

A Book Review on Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage (Revised Second Edition) by Osman Bakar. Malaysia: Centre for Civilisational Dialogue University of Malaya and Islamic Book Trust. 2022

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This book is an introduction to Islam’s legacy of ecological and environmental wisdom prescribed in the Qur’an and in the history of Islamic science and technology. The author attempted to expound the title in question two-pronged: by addressing the spiritual dimension of the environmental wisdom and its scientific-economic counterpart. His main argument centres on highlighting a spiritual vision of nature – in this case, Islamic – that should be embodied and accounted within discussions about ecology and environment based on dialogue. The book is an ideological expansion of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s seminal work, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (2007). Specifically, the author emphasizes that the Earth is human beings’ *only* planetary home and highlights the Quranic take on the proposition. In this revised second addition, it updates the importance of intensifying interfaith dialogues particularly with regards to addressing contemporary environmental issues (i.e climate change) by reflecting on Muslim-Catholic dialogue by referring to the Pope’s *Laudato Si in His Holiness’* regards to Earth as *Our Common Home* in particular. Theoretically, this book is yet another addition to the dialogic approach to inter-civilizational issues to address *both* practical and spiritual upheavals emanating from such inter-religious discourse about the current state of humanity and its relationship with the environment.

Relative to Osman Bakar’s other published books, this is a small one. Yet, it offers an important overview about his philosophy or *hikmah* that could be drawn from the environment by drawing from achievements of Islamic sciences and technology and wisdom gained from the Quran at large. This book is an expansion to a more general thesis advanced by Seyyed Hossein Nasr – that the humanity is facing a spiritual crisis; Nature is both reflection and ground for its self-reflection and improvement. In this revised second edition, Osman Bakar’s new preface highlights a specific point: the planet Earth is humanity’s *only* planetary home. (vii) He reinforces the thesis from readings of the Quran. In the older (2007) preface, he called for more attention to be paid regarding the environmental and ecological aspects of Wisdom enshrined in the Quran, in addition to oft-discussed issues at the time including, but not limited to, “...political Islam and extremism, the Shari’ah (Islamic Law), Islam and women, Islamic banking, and intra-Islamic conflicts.” (xi) His basic call is to widen the vision of Islamic thought and discourse to the public so to generic public awareness about the existence of Islamic environmental wisdom that could serve to address current environmental challenges – externally as physical manifestations of collective human activities and internally as spiritual attitudes that reflect one’s relationship with Nature.

The first chapter is entitled “Ecological and Environmental Wisdom in Islamic Legacy.” In this chapter, the author points the hard lessons learned by modern people from the environment and their surroundings. They learn the lessons from environmental pollutions and ecological disasters. (1) In history, the modern and secularized West first learned this bitter lesson and the first who planted the “forbidden tree of secular knowledge.” (*ibid.*) At this point, Professor Osman distinguished between two trees of knowledge namely the ‘secular’ tree of knowledge and its ‘Islamic’ counterpart. He alluded to the importance of scrutinizing and critiquing the knowledge project of modern Western civilization. He expounded further the way the West had addressed their ecological challenges by outlining the rise of North American environmental consciousness namely Environmentalism as post World War 2 phenomenon and late 19th century graphic exposures of polluted water bodies, smog, erosion, deforestation, and other environmental disasters. (3) He then points to economic cost-based approach on addressing the issue, i.e “cleaning” and “repairing” the environment that proves to be astronomical with only limited results. (4) The author then interposed about the depiction of origin and development of environmental and ecological consciousness in Islamic civilization. He proceeded to some length in outlining and conceptualizing “traditional Muslim’s” view on science and the environment. Key to this point is to question the reductionist vision of the natural order and its “value-free” approach of modern prescribed ‘solutions’ to environmental problems and review the natural order instead in more wholistic science that do not preclude the question of value (*vis a vis* axiology) and fundamental belief (*vis a vis* theology and theosophy). He then outlined why environmental and ecological consciousness is central to Islam and drew fundamental ideas in Islamic ecology and environmental science by detailing the concept of *Shahadah* and its significance to the environment as part of the Unicity.

