

Book Review

Islam and Ecology

By Fazlun Khalid and Joanne O'Brien (eds.). London: Cassell Publishers Ltd., 1992, 111 pp.

Islam and Ecology illuminates the issues of environmental change and human survival. The authors present the Islamic view of ecology based on the Qur'an and the hadith. Each essay contains Qur'anic passages that support the view that natural phenomena are important to humanity, for they have been created by God. The book is valuable because it is based on scientific knowledge and Islamic principles. While the book contributes much to understanding Islamic teachings on the environment, it does not contribute much to our understanding of ecological problems.

The book is flexible, and the concepts with which it deals are presented in a manner designed for quick comprehension. Each essay makes the reader feel ethically obliged to follow these concepts, as it is made clear that most of our actions are based on our understanding of the will of God, how we think the world works, and what we believe our role in the world should be. The book's purpose is not to drown the reader with facts, but to present and explore a small number of basic and useful concepts. Another aim is to illustrate how one can constantly strive to improve one's life in the light of the Sunnah, how God's dictates can illuminate ideas, and how one can organize one's life in a meaningful way.

Chapter one deals with Islam and ecology, the planet Earth, air and water pollution, deforestation, and the relationship between humanity and animals. It is stated that Islam teaches humanity to use what is needed according to the moral and ethical discipline laid down by the Creator. However, after a brief initial engagement, the author does not deal with the facts of ecology and the merits of Islamic teaching in this area.

Chapter two is analyzes Islamic ethics and the environment. The author is short on the environment, as he concentrates mainly on ethics according to the Sharī'ah and humanity's love for the components of nature. He then discusses how people can perfect themselves if they follow the commands of God. The chapter is restricted to ethical values and deals only briefly with the environment. For some reason, the author deemed it unnecessary to give historical incidents or quotations that show how Muslims thinkers analyzed nature and how important it was to them to urge the proper use of environmental and natural resources.

The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of a crisis of mind and spirit. There could be no greater misconception than to believe it is concerned only with endangered wildlife, man-made ugliness, and pollution. We recognize that the Earth's resources and environmental problems, as well as the possible solutions, are interconnected in complex ways that we are only beginning to understand. With this recognition, and the knowledge that we must seek God's guidance, it is hoped that people will begin to understand and care a little more about nature.

Chapter three is concerned with science within Islam. The author distinguishes between science within Islam and the scientific system based on human thought and the belief that the physical universe is the only reality. He describes the methods and uses of science and claims that it is essential that science should praise the Creator—scientists must produce a unity between religious practice and scientific education. The resulting principles will help humanity treat the environment with love, gratitude, and care, and will show it how to make the best use of the world's resources. Based on this understanding, it becomes an Islamic duty to conserve and protect the world and its resources. The author does not go into the history of Muslim science in order to illuminate the methods used in the natural sciences to interrelate nature and produce its meaning. However, some idea of the scope of the current debate on environmental problems is given, which provides a new approach to the environment.

Chapter four examines natural resources. Although the term "resource" is not defined, it documents the main Islamic principles and precepts concerning natural resources. The major focus is on land (divided into developed and undeveloped) and water, which form the necessary elements for all human life and activity. Islamic land laws and the role of animals and plants as natural resources are also mentioned. In my opinion, he should have explained that "resources" does not refer to a thing or a substance, but rather to a function that may be performed by a thing or a substance or to an operation in which it may take part to satisfy a particular need. It in these areas that Islamic teachings are more relevant as a guide to achieving humanity's well-being. The contents of the chapter are useful and can be easily adapted to a community's needs.

Today, potentially renewable forest resources still cover about one-third of the earth's land surface. Despite their major ecological and economic importance, they are disappearing faster than any other ecosystem. As populations and economic development grow, these oases of biological diversity are coming under increasing stress. If humanity's use of forests and other related resources continues unabated, it will face a severe reckoning in the future. The interrelatedness of all living species must be recognized and this, in turn, should force humanity to preserve the ecological integrity of this planet. Humanity should realize that it has no right to interfere destructively with nonhuman life, the only exception being to satisfy its vital needs. Chapter four does not deal with this aspect, nor does it give the Islamic point of view on it.

Chapter five, which deals with trade and commerce in Islam, is not related to ecology. The author defines Islamic laws that control trade and business and points out that it is necessary to take an altogether different approach to that of economics in order to understand what is just and unjust in our commercial behavior. He explains how just behavior will be in harmony with the principles of Islam.

Chapter six deals with desert reclamation and conservation in Islamic law. The author points out that the Shari'ah is directly relevant to these concerns, for it contains important principles that govern the use of property, water rights, maintenance of livestock, hunting, and other resources and/or activities needed for human survival. Reclaiming the land and using it for agriculture is important as the planet's population, and its subsequent demand for food, continues to grow. Such goals may be reached if they are pursued in accordance with the guidelines outlined in the Qur'an and hadith. The chapter is well written and interesting.

Chapter seven discusses disconnected people. After giving some very brief information about people and their environment (human ecology), it concentrates on gathering demographic data on two family structures found in two different environments: the Dayak tribesmen of East Malaysia and the Tuareg of Saharan Africa. The author contends that these people and their life styles follow God's will and harmonize with environmental reality. He also says that we have lost our intuitive knowledge of how to relate to each other, to nature, and to the environment.

Theoretically, there is almost no limit to the kinds of ecosystems that can be recognized (the authors do not define "ecosystem" in detail). Their main purpose is to encourage Muslim legislators to base the Islamic legal systems on these decrees and to formulate laws that cover the conservation of forests, overgrazing, water resources, animal rights, and other areas of concern. Islam teaches that any activity having social implications or effects on others must conform to the physical laws of nature as well as to the moral and ethical principles laid out in the Qur'an.

The goal of this book is not to give a detailed picture of ecology, but to present the Islamic viewpoint. Some will find a new approach to the study of ecology and the use of resources, while others will become more aware of the surrounding environment and, hopefully, begin to live gently within that place or walk lightly on the earth. I highly recommend that Muslims read this book so that they will gain a better understanding of one of the most serious problems facing humanity today and also to learn what solutions Islam has to offer.

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Book Review

Ecology and Geography in the Islamic World An Ecological Approach

By Akhtar Siddiqi, Department of Geography and Geology,
Indiana State University

Ecology and Geography in the Islamic World: An Ecological Approach is a book that is both timely and important. It is a book that is written for a general audience and is not a technical treatise. The book is written in a clear and concise style and is easy to read. The book is a good introduction to the subject of ecology and geography in the Islamic world. The book is a good read for anyone who is interested in the subject of ecology and geography in the Islamic world.

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