

## BOOK REVIEW

### ISLAM AND ECOLOGY: A BESTOWED TRUST

**Richard Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Bahruddin** (eds.)  
Religions of the World and Ecology Series. Harvard University Press,  
ISBN 094545406, 2003, pp. xliii + 584, glossary, biblio, index.

**Carool Kersten**

The themes of this hefty tome, consisting of twenty-three essays, preceded by prefaces and introductions, are closely connected with the May 1998 conference on Islam and ecology, which was held in the framework of a series of gatherings on the stance of the world's religious traditions towards today's environmental crisis, hosted by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University between 1996 and 1998. The editors of this volume must be credited with giving the contributors opportunity to present the most up-to-date essays, which must have been quite a strain on the editing process of an ambitious project like this.

The various contributions have been arranged in five sections on broad themes related to ecology and relevant environmental issues. The first three essays are orientational and reflective pieces, providing a setting and capturing a mood that help place the elaborations in other articles into a proper context. The book appropriately starts with a meditation on the Qur'an by Ibrahim Özdemir, introducing a number of crucial notions for a holistic way of thinking. Terms like *mizan* (balance), *khalifa* (viceregency or stewardship), and the concept of nature as *muslim* (submissive) are keys to understanding the Islamic attitude towards creation. The author also makes the important ontological correlation between nature and Qur'an as 'Signs of God'.

Özdemir's is followed by two mystically-inspired essays on Rumi and on the concept of *fitra*. While L. Clarke's exposé on the Masnawi's imagery of nature as a living organism opens up the poetic vistas of Sufism, Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti explains how *fitra*, the innate realization of

true religiosity, has shaped Islam's outlook on world and man. This theme is picked up again in Said and Funk's later article on 'Peace in Islam,' a contribution suffused with the 'unity-of-being' (*wahdat al-wujud*) idea, inspired by the thought of Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240).

The next part – 'The Challenge of (Re)Interpretation' – contains some of the most thoughtful essays of the entire book. S. Nomanul Haq's survey of Islam's normative sources pursues the philosophical angle of Özdemir's opening essay. Apart from the daring stand of taking the Qur'an as a 'stimulus to religious imagination' that 'cannot claim epistemological finality' (p. 125), some of his observations can be cross-referenced to other articles in the book, such as the Qur'anic image of all living creatures being communities in their own right (Said & Funk, Llewellyn), the hadith literature on the use of resources (Llewellyn), and the parable of the Ikhwan al-Safa (Said & Funk, Foltz).

A very important contribution is Othman Llewellyn's lengthy exploration of the possibility for an Islamic environmental law. A nature conservationist who pairs a rich experience in implementing environmental protection programs with sound knowledge of Islamic law, his essay is probably the most practical exercise in searching for Islamic solutions to acute global problems. In particular his elaboration on the instruments provided by Islamic law of property pertaining to land and water resources is extremely instructive. Taking the current world order as a given, Llewellyn's approach towards change is very pragmatic.

That cannot be said of two essays found in the third section, where environment is linked to social justice. Although Fazlun Khalid and Yasin Dutton are correct in establishing a correlation between the emergence of a monetary economy and our present-day ecological predicament, their rightly-felt moral indignation of its usurious excesses is taken to utopian conclusions, such as a plea for a re-introduction of gold and silver-based currencies, which does not take into consideration the order of magnitude of the global economy. Moreover, they also fail to take notice of the deep involvement of states claiming to be the guardians of Islamic heritage, such as Saudi Arabia; a point that Mawil Izzi Dien, one of the first explorers of Islam and ecology, does raise in his contribution to this book.

Instead of only focusing on the detrimental effects of the dominance of Western economic and political models, some other writers are more

introspective and even openly critical of Islamic tradition itself. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose pioneering work on environmental issues dates back to the 1950s, accuses Muslims of ‘sleep-walking’ through the ecological crisis. Very few religious scholars pay close attention to the issue, while the interest of jurists – and Islamic revivalists — is virtually non-existent. However, both Sufi and philosophical texts provide excellent starting points for an Islamic teaching on ecology. Nasr’s essay is at the same time a plea for the preservation of traditionalist knowledge and the introduction of political reforms that can lure Muslims away from their obsession with the thoughtless emulation of Western models of scientism.

In a similar vein are the contributions by Richard Foltz and Kaveh Afrasiabi. They attribute the apparent lack of interest in ecology to Islam’s ‘anthropocentrism’ — a charge denied by Khalid. As a result Muslim tradition has approached man’s relationship to nature from the angle of social justice, which in this context means ensuring equal access to natural resources. Although this is in itself also a worthy cause, it is nevertheless another exploitative attitude and contradictory to the holism advocated by Foltz and Afrasiabi. While Foltz is cautiously appreciative of Iran’s practical achievements in managing environmental issues, in Afrasiabi’s article the earlier criticism leveled by Haq, Nasr and Foltz reaches its crescendo. ‘Toward an Islamic Ecotheology’ is a bold critique full of postmodernist arguments against dualism and utilitarianism. It does not shy away from taking on big names like Qutb, Rahman, Izutsu and Nasr himself. Afrasiabi wants to combine controversial subviews from within Islam with non-Muslim advances in human knowledge.

The fourth section reports on concrete activism toward a sustainable society. Safei-Eldin A. Hamed revisits the instruments of land use, but argues that more far-reaching – and indeed extremely difficult — institutional reform, which takes cultural specifics into account, is needed. His contribution is followed by case studies on family planning in Iran and Egypt; Islamic aspects of Malaysia’s development doctrine; and a study of the Aga Khan Development Network. Mohammad Siddiq’s ‘An Ecological Journey in Muslim Bengal’ seems somewhat out of place in this section. It might have fitted better in the closing part of the book, which returns to poetic harmony, revolving around the metaphor of the garden.

This last section opens with an essay by architecture professor Petruccioli, in which a dialectic concept of landscape is linked to Islamic urbanism, bringing back once again the gnostic notion of nature as a divine sign. The author also explains that the Islamic view of ecology is not — like that of many ‘fundamentalist’ Western ecologists — preoccupied with preserving pristine, virgin nature. He illustrates this with a historic example from Algeria and an interpretative ‘recodification’ of the landscape of the Kashmir valley. James Westcoat then contemplates the correspondence between the Qur’anic imagery of Paradise and the Mughal gardens of Lahore, linking it with the significance of paradise symbolism to Muslim environmental design. To close this impressive study of Islamic ecology the editors have selected Farzaneh Milani’s excursus into the Ecofeminism of the contemporary poetess Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967).

Although perhaps of no direct interest to medievalists themselves, this book contains so many references to the classical Muslim heritage that it will certainly help raise the non-specialist reader’s awareness of Islam’s contributions to mankind’s knowledge and spirituality in relation to ecology, and will consequently lead to more appreciation for the work done by the students of medieval Islam.

**Carool Kersten**, formerly with Payap University in Chiang Mai, now conducts research at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.