

## **BOOK REVIEW BY HARFIYAH HALEEM**

**THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF ISLAM, by Mawil Izzi Dien, Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, UK, 2000, 191pp.**

This work represents a real and serious effort by a Muslim scholar to engage in the global debate on green issues. So far the running has been made by scientists of various disciplines mainly based in the developed north and west. The author acknowledges that 'the same North that produced pollution and the notion of maximum satisfaction has produced a self-critique which gave birth to some of the environment's most staunch defenders,'(p.88) and that religions 'dormant' in this respect have been triggered into trying to recover their 'traditional environmental legacies'. He considers that the environmentalists' 'call for a holistic ethic... represents a practical platform for Islam's holistic view.' (p. 63)

The aims of this book are mentioned explicitly in various places, which is helpful to those who do not see the need for any input from religions and also in assessing its success in achieving these aims. The preface (for the benefit of non-Muslim environmentalists) lists the areas where it 'represents one of the major cultural forces in the contemporary world.' In view of this, he says, it is undoubtedly crucial to understand the Islamic viewpoint in order to deliver an effective policy that is not detached from people's convictions and sentiments.' (p.7) This book hopes 'to provide ways in which the Muslim community can be convinced about the necessity for caring for the environment'. (p.57) It asserts that 'it is expected that Islam will protect the environment once it is understood that such protection is good in itself' (p.92). It is therefore meant to bridge the gap between environmentalists and Muslims.

To help Muslims and environmentalists understand what Islam has to offer, Dr Izzi Dien first defines the concept of the environment in Islamic terms, then makes a systematic examination of the different 'dimensions' of Islamic thought on the subject, including the theological, ethical, legal and economic.

His final chapter compares his earlier paper on Islamic Principles for the Conservation of the Natural Environment with the World Charter for Nature and the Rio Declaration, (Agenda 21) in an effort to help develop future environmental legislation in Muslim countries. This gives the book a useful, if sometimes slightly repetitive structure, as these areas tend to overlap. For example Ibn Qudama's interpretation of 'for you' to mean 'for all God's creatures', not just 'for human beings', reappears at least three times in different contexts.

Dr Izzi Dien is well read in Islamic law and theology in the original Arabic texts, both classical and modern, as well as being acquainted with the UN legal principles. Ninian Smart's six dimensions for defining religion underpin the introduction, and explanations by Syed Qutb provide a 'useful theoretical foundation' (p.58) for the theological section. Here the 'rational' (utilitarian) outlook is excluded on the grounds that it is 'a product of limited human rationale' whereas the Islamic belief in God provides the necessary 'justification for the case of the environment', as the concluding chapter stresses.

Dr Izzi Dien acknowledges part of the controversy about the nature of *khilafa* - is it full 'viceregency', or more 'limited trusteeship' ? - and the fact that animals can be better than human beings who break their contract with God, and later states that the destruction of the ozone layer is 'a violation of God's order'. However he also explores the idea that it is only God who can break the universal laws; human beings cannot break them, only use them for their benefit in so far as they are able to 'deduce what appear to be permanent and regular patterns...'. Human beings are able to disturb the balance, 'corrupt the earth and shed blood on it', yet they have a status higher than the angels, by virtue of the special knowledge God conferred on them, **if** they follow His guidance, the *Shari'ah* - literally the path to drinking-water.

The ethical section, too, brings out some interesting questions: 'Would aggressive conservation disturb the equilibrium in the wrong direction?' What is the relationship between human wants and needs? What about Muslims'

excesses in Ramadan and Hajj? Who can weigh the value of a tree's praises of Allah against the benefits of a new motorway? He sees in the Qur'anic story of the she-camel of Thamud an example to show the destructive and callous attitude of human beings to God's creation. It is wrong to destroy crops and cattle. True believers mend and reform things and 'walk on the earth with humility.' This chapter also presents the *hisba*, 'an Islamic administrative system' or 'ethical law' as a 'very useful operative tool' for environmental protection, 'free from much of the rigours of the formal law' .

In the legal section, Islamic legal sources and maxims are examined for their usefulness in making environmental legislation. He suggests, based on Qur'anic terminology, that nature and the book clarify each other: 'each are revelations composed of signs, *ayat*, coming from a single source.' Most of the legal maxims relate to the concepts of harm, benefit, and necessity, and the delicate balance between them - 'Islam pays greater attention to the removal of harm than ... a new benefit' - with oil tankers as a final example.

Chapter 7 explores a key Islamic legal concept: *maslaha* or public interest, and the prioritising of different categories of interest, saying that the narrower national 'interest of a particular society can be waived if more important interests are apparent'. It applies these principles to the conservation of endangered species, listing a number of questions to be asked. Surprisingly the other, forbidden kind of interest, *riba* (usury) is not mentioned at all, even in the previous chapter on Islamic economic justice and the balance between consumption and investment for the benefit of the environment.

In the final section on international law the general impression left was that the Islamic Principles are still vaguer than those of the UN. The issue of poverty as a factor in environmental degradation is raised in both but not clearly. Although they tactfully urge wealthy 'developed' nations to pursue policies of 'sustainable development' and reduce 'unsustainable patterns of consumption,' what neither the Islamic Principles nor the UN documents seem to state is that excessive wealth leads to even greater environmental threats than poverty. It is the wealthiest countries, not the poorest, who consume

most of the world's resources and create by far the greatest amount of pollution and destruction, and who, at world summit meetings, try to offload some of their responsibility on to poorer nations (p.160). It is they who reap the benefits of unsustainable rates of *riba*, causing indebted nations to despoil their natural resources. Poverty is a virtue in Sufi Islam. The Prophet's life (S) was characterised by frugal consumption and recycling of wealth to the poor 'in order that it may not (merely) make a circuit between the wealthy among you' (Qur'an 59:07) (p.131). It is to be hoped that Dr Izzi Dien's next book will go into Islamic economics in more depth, and in an equally positive and scholarly way.

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