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BOOK REVIEW: RECOVERING ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC TRADITIONS IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Muhammad Yaseen Gada*

Sami Al-Daghistani, ed. *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World*. Leiden, 2025. pp. 209, AUD 366.00
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Abstract: This review examines Sami Al-Daghistani’s edited volume: *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World*. The multidisciplinary volume is aimed at “epistemic decolonization” by recovering Islamic intellectual traditions that link economics, environment and ethics within a unified framework. It highlights key concepts such as *tazkiya* (purification), *iqtisād* (moderation) and “ecological *ribā*” (usury), offering fresh perspectives for rethinking environmental ethics and economic thought. While the book makes an important contribution to decolonial scholarship and clearly explains the “what” and “why” of an Islamic approach, it gives limited attention to the “how,” leaving practical applications and policy directions underdeveloped. Overall, *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World* is a timely and important contribution to debates on decolonial environmental and economic ethics.

Keywords: *Islam, economics, environment, ethics, tazkiya, iqtisad*

This multidisciplinary volume, edited by Sami Al-Daghistani, offers a timely examination of Muslim ethical and intellectual responses to the environmental crises linked to unsustainable modern economic models. Pursuing a project of “epistemic decolonization,”¹ the book recovers Islamic viewpoints that integrate economics, environment and ethics into an interesting framework, challenging contemporary Muslim thought’s dependence on Western paradigms. Its central aim moves beyond prescribing how to make a sustainable “environmental-economic philosophy work with religion.” Instead, it is fundamentally an exercise in “reconsidering the very conditions of possibility.”² By engaging with the “diverse...Islamic thought and practice” across history,³ the volume illuminates the complexities of historical and modern interventions

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¹ Sami Al-Daghistani, ed., *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World* (Leiden, 2025), xii.

² Ibid., 11.

³ Ibid., 13.

on economic and environmental philosophy. The book is divided into two sections, the first of which examines classical Islamic thought and the second analyses modern practices.

In his introduction (Chapter 1), Al-Daghistani abhors modern economic thought for separating ethical and environmental concerns, in contrast to classical Islamic thought, which integrates them. He demonstrates their holistic approach by examining pre-modern and contemporary Muslim discourses, incorporating ecology, ethics and cosmology into economic life. Because “the current concepts of environment and economics stem from a specific epistemological reasoning and the politics of power which normalized a particular economic and environmental” set of terms and concepts,⁴ this framework challenges reductionist models. Thus, Al-Daghistani argues “it is important to critically assess these terms and to compare them to other non-European intellectual and religious traditions, including Islamic,” to present a different interpretation of sustainable coexistence.⁵ This framing is powerful but sets up a binary that occasionally risks oversimplifying a complex global crisis by predominantly externalising blame.⁶ As DeLong-Bas writes, there is no single Muslim perspective on environmental crises.⁷ Divergent views on their causes and responsibility, coupled with varied interpretations of climate change, have led to a spectrum of responses and widespread apathy among Muslim communities.

In Chapter 2, “On *Tazkiya* and *Zakāt al-Nafs*: Decolonizing Modern Economic and Environmental Thought,” Al-Daghistani explores *tazkiyat al-nafs* and *zakāt al-nafs* (purification of the soul) as ethical frameworks that challenge modern economic and environmental paradigms. He argues that these concepts, deeply rooted in Islamic classical thought, emphasise holistic accountability, merging spiritual ethics with material engagements. For instance, he says, “*zakāt al-nafs* and *tazkiya*” point to an “ethical side of obtaining human capital in economic” activities and how one relates to the environment they live in.⁸

Al-Daghistani uses the work of scholars like al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Iqbal (d. 1938) to show the microcosmic view of humans, in which taking care of the environment is the same as purifying oneself. Al-Ghazālī said the “human being is a microcosm that by necessity contemplates about the creation of the world and the natural environment, which brings him closer to knowing himself and the Divine.”⁹ Iqbal’s work is important because it connects spirituality and ecology through the idea of *khudi* (self or Ultimate Reality), which suggests a metaphysical connection between people and nature. According to Al-Daghistani, “Iqbal engaged with Qur’anic metaphysics to develop an Islamic ethics of care for the environment, by introducing a new relation between human being and nature.”¹⁰

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jens Koehrsen, “Muslims and Climate Change: How Islam, Muslim Organizations, and Religious Leaders Influence Climate Change Perceptions and Mitigation Activities,” *WIREs Climate Change* 12, no. 3 (2021), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.702>.