The second chapter is basically Osman Bakar’s own reflection take to address the human spiritual-temporal crisis in Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s seminal work, *Nature in Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (2007). Professor Osman calls for a revision of Classic Man and Nature – to review the importance of the sacred in the spiritual vision of nature that had been lost or at least side lined in modern conception of the natural world in the name of progress and development. Thus, this book should be read in conjunction with Nasr’s *Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (2007) to enable a fuller understanding of Prof. Osman’s prescription for inter-civilizational dialogue as part of the solution to this “Man and Nature Crisis.” A key to Professor Osman’s dialogue proposal is the need for an integrated environmental philosophy. He calls for an extensive metaphysical enquiry about nature of its materiality and meaning. Consequently, he asks the state of natural science that we cultivate today that is in the form and attitude of absolute human conquest of nature without a sense of responsibility to a greater sense and higher authority. He then outlined some of Islam’s prescription on the human respect for Nature by envisaging God as the Ultimate Reality, and Nature as signs to relate to such reality by pointing to some verses in the Quran. The basic idea here is for us to inculcate an intellectual and spiritual reflection of Nature to develop such respect towards her. (51)

The book’s third and last chapter entitled “The Quranic Idea of Earth as Our Only Planetary Home” could be the most interesting and provocative yet. In this chapter, Professor Osman maintains that “... as in all religious traditions, the spiritual is the very core of all that is called human.” (63) Now, discussion about religion and spirituality is nothing new. But, to bring about the spiritual dimension, which is the inner dimension of religion, to the practical, propositional, and philosophical aspects of contemporary study of the environment and its related sciences is! The author attempts to deepen the discussion about the environment beyond the cerebral to include other aspects of Intellect (i.e Revelation, intuition etc.) as traditionally understood within the Islamic discourse. It recentres the once ‘forgotten’ way to understand nature by pre-modern societies, by means of reflecting Nature and its grandeur and relate it to the Ultimate Reality, and to make contemporary of such vision, is a bold intellectual project that in which field that demand most immediate and tangible solutions to present environmental challenges today.

The author showed the problem of Heliocentric Theory with regards to the degradation of Planet Earth not so much about the astronomical fact whether the Earth revolves around the Sun or vice-versa but the loss of cosmological view that entails it. By degrading the Earth into just an “ordinary planet” just like another, the cosmic centrality of human life, and indeed all life on Earth, is now taken for granted that significantly reduces human’s theomorphic potentiality with regards to its position in the universal order.

This chapter is also interesting because it relates to His Holiness Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home (The Vatican Press, 2015). This implies a direct dialogue between Islamic and Catholic religio-spiritual and philosophical tradition to address the issue of the environment framed as the issue about the state of humanity itself with regards to its soul. What this means to the general study of humanity is a bid to bring about the centrality of the Sacred within discussions pertaining contemporary ecosophy and political ecology in general. This also signal a serious bid for dialogue – a wide open one – between two great Abrahamic religious traditions of the world namely Islam and Catholic Christianity.

Professor Osman closes this chapter with two adjoining subchapters that proposes the Earth as human being’s ideal home from the Quranic perspectives and human’s responsibility to safeguard and care for their *only* planetary home. Implicitly, this idea runs counter with propositions that humans could one day physically migrate from Earth and colonize other celestial objects (i.e Moon, asteroid, Mars etc.). Professor Osman’s thesis demand that the state of planetary health directly reflects the state of outward and inward human condition that must be addressed here and now. For this, he stresses the concept of human as *khalifah* (vicegerency) to the Divine and *wasatiyyah* (balance and moderation) to be practiced and further elaborated in a hope to arrive at a viable solution to the environmental challenges.

This book is recommended for those who are looking for contemporary exposition about Islamic philosophy and the environment with a particular attempt to bring forth the voice of religious perspectives from their intellectual and spiritual dimensions to contribute towards the practical problems of the environment and philosophy of nature. Within academic setting, this book could be used to form a base for discussion and debate between the relevance of religious ideas and its role to actively inform issues and study about the social and humanistic sciences.

Some of the premises in this book could serve as starting points to frame an eco-conscious value construct that strikes closer to context at home. While this discourse is primarily Islamic, its participants need not be necessarily Muslims to fruitfully contribute towards a collective realization that sees the virtue of Wisdom (*Hikmah*) and its tradition that sees Planet Earth and human livelihood as active subject of contemplation and action.

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