

McGill Chaplaincy's

Radix

April 2003

*Ceci n'est pas
une pomme*

i

Environment

Editorial Notes—The War On Environment

What is “environment”? I’ve had plenty of occasion to consider this question as a student in the McGill School of Environment, but the answer is not as simple as it might seem. I might begin to describe it as what surrounds me, what is outside of me. But that’s not quite it, because I’m part of that too—I affect what’s around me just as it impacts me. So is it really possible to draw a line between myself and some thing called the environment?

I am writing this on the night before the night that war will begin. I am wondering how this environment of mine is about to change. As my mind passes through puddles of bewilderment and disbelief, I come uneasily to rest on thoughts of people in Iraq, as they awake to what will likely be their last day of “peace” before the “war.”

Are humans part of the environment? Even if we think of environment as all that is non-human, in a war humans still fall into “environment.” There’s not much that’s more dehumanizing than having the value of your life reduced to “casualty,” a by-product of a bombing raid. For a war like this one to happen, this perspective is necessary. It is necessary to see “civilians” (people) as static points in a static environment that has clearly defined boundaries and parameters. And then it is necessary to see that environment as something that, by some divine or moral or biological right, we must exercise control over.

But what if we don’t recognize those strict boundaries, what then? It is harder and harder to take those distinctions seriously, as this war exemplifies so precisely. The imminence of war on the people of Iraq was declared to the world, and in the same breath the expected repercussions were pronounced as the U.S. domestic alert was raised to “code orange”. Waging a war in Iraq is not confined to Iraq. Or to nearby countries like Turkey, Kuwait or Jordan. It is not even relegated to lands far from home. It is in all of these places, and it is at home too. So where is the distinction between where we end and Iraq begins?

It is useful to the games we play as humans, to define boundaries for ourselves, to place things in discrete categories in order to simply distinguish “I” from “you” and things of value to “I” from things of value to “you.” But as the implications of this war and the process leading up to it demonstrate, the relevance of such distinctions is tenuous at best—our use of technology draws us ever more into contact, systematically dissolving what was, in the past, enough to separate me from you.

So what is environment? It’s not something static, there’s no ideal state to be found. The environment, like all systems, is part of an unceasing process of creation and destruction—just as (in Hindu mythology) Lord Siva dances the world into creation, so he destroys it. And I can’t conceive of an environment in which I am not intrinsically connected. So when I think about the state of my environment today, on any level and in any sense, I have to feel hopeful but I don’t know what it is that I hope for. I can’t imagine a some *thing* that makes sense to hope for. Instead I suppose that I find hope in recognizing that life doesn’t exist without death, or creation without destruction, and trying to make sense of my world with this in mind. I am a part of that same process along with everything else.

So as some people in the world began preparations to wage war on Sunday, March 16th, thousands of others around the globe lit candles and held vigils for peace*. In a sense it was a small gesture—after all, there are probably more troops stockpiled in the Gulf than people who lit candles on Sunday—but its significance is real. As JRR Tolkien pointedly offers: “The beauty of [the white star] smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”—*The Return of the King*. That light remains long after clouds have passed, emerging to illumine the truth we all seek. For the sake of all people and our world we will keep that light going strong.

—Erica Crawford, editor. *After a fantastic two years, this will be my last issue as editor of the Radix. I would like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to Marie Eclache and Indi Samarajiva for all their hard work and inspiration, as well as the fabulous editorial boards and contributors that I’ve had the good fortune to work with. Also a big thanks to Gwenda Wells and McGill Chaplaincy for all of your support. So the hunt for a new editor of the Radix for the 2003-4 school year begins! If you are interested in the position, or being involved in the Radix next year, contact Chaplaincy at 398-4104.*

*see www.moveon.org for more details

The Ultimate Saint

Last weekend I went to the woods. I left the city for a place where there are more trees than cars, and I came back feeling renewed. Something about being surrounded by nature fills me up so that I have more to give to others. As I walked alone through a whispering forest I was reminded of all the millions of people who came before me, who lived off the land and knew how to survive with nature, and I felt at peace.

We are all so closely connected by our neediness. All humans need trees and water and grass and fish to survive physically and spiritually. