Book Review

Fazlun M. Khalid, *Signs on the Earth: Islam, Modernity and the Climate Crisis* (Markfield, UK: Kube, 2019), 249 pp., \$18.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1847740755.

The global environmental crisis disproportionately affects Muslims, insofar as its effects are more severely felt in the developing world and fall harder upon the poor than upon the rich. And yet, the issue has received little attention from contemporary Muslim thinkers and activists worldwide, preoccupied with 'more pressing' issues. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a Muslim philosopher who spent most of his career in the United States, was among the first contemporary scholars to begin talking about environmental degradation as a crisis of the spirit, anticipating Lynn White's seminal essay, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' in 1967 by several months in some public lectures. But Nasr's target audience was Westerners, and his ideas have never had much resonance across the Muslim world. Twenty years after the ground-breaking international conference on Islam and Ecology organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim at the Harvard Divinity School in 1998, the question still looms large: What has been the impact of Islamic environmentalism and what has it achieved?

Muslim societies are spread across the globe and are as diverse as humanity itself. Sadly, one thing that virtually all Muslim-majority countries share is the full range of catastrophic environmental problems—pollution, biodiversity loss, desertification, lack of clean water—which in most cases are steadily worsening with few if any hopeful signs on the horizon. Governments show little will to take remedial steps, and in some cases environmental activism is considered politically suspect. The oil-rich Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region are not only some of the world's worst environmental offenders, but despite their economic power and claims of piety they, have shown almost zero interest in putting Islamic principles related to environmental protection into practice. Across the Muslim world, environmentalists can be perceived as Westernized in their training and outlook, which often does not help their cause in reaching traditional communities.

Thankfully there have been a few rays of hope peeking through the smog of poverty and maldevelopment that have plagued so much of the world's Muslim population over the past two decades, and many of these sources of light can be traced either directly or indirectly to Fazlun Khalid. The founder of the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) who has spent his long retirement from civil service tirelessly travelling the globe educating Muslims about Qur'anic environmental teachings one village at a time, Khalid rightly deserves to be considered the world's number one *Islamic* (as opposed to simply Muslim) environmentalist.

Khalid describes his book as 'an attempt to discover the relationship between modernity and Islam in the context of environmental concerns' (p. xv). At the heart of his analysis is the fundamentally inequitable and short-sighted nature of today's global economy, which, as he points out, finances the destruction of the environment through the endless multiplication of credit. Since the creation of credit is predicated on the taking of interest, such a system is necessarily un-Islamic. 'Money is the universal God of our times', observes Khalid, 'it conjures up for us the possibility of heaven on earth, it seeps into every corner of our lives and its virus-like nature is devouring its way through the natural world, thus leaving behind a degraded earth for future generations' (p. 21).

The first two-thirds of the book are essentially a primer on environmentalist thinking, presumably geared towards readers new to the topic. Khalid presents a critical history of capitalism, the exploitation of natural resources, and the growth of consumerism, occasionally interjecting relevant Quranic verses. The story will be familiar to readers already versed in environmentalist discourse, but as a general introduction to the problem and its causes it is engagingly written and flows well. And while the narrative is rooted in the secularizing, industrializing, and colonizing modern history of the West, Khalid exempts no one from responsibility for how things are today, since 'we are all without exception seduced by the trap of consumerism, at the base of which is a political economy to which we all subscribe' (p. 147).

Khalid provides an overview of Islamic environmental principles in Chapter 5. He summarizes the environmentalist readings of the traditional sources (Qur'an, hadiths, and Islamic jurisprudence) that have recently been made by a number of scholars, while implicitly conceding that they are not being applied on any significant scale in Muslim societies today: '...all Muslim countries are also locked into this global system...and in many ways they also want most things the system has to offer...' (p. 194). He concludes his book by returning to the idea that our attachment to the notion of economic growth must be abandoned in favor of a 'circular economy...in which we keep resources in use for as long as possible, extract the maximum value from them whilst in use, then recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of each service life' (p. 199).

Khalid seems to have intended this book as a testament, and one hopes that it will stand as a lasting monument to his legacy. He is not an academic and his is not a scholarly book, but he is a clear thinker and he knows how to present a compelling argument. He is equally at home in Western and non-Western contexts, physically as well as culturally, and he is able to communicate easily across cultures. Unlike Nasr, his work is addressed in the first instance to devout Muslims like himself, but readers from other backgrounds will find his presentation just as informative and inspiring.

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References

- White, Lynn Jr. 1967. 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 155: 1203-207. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.