

Interview on Environmental Problematique and Islam

Note

The following is an interview conducted by Center for International Studies (IPCIS) and Richard C. Foltz from Dépt. des sciences de la religion Université Concordia University in Canada. He is one of the leading experts in the field of Religion and Environmental Studies. He has published extensively on environmental issues and the impacts of religion and religious paradigm on the current crises which haunt humanity and our planet at large. Among his many works we can mention the following books

- *L'Iran, creuset de religions : de la préhistoire à la Révolution islamique*, Québec : Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007.
 - Persian edition, *Gozar-e dīnhā az Īranzamīn*, tr. Ali Shoja'i et al., in preparation.
 - Arabic edition, *Al-rūhāniyya fī ard al-nubala': kayf athart Īran fī adyān al-'ālam*, tr. Bassam Shiha, Beirut: Al-dār al-'arabiyya al-'ulūm, 2006.
 - English edition, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004.
- *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- Editor, *Environmentalism in the Muslim World*, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2005.
- Lead editor (with Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin), *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

- Turkish edition, *İslam ve Ekoloji: Başedilmiş Bir Emanet*, tr. Nurettin Elhüseyni, Istanbul: Oğlak Yayınları, 2007.
- Arabic edition, *Al-islām wa'l-bī'at*, tr. Hussein Ghali, Cairo: 'Adel al-Mu'alam, 2008.
- Editor, *Worldviews, Religion, and the Environment: A Global Anthology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Thomson, 2003.
- *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*, New York: St. Martin's Press and London: Macmillan, 1999.

Questions about Islam and environment

1. As you know there is no doubt that humanity is confronting an environmental crisis which is likely to escalate in the future. Many experts argue that modernity and capitalism are the two main factors involved in the appearance of this crisis. What is your analysis of the major factors in bringing about the environmental crisis we face today?

Richard C. Foltz: Of course there are many aspects to the crisis and many reasons we do not seem to be solving it, but I think the root cause is that human societies all over the world have accepted and adopted a value system which is very short-sighted and based on some fundamental fallacies. Virtually every society in the world has made and continues to make bad choices when it comes to how we live with the rest of nature. It is true that the dominant value system today was substantially shaped by the ideological arguments of capitalism and modernity, and that these ideologies have propagated a number of false promises and misrepresentations that continue to be used to justify the bad choices we make. The field of economics, which is most often evoked to provide a “scientific” rationale for our irresponsible behavior towards the environment, is in fact much closer to a religion than to a science, such that many are now saying that the dominant faith system in the world today is the Religion of the Market. In fact it is very easy to demonstrate the falseness of this new religion, because it continually fails to provide what it promises and is based on premises which are obviously untrue. For example, the Religion of the Market has been promising for decades that wealth will be more equally distributed, whereas in fact it has been concentrated upward into the hands of those who are already rich. Moreover, it is an ideology founded on the principle of endless economic growth, whereas in a finite system infinite growth is impossible—in fact, to use a medical analogy, it is the very definition of cancer. But because the Religion of the Market is supported by the most powerful forces across the globe who devote enormous amounts of energy and money to its propaganda

and often impose it by force, it is difficult for the voices of reason to be heard. Anyone who questions the dogmas of this faith system is loudly dismissed as a heretic and either repressed or ignored.

2. Do you agree that developed countries have had a basic role in creating the environmental crisis, given that presently the role of the developing countries in causing environmental degradation is higher than the developed countries? Indeed certain experts believe that expansion of the capitalist system by the West has practically dragged the developing countries into the field of a competition named globalization, which has resulted in extensive destruction of the planetary environment. Therefore, the role of the developing countries in the destruction of the environment has apparently been significant over the past two decades. What is your opinion?

Richard C. Foltz: It is true that the Industrial Revolution as well as the formulation of modern economic theory took shape in the West during the 19th century, and that the rapid industrialization of Western countries was made possible by a short-sighted and unthinking exploitation of natural resources. However, it must also be recognized that there is not a nation on Earth today that does not aspire to follow the Western model of development, whatever their leaders may claim. I do not agree that developing nations have been “dragged” into following the Western model. In fact, many countries have plunged into the same kind of unsustainable mining of resources in an even more accelerated way, often abandoning traditional practices that have enabled them to live in their local environments for centuries. Developing nations often complain that it is unfair for the West to try to deny them the possibility to develop when the West has already done so. They are right that such an approach is unfair and hypocritical, but unfortunately it is also a physical fact that the Earth cannot sustain a Western style of development across the whole world. The so-called “American way of life” is possible only because a mere 4 per cent of the world’s population manages to consume 35 per cent of the planet’s resources. If Americans were to make do with only 4 per cent of the resources, there would be no “American way of life.” Likewise, it is impossible for the entire population of the world to consume resources at the rate Americans do—it would require *seven* planet Earths in order to do so! If we are to achieve a sustainable way of life which guarantees that something will be left for future generations, Westerners will have to learn to live with less, and non-Westerners will have to give up the fantasy that they can live the way Westerners now do.

3. As you know the outlook of tradition in general and that of the divine religions in particular toward nature and the environment is different from the modernist outlook toward these two issues. In continuation of your answer to the first question I would like to have your explanation concerning this difference in outlooks. A related question is whether by accepting the

outlook of the divine religions we could be able to expect an extensive progress by man? If yes, can you explain what macro pattern is introduced by the divine religions such as Islam?

Richard C. Foltz: There are several points which complicate this issue. One is that the existing religions all came into being in circumstances different from those we face today: never before has it been possible for the human species to cause the kind of widespread damage to ecosystems that we are doing now. So it is not very realistic to expect any tradition to provide us with a pre-packaged environmental ethic that will solve today's problems. Another point is that the leaders and followers of every major religion today have mostly sought to adapt their beliefs and principles to accommodate the dominant economics-based value system, rather than to challenge it or offer real alternatives. In fact virtually no major leaders in any religious tradition in the world today are talking about environmental protection as if it were a serious issue, and many are in fact denying its importance and centrality. Even those who acknowledge the importance of the environment mostly do so only as lip-service. Finally, many people in the world are not religious, and many who are mostly use religion to justify what they have already decided to do rather than use it as a source of guidance. All that being said, it is true that every religion can be interpreted to teach responsible environmental stewardship, if that is the kind of interpretation one is seeking, although the opposite is also true.

4. And as a final question I would like you to provide an explanation of the basic viewpoints of Islam about the environment, and how we could employ a sacred paradigm in dealing confrontation with the environmental crisis?

Richard C. Foltz: If one defines "Islam" as being first and foremost what is contained in the Qur'an and the hadiths, then it is possible to identify principles which could be understood to teach environmental responsibility. The Qur'an emphasizes that Creation belongs to the Creator, not to us, and that its benefits are intended for all creatures and not just human beings. Many hadiths refer to the sparse resources available to the Arabs at the time of the Prophet (s), and affirm that they should be fairly distributed and not privately owned. Unfortunately, in the world today there is not a single Muslim society that is developing in a sustainable way or applying anything like an Islamic environmental ethic to its policies. Moreover, most Muslims are mainly concerned with political and social issues and mistakenly perceive the environment as something peripheral, whereas the environment is actually the very context in which these other issues are played out. To one who understands our absolute dependence on healthy ecosystems, all other human struggles are like fighting over deck chairs on the Titanic.