

BOOK REVIEW BY HARFIYAH HALEEM

ISLAM AND ECOLOGY: A BESTOWED TRUST eds. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, in the series: 'Religions of the World and Ecology', Harvard Centre for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University Press, 2003. ISBN0-945454-40-6 P/b. 584 pp.

On the basis of E.N. Anderson's statement: 'All traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources well, over time, have done it part through religious or ritual representation of resource management', Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim of Harvard University's Centre for the Study of World Religions initiated a series of conferences (1996-1998) and publications exploring the various religions of the world and their relation to ecology. The book explains, in multiple prefaces, the various layers and aims of this enterprise, and the series of books that have resulted. The titles of these reflect something of each religion's teachings on ecology, for example *Buddhism and Ecology: the Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*; *Indigenous traditions and Ecology: The Interbeing of Cosmology and Community*. The subtitle, 'A Bestowed Trust' of Islam's contribution to the series expresses the *amāna* (Trust) mentioned in the Qur'an, offered by Allah and accepted by human beings only because of their foolishness. Its introduction also emphasises the Islamic view that a just society, 'in which humans relate to each other and to God as they should, will be one in which environmental problems simply will not exist.'

Although it is often demoralising to look at the state of the earth and what human beings, including Muslims, are doing to it, this book provides some encouragement to those who care. Its size, the number of articles and scholars it has collected together, its international factual base, spiritual and intellectual depth, meticulous and thorough scholarship, are of an order not seen before in this field. Most important, each article contains a section of practical suggestions for further action, including study and education, and there is much evidence of action already taken and organisations and people involved at all levels. The clear definitions of concepts (e.g. ecofeminism, *himā*, *haram*) are helpful. It is an unprecedented collection of valuable information concerning people, organisations, funding bodies, state of the art studies, books and articles (10 page bibliography and endnotes to each article!), and shows that much progress is being made in the field of Islamic thought and action on the Environment.

Issues that arise in the various articles include the need to reinterpret (or restate) Islamic law from its sources regarding environmental challenges; the colonial despoliation of the Islamic heritage of gardens and water distribution systems, for example the Mughal gardens in North India, Kashmir and Pakistan, whose history of decline is briefly traced through Sikh, Raj and Pakistani rule, and the colonial exploitation of Bengal under the British Raj, with the resulting famines, deforestation and floods. Then there are the injustices caused by the modern usurious monetary system, and modern industry as a 'cancer in the body of nature'. Some of the articles (like S.H. Nasr's) take a frank look at the obstacles in the way of changing the course of

history in favour of the survival of the earth and its inhabitants, including humanity itself. The blindness and self interest of authorities, both political and religious, are compounded by ignorance, carelessness and powerlessness among the general population. Even the many measures taken by such governments as that in Iran, which do take the environment seriously, seem so far to be inadequate to cope with the ever-growing scale of the problem. Several articles deal with population, and attitudes amongst Muslims towards controlling its growth, again with Iran as an example of a government first favouring conservative Islamic attitudes that encourage reproduction, then swinging strongly in favour of family planning when confronted with the practical problems of caring for and feeding their mushrooming population.

This book contains articles by 23 contributors, with notes at the end about each - most of them are very eminent scholars and activists, including seven women, and not all the contributors are Muslims. Of the 19 contributions by Muslims there are three by followers of Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Sufi, all complementing one another on the need for reform of the monetary system, and although this might be unrepresentative (as Foltz hints), they do seem to have an important and valid point and some solutions to offer. There is an article on 'Islam in Malaysia's Planning and Development Doctrine' which makes all the right noises, but contains no evidence of what happens on the ground, and another about the Aga Khan Development Network, in which the words 'meager resources' occur several times. Are the resources available in developing countries really so scarce or are they just mismanaged?

In the articles by non-Muslims there are some critical remarks from, for example, Foltz and Petruccioli, but Foltz also gives encouraging information about environmental action and organisations in Iran, and many of the articles by Muslims answer environmentalist challenges, for example the perceived 'anthropocentrism of the Abrahamic faiths' by stressing that in Islam, 'Nature is not there only for our use' but as a trust to be managed according to Allah's guidance. Counterbalancing Petruccioli's brief article on the pretensions of Mughal gardens to 'divine kingship' rather than *khilafa*, there is a longer and much more sensitive article on the same gardens and others from James L. Westcoat, who has clearly studied them much more thoroughly, absorbed the meaning of the garden references in the Qur'an and is able to link the theory with the practice.

Some of the best and most useful articles are the one on 'The Basis for a Discipline of Islamic Environmental Law', by Othman Abdul-Aziz Llewellyn, which will be invaluable to those Muslims currently involved in drawing up international environmental laws; L. Clarke examines 'The Universe Alive: Nature in the *Masnavi* of Jalal al-Din Rumi'; Sa'adia Chishti (whose career notes leave one gasping with admiration) explains 'Fitra: An Islamic Model for Humans and the Environment'; and Seyyed Hossein Nasr's practical, clear and down-to-earth analysis of the problems and what is to be done about them.

This major work of scholarship helps to buoy up the optimism so much needed in face of the magnitude of the task and the failures encountered so far. It ends with a very short article on the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, which the contributor has newly discovered to deal with actual ecology: 'We metaphorized the garden, allegorized it, politicized it, analyzed it over and over again, but never understood it to be simply a garden, and Farrokhzad's ecological concerns evaded us.' In the poem in question, the poet bewails the degradation of the garden, and the attitudes of various members of her family towards it, which epitomise many of those that prevent people acting to rescue the environment. The poem ends with the poet's own firmly held, if tenuous, faith that all is not yet lost:

But I believe the garden can be taken to hospital
I am convinced
I am convinced
I am convinced
And the garden's heart lies swollen under the sun
Its mind slowly draining out of green memories.

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