⁷ Al-Daghistani, *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions*, 140.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

The chapter makes a strong philosophical case but raises a crucial practical question: can spiritual insights like *tazkiya* and *khudi* alone solve ecological crises without concrete mechanisms for implementation in policy, markets or grassroots action?¹¹ Without this, such rich concepts risk remaining philosophically potent but practically inert.

In his essay, “Islamic Environmental Economics and Sciences of Nature,” Waleed El-Ansary argues that traditional Islamic ideas about science and economics, especially their holistic view of work, nature and commercial value, can help fix the environmental crisis caused by modernity’s reductionist, mechanistic paradigms. El-Ansary says “the reductionist paradigm of modern science excludes the integration of the findings of modern science into higher orders of knowledge.” Because of this, he adds, “both man and nature have suffered a plethora of unintended adverse consequences.”¹² El-Ansary says we need to change our way of thinking about the world so “the irreducibility of quality to quantity in the Islamic sciences of nature reintroduces values into environmental economics.”¹³ He suggests an interdisciplinary paradigm by synthesising Islamic metaphysics, environmental economics and critique of modernity. By emphasising conventional cosmology, he presents an ethical substitute while contesting the epistemic causes of ecological deterioration. His emphasis on quality over quantity¹⁴ and the spiritualisation of labour¹⁵ offer an interesting framework for sustainable economics. However, his critique of modern science, while valid, could be strengthened by empirically engaging with modern ecological models rather than primarily offering a metaphysical counterproposal.

Katharina Ivany investigates the development of *iqtiṣād* from a moral virtue (moderation) to a contemporary concept, “economy,”¹⁶ in her chapter (4), “A Neglected Notion: *Iqtiṣād* in Pre-modern and Early Modern Islamic Thought.” Ivany looks into how premodern Islamic sources, which define *iqtiṣād* as balance (*i’tidāl*), sensible conduct (*rushd*) and the “right measure,” suggest it was a component of traditional Islamic ethics.¹⁷ Wealth was seen favourably by scholars such as Birgivī Meḥmed Efendī (d. 1573) and Ghazālī, provided it was controlled by “moderation in” and a “sensible way of spending.”¹⁸ Ivany contends that current debates about environmental and economic sustainability could benefit from this historical interpretation of *iqtiṣād*.

¹¹ Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn, “The Basis for a Discipline of Islamic Environmental Law,” in Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, eds., *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 237.

¹² Al-Daghistani, *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions*, 76.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63–68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 104–105.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

The critical question her suggestion prompts is: how can this ethical concept of *iqtisād* be translated into a critique of consumerism within modern Muslim societies,¹⁹ not just as a counter to Western capitalism?

The chapter “Islamic Resources for Water Conservation and Management” by Natana J. DeLong-Bas offers an interesting theological-ethical framework for Islamic water stewardship. Criticising the neoliberal commodification of water, she notes, “the shift from considering water as a right to water as a commodity has provoked significant theological and ethical debates.”²⁰ She uses Islamic sources to construct water as a divine sign (*āyah*) and sacred trust (*amānah*), arguing that God’s sovereignty over natural resources is reflected in its equitable distribution.²¹

DeLong-Bas suggests religion as a force that complements scientific environmentalism; she says, while science offers diagnostic warnings, “religion can inspire meaningful responses...rooting actions in faith.”²² This synthesis is demonstrated by the way Muslim scholars expand on the idea of *maṣlaḥa* (common good), classifying environmental issues under the domain of public welfare and justice (*‘adl*). She notes, “equitable access to resources within the categories of justice and common good, such that environmental issues cannot be separated from the concerns of the life community.”²³ She goes on to say that in this framework, community needs—especially those related to basic resources—take precedence over individual excess.

Nonetheless, DeLong-Bas opposes theological determinism, pointing out that “theological and ethical inspiration is simply one piece of a much larger needed package.”²⁴ By combining practical hydrology with Qur’anic hermeneutics, she urges Muslims to “observe, reason, and remember” the ecological embeddedness of water.²⁵ Though she acknowledges some individual green practices of Muslims at houses of worship,²⁶ this chapter also questions whether ethical or theological approaches alone can be transformed into a practical suitable way for mitigating environmental crises.

The next chapter, “Borrowing against the Future: Is Ecological Usury Changing the Climate?” by Sarah E. Robinson, reinterprets and extends the Islamic ban on *ribā* (usury) as a framework for intergenerational environmental justice, providing one of the volume’s most innovative and applicable arguments of the theological-economic critique of climate inaction. She contends that over-extraction of resources is a type of “ecological usury,”²⁷ giving future generations unmanageable debts, which is against Qur’anic ethics that combine the

¹⁹ Muhammad Yaseen Gada, *Islam and Environmental Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 34; Zainal Abidin Bagir and Najiyah Martiam, “Islam: Norms and Practices,” in W. Jenkins, M.E. Tucker and J. Grim, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Routledge, 2017), 80.

²⁰ Al-Daghistani, *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions*, 124.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

²² *Ibid.*, 126–127.

²³ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

condemnation of exploitative *ribā* with calls for redistributive *zakāt* (charity).²⁸ Robinson urges Muslim and international audiences to address the “borrowing against the future” inherent in contemporary consumption by portraying climate collapse as a moral failure comparable to financial predation.

The idea of *khalīfa* (stewardship), which views people as trustees of an earthly inheritance that belongs to God and future generations, is at the heart of her argument. “If current people deliver to the next generation a substantial economic [and] environmental burden, rather than a charitable trust enhanced by this generation’s care, these activities stand in stark contradiction to the role of humanity as caretakers and trustees, *khalīfa*,” warning that current extractive practices betray this trust.²⁹ Robinson bases her argument on pressing empirical facts, such as the *hajj*’s susceptibility to temperature increases, which could make Makkah uninhabitable. This raises the question she asks: “Can modern Muslims imagine a year without a *hajj*?”³⁰ Her argument to substitute “climate charity” for “climate usury” is strengthened by this existential threat.³¹ She argues this requires systemic reform and personal accountability – shifting from ecological exploitation to intergenerational justice, and from anthropocentric excess to what she terms “theocentric accountability.”³²

Her argument that “science is never enough to resolve problems that are cultural in origin” is a crucial contribution,³³ aligning decolonial critique with the need for moral frameworks. Once again, this chapter falls short of explaining how the concept of “ecological *ribā*” is transformed into practical reality through its incorporation into national policies, government schemes and other on-the-ground frameworks.

Jonathan E. Brockopp explores the moral conundrums that Senegal, a country that contributed only “one ten-thousandth of world historical emissions” but is disproportionately affected by climate change,³⁴ faces in the final chapter, “Senegalese Responses to Climate Change: An Ethical Analysis.” Brockopp draws attention to Senegal’s precarious position as a country that depends on foreign investment (such as Sweden’s involvement in the energy sector) and is therefore influenced by the environmental priorities of wealthier countries.³⁵ Although Senegal has made strides in renewable energy, Brockopp points out that these initiatives are insignificant in comparison to high-emitters such as the United States, where even small changes would offset Senegal’s total carbon footprint.³⁶

Brockopp also criticises the discrepancy between Senegal’s policy discourse and Islamic environmental ethics. The 2015 Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change seems performative rather than policy-relevant because religious language is missing from climate

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Ibid., 163.

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Ibid., 168.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 153.

³⁴ Ibid., 180.

³⁵ Ibid., 181.

³⁶ Ibid., 188.

strategies, despite the country's majority being Muslim.³⁷ He contends that, rather than being a result of natural, faith-based climate action, this is a top-down attempt to conform to international standards.³⁸

His chapter implicitly raises a central question for the entire volume: why is there such a disconnect between deep Islamic environmental ethics and the policy actions of Muslim-majority states? This moves the critique beyond external blame to internal accountability.

Overall, *Recovering Environmental and Economic Traditions in the Islamic World* is a significant and welcome contribution to decolonial environmental ethics. It successfully unearths a rich intellectual heritage that provides essential moral resources for reimagining a sustainable future. However, the volume's coherence is frequently fragmented, as the chapters lack practical engagement and do not directly address the climate crisis. The volume's scope would have been significantly enhanced by incorporating a separate chapter on Muslim environmental activism. This chapter could analyse the mobilisation of Islamic theology, jurisprudence and ethics to support eco-friendly initiatives and conservation efforts, drawing on compelling examples from the UK and Indonesia.³⁹ While its decolonial framing is necessary, a more balanced critique that also examines internal challenges within Muslim societies would strengthen its argument. The book excels at answering the "what" and "why" of an Islamic environmental economics and leaves the reader eager for a sequel that tackles the more difficult question of "how".

³⁷ Ibid., 185.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Koehrsen, "Muslims and Climate Change."

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