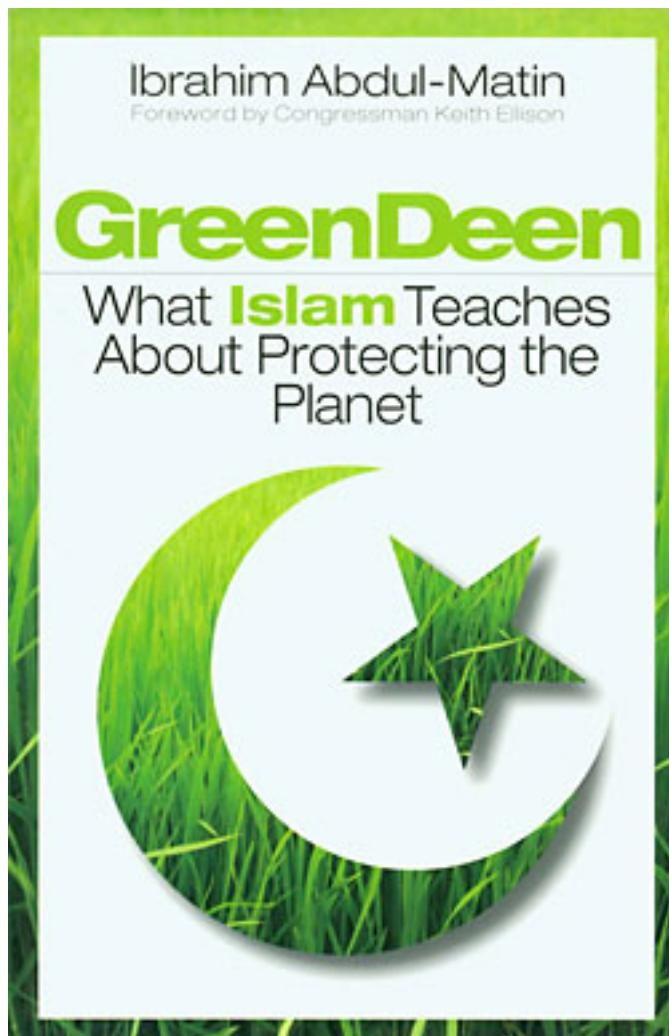


Ecology and Islam: review of Abdul-Matin's "Green Deen"



Muslim Americans are slowly beginning to make their mark on their conflicted society. There are more Muslims than Jews in the US now --approximately 5 million. They are the most diverse of all American believers, 35 per cent born in the US (25 per cent Afro-American), the rest -- immigrants from southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Traditionally they have voted Republican, but have shifted to Democrat and Green parties in recent years.

Ibrahim Abdul-Matin is the son of black converts, raised in New York, a community organiser now environmental adviser to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. His book about Islam and the environment -- *Green Deen* -- is a stimulating overview of both the US environmental movement and how American Muslims are becoming part of it, bringing their own unique perspective.

Abdul-Matin sees the weakness of the environmental movement today in its secular, legalist

approach to problems: pass enough laws and you can curb the negative practices of business and consumers, and push them along an environmentally-friendly path.

But this, as he shows in this book, is not enough. He interprets Islam's focus on One Creator as giving "humankind the opportunity to be one and to have a common purpose", to bring back ethical principles into our daily lives. He points to six principles which underlie Islam and shows how they relate to our relationship to the environment:

- *understanding the Oneness of God and His creation (*tawhid*);

- *seeing signs of God (*ayat*) everywhere;

- *being a steward (*khalifah*) of the Earth;

- *honouring the trust we have with God (*amana*) to be protectors of the planet;

- *moving toward justice (*adl*); and

- *living in balance with nature (*mizan*).

Deen or *din*, meaning religion in Arabic, is used in the Quran to refer both to the path along which righteous Muslims travel to comply with divine law (Sharia) and divine judgment or recompense, which all humanity must inevitably face -- without intercessors -- before God. The word probably derives from the Persian Zoroastrian concept *Daena* -- insight, the Eternal Law. In Hebrew

din

means law or judgment. In Islam, the word implies an all-encompassing way of life lived in accordance with God's divine purpose as expressed in the Quran and hadith.

The author recalls a moving childhood experience, hiking on Bear Mountain near New York, his first time in the wilds. He watched as his father cleared a spot in the forest to pray, explaining to him, "The Earth is a mosque." He considered other religions as a youth but reaffirmed his father's decision to follow the deen, "a living tradition that is spiritually nourishing and intellectually coherent".

