

Celebrating Ecological and Cultural Diversity through Interfaith and Intersectional Climate Activism

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 June, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Fahimah Badrullisham

Trinity A; World Environment Day

Genesis 1:1-25; Matthew 28:16-20; Matthew 28:16-20;
Contemporary Reading from Catholic Priest and Ecologist, Thomas Berry

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Hi, I am a Muslim Australian and I am a Community Member of the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change. I was born in Malaysia in the late 80s, into a Malay Muslim family. We moved houses a fair bit, but with every home we had my parents put love and care into the garden, even though they knew we'd have to leave it all at the end of our tenancy. We always had trees and flowers as an essential part of our home. My dad grew up in a traditional Malay village and we were brought up to observe and enjoy the interconnectedness between the land and our lives - my grandma said this is *adat alam* - a Malay phrase that means this is the way of the natural world. It was basically permaculture before permaculture was a thing.

Understanding this interconnectedness or *tawheed* - Islamic philosophy calls it subtle heat between humans and the natural world - always came with an acknowledgement that everything comes from God's providence. *Allahu akbar* - God is great. Climbing trees to pluck fruit is all very well, but falling from a branch that cannot take one's weight seems like a good metaphor from my childhood. Nature provides, but if you are not respectful and if you are not careful you will get hurt.

When I started to pay attention at school, I thought that the suburbs and the cities were where the unruliness of the village was tamed, where progress was made. This is what people should aspire to, I thought: brick and concrete houses over timber houses on stilts. Paved roads for cars over dirt roads for bicycles. Air conditioning over natural breezes. I assumed that in the name of progress we had to destroy some of our forests to produce timber and palm oil plantations. I learned that we should exploit our oil reserves.

The British stole our resources to build their great empire and now it was Malaysia's turn to industrialise and modernise. I was conditioned by the narrative that measures human progress against resource extraction. I didn't question whether the exploitation and degradation of the environment and vulnerable people were necessary because I didn't even know this was happening. Or maybe it was inconvenient to notice that it was happening.

In the mid 90s I learned in science class that there was a hole in the ozone layer because fridges were 'bad'. I learned that acid rain causes buildings to erode because our cars were 'bad'. I learned that global warming was going to cause a lot of damage and suffering because greenhouse gases are 'bad'. I realise now that the syllabus, conveniently, did not discuss Malaysia's deforestation and oil and gas explorations as a contributor to pollution and climate change because, well – of course - GDP growth always comes first.

I thought, with the naivety of a 10 year old, that the grown-ups would sort everything out, and by the time I had grown up, the world would be clean, modern and prosperous for everyone, everywhere. But clearly the adults didn't sort everything out. They could have but they didn't.

I decided to pursue architecture as a career because it's a profession that combines creativity with science and engineering. I have an interest in natural buildings and indigenous homes around the world that sustain communities in line with their own understanding of *adat alam* and *tawheed*. The big question is how to adapt low tech vernacular architecture, which undeniably has shortcomings, at a city scale, and to do this in a way that is responsible towards people, resources and the environment.

As the director of my design firm, and now as an adult myself, I adhere to Islamic business ethics. The Prophet Muhammad said:

"The two feet of the human will not move on the Day of Resurrection until she is asked about her life and how she used it, about her knowledge and what she did with it, about her wealth and how she acquired it and how she spent it..."

For me, this hadith makes it clear that accountability is required in all business practices. This requires an understanding of supply chains and an application of social and environmental ethics to the core principles of any business.

Today, the construction industry accounts for 18% of Australia's carbon emissions and contributes heavily to landfill and pollution. The carbon emissions of a building are locked in by decisions made early on in the design process, so architects and engineers have a responsibility to prevent emissions by factoring in climate friendly design.

My approach to architecture is through passive solar design. I also use recycled materials and carbon neutral certified products while avoiding timbers sourced from old growth forests in Malaysia, Australia and elsewhere.

The Quran says in Chapter 2, verse 188:

"And do not consume one another's wealth unjustly or send it [in bribery] to the rulers in order that [they might aid] you [to] consume a portion of the wealth of the people in sin, while you know [it is unlawful]."

To me, this verse speaks as a direct condemnation of our exploitative treatment of Indigenous people and culture. People like me come to Australia, seeking a better future, but we do so in a country built on colonial theft and genocide, where the 1% are still being enriched by fossil fuel extraction at the expense of the Traditional Owners of the land.

This isn't just an Australian problem. It is a global problem. Our addiction to cheap mass produced goods from China, for example, silences us from speaking out against the systemic erasure of the Uyghur Muslims, for fear of trade sanctions.

It's tempting to say that *"I don't personally enable genocide, I don't want to feel guilty. I mean well and I live an ethical life as best as I can."* But I think true climate justice is inextricable from justice for First Nation people, and for vulnerable communities everywhere. An inclusive and intersectional approach to protecting all of creation means embracing the diversity of the natural world and the human race.

Being aware of our own contribution to such a huge problem is not comfortable, but if understanding interconnectedness challenges our privilege, it can also drive us to be better towards others and the planet.

I leave you with this verse from Chapter 49 of the Quran:

"O humanity! Truly we have created you from a male and a female and made you into peoples and types that you may recognise one another. Truly the most generous of you with God is the most devout. Truly God is knowing, aware." [49:13]