and approaches towards nature are identical? No. However, could they possibly be similar. In fact, actually quite similar. Therefore, just because their origins and worldviews are different does not necessarily mean that they must behave differently. However, because their worldviews are different, they have different motivations and justification for behaving in this manner. Nonetheless, they act similarly. In this case, although both Islam and Confucianism have different perspectives, they come to agree on how important the sustainability of nature is.

### **The Current Abysmal Response to the Ecological Challenge**

Although the religious theories of both Islam and Confucianism response and interacts caringly with the ecology, it does not seem to translate into the actions and practices of its adherents. Why is this? Both Islam and Confucianism have had a recent revival, a reflowering of religious fervour with a growing interest in spiritual commitment and dedication of the faithful.<sup>1</sup> However, this religious revival remained at a spiritual and literal commitment to the faith rather than a more positive interaction with the greater society at large.<sup>2</sup> Thus the challenge to us is not just to regurgitate these beautiful religious platitudes in both the Qur'ān and the Analect but how to make expand the literal commitment of this religious fervour to translate into positive changes of how people live with each other and interact with the ecology. Religious scholars just simply observing to their own textual traditions is good but insufficient to solve this ecological disaster we are

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to the “The Fundamentalist Project” for the rise and relevance of religion on large number of peoples today. The Fundamentalism Project was an international scholarly investigation of conservative religious movements throughout the world, funded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The project began in 1987, directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, concluding in 1995.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170206-religion-can-make-us-more-environmentally-friendly-or-not/> “You might think that being religious would make you more likely to care about the natural world. But the truth is not so simple”

all headed towards. We need to make alive these positive religious text, see them in context of responsibility of human stewardship of a living planet and get these living interpretation of these living text to live , solve and transform the lives beginning with their followers but hopefully influencing and encompassing all. Lets rise to the challenge given by the Indonesian Muslim reformers call to “*Membumikan al-Qur’ān*”, to bring down the Qur’ānic teachings from the sky down to solve human and earthly problems.

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