For Abdul-Matin, there is no conflict between religion and science - - humans are the best of God's creation, and, as stewards blessed with intelligence and reason, have a responsibility towards the rest of God's creation. He points to the verse, "Corruption has appeared on the land and in the sea because of what the hands of humans have wrought," as proof that God warned people about their possible harmful impact on the planet, "a taste of the consequences of their misdeeds that perhaps they will turn to the path of right guidance". (Quran 30:41) In this sura, *The Romans*, God warns humanity not to disturb the balance of Nature.

Green Deen is a refreshing mix of theory and practice. Concern for *mizan* translates as: "Where does your trash come from? Where does it go? How can you be actively involved in making the world a cleaner, less toxic place?"

Ayat are everywhere: "He has made subject to you the sun and the moon, both diligently following their courses; and the Night and the Day." (Quran 14:32-3) While a hardnosed scientist might dismiss this as poetic license, the author interprets these *ayat* as indeed serving us every day, allowing us to travel, giving us heat and light, time to sleep and time to work. "To everything there is a season" is Ecclesiastes' expression of this truth.

Stop using "energy from hell" -- coal and oil, the latter associated with today's wars, both devastating in their ecological footprint, and betraying both *khalifa* and *amana*. Use "energy from heaven" -- solar power, wind energy. He could have mentioned woodchips, which can be burned efficiently and are bi-products, "waste", from manufacture. (For a *khalifah*, there is no such thing as waste).

For someone with a more secular worldview, all this is still very relevant. In the past two centuries, science has reduced to the lifeless pursuit of technology. There is no poetry in this, only money and novelty. It is the very poetry of the Quran, this quaintness of the belief that Nature was made subject to humans, that is what is necessary for leading us to any change

towards reincorporating morality into our lives, whether religious or secular, given our disconnect with Nature.

The author gives a brief overview of the development of ecological awareness, starting with the conservation president Theodore Roosevelt, who in some sense recognised his role as *khalifah* and set up the system of national parks at the beginning of the twentieth century, making humans' relationship to Nature part of America's political dialogue. The next step forward was not until the 1950s, when the American Dream, which captured the world's imagination, was accompanied by a sudden sharp decline in bird populations and an equally sharp rise in cancer rates.

The realisation that growth was not without "external economies" started a popular movement to regulate toxic chemicals. In the 1960s, the civil rights movement empowered marginalised communities to build on this foundation. Now, the generalised problem of global warming demands that everyone should transform their lifestyles, as we are all "marginalised" communities now.

These developments reflect the six principles of a Green Deen. "The environmental movement can be seen as an attempt to restore balance and justice to the Earth after the environmental destruction caused by overconsumption," itself the result of an obsession with creating, producing, finding self-worth in consuming.

This is the heart of the problem for the author, a result of our 20th- century economic systems -- both capitalist and socialist, the author claims -- which reduce us to units of production. "We become relevant only by what we can create." In contrast, Islam teaches that "we come with intrinsic value. We are also an *ayat* of Allah" and "do not need to consume or create to have worth."

The author's analysis breaks down at this point. He is limited in what he can say, given American biases. Damning socialism along with capitalism is a typical American cop-out, but socialism was the secular attempt to reintroduce morality into the economy, to fulfill the six

principles that underlie Islam -- minus God.

Socialism never had the chance to deal with the dilemma of overconsumption; the system, as identified with the Soviet Union, never had the luxury of luxury, always fighting for survival in the face of the more powerful capitalist world. Cuba is the only remnant of that socialist experiment and has a much better environmental record than the West. Abdul-Matin makes no mention of its secular attempts to find *mizan* though they are encouraging and follow his by now standard recommendations: urban market gardens, solar energy, bicycling and walking, but above all, making do with less.

Islam has a lot in common with socialism, a comparison Abdul-Matin implicitly makes in the principle of *adl* -- social justice. Umm Kholthum boldly referred to the Prophet Mohamed as "the imam of socialism". The Prophet's wife Aisha related that, "He himself removed the lice from his clothing, milked his goats, and did all his work himself." No need to exploit others to fulfill your needs.

The author can't hide his own socialist leanings entirely -- green jobs (minimising inputs, producing durable, environmentally friendly outputs) must be linked to *adl* -- justice and equality -- or they will just perpetuate the current inequalities. Water should not be sold for profit. The famous hadith about Uthman buying the Ruma Well and making its waters free, responding to the Prophet's call, is recounted.

The author also skirts around the issue of neocolonialism, considering the colonies liberated in the 20th century as "postcolonial", though suffering from the "economic control of large corporations". More tip-toeing through the US ideological minefield: America as the imperial ogre, the big waster, wreaking havoc around the world, does not make an appearance. Nor does the world's worst polluter -- the US military. Watch *Avatar*, set far into the future, to see that there is nothing "post" about so-called postcolonialism.

Traditional societies were not overconsumers. Their no-brainer philosophy was *Eat in order to live*, not *Live in order to eat*, as we do today. The Western disdain for the "primitive" inherently dismisses their natural wisdom.

Abdul-Matin's defence of Islam implicitly asserts this wisdom, which is not unique to Islam. However, due to Islam's care to conserve the original message of 15 centuries ago, it has not been erased, as it has from the other monotheisms, so successfully incorporated into the modern world. He provides a fascinating example of how Islam can be practised in the modern world in new ways. A Muslim community in Chiapas, Mexico lives off the grid, with organic farms, few cars, solar panels made of scrap metal, sun-drying their fruit. They have rediscovered how relevant "backward" ways of living are to today's needs, giving "civilisation" a new meaning.

The root of the problem is not just overconsumption, but the colonisation of the world, which destroyed -- and destroys -- cultures based on religion with its moral truths and respect for nature. Instead of "What is a just price?" the question is "What can I get away with?" This negative freedom (freedom to do anything subject to constraints) has taken the place of positive freedom (freedom as defined by an understanding and willingness to follow a path in accord with divine law), as embodied in religion.

The various stages in environmental awareness in the West have tried to overcome this by regulations, the result of popular resistance -- both community- and religious-based movements. The next step forward, according to the author, is an environmental justice movement, which he says is slowly coming about "as a response to the disconnection between people and planet" and which must incorporate the principles he outlines.

The author enthuses about the "smart grid" and other self-regulating systems, which use computer monitoring and feedback to adjust the various components in environmental systems (temperature, air quality, energy use) given the situation and needs. That is all well and good. But aren't we still just consumers, even if more careful about our footprints?

The author's intrinsic bias is still lifestyle-related: consume responsibly, but consume. Don't rock the boat. Nowhere does the author address the economic mechanism that lies behind colonialism and its tendency to overconsume -- the maximizing of the surplus we produce, profits -- whether or not we need this material excess. As long as we put profit on a pedestal, we are slaves to the destructive logic undermining the ecological balance.

"Let there be no change in the work wrought by Allah: that is the true Religion. But most among mankind understand not." (Quran 30:30) That *ayat* calls for us to minimise the surplus we extract from Nature in the form of profits. "Leave well enough alone." As scientists of the

economy and Nature do, we should maximise something worthwhile, like efficiency of production, green jobs, renewable energy use, clean air. In his care not to tread on capitalist-crazed American toes, the author misses the startling and highly relevant insight that Islam has for us: to seek balance, *minimise* consumption.

That is the hidden truth here, for both Muslims and non-Muslims, religious and secular minds alike. We are witnessing today environmental heedlessness in Westernised Muslim societies like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In Cairo the choking exhaust fumes, the casually disposed-of garbage on streets, the unthinking use and discarding of "free" plastic bags, the misuse of water -- this behaviour surprises foreigners, already more "environmentally aware". Sadly, Muslims are today "catching up" in the negative sense.

By abandoning socialism, embracing Western neoliberalism, Egypt lost what little (socialist, anti-imperialist) morality there was that held society together, morality which found deep and heart-felt response in the common people. True, Egypt's socialist experiment was flawed. It suffered from paranoia -- how to maintain power in the face of both Western Cold War intrigues and the difficulty of incorporating the greater truths of Islam in a largely secular movement -- which eventually defeated it. There was no easy path to tread. Socialism's professed secular nature was a stumbling block that eventually brought it down.

Perhaps the new awareness Abdul-Matin points to, sparked by the environmental movement in the West, will indeed find inspiration in Islam; and East and West will work together to revive the patient. A similar coming-together of activists in the West and the Muslim world is now trying to cure the other poison infecting the Middle East -- Israel's refusal to come to its senses and make peace with its neighbours. Westerners concerned with *adl* are finding eager allies in Muslims, who need no convincing about the evils of colonialism when it comes to Greater Israel. For both East and West, realising that the mentality behind colonialism also lies behind the ecological crisis is the real next step forward.

The author imagines another electricity blackout as happened most recently in 2003, and imagines houses of worship off the grid, "shining beacons of light in a sea of darkness".

Written by Eric Walberg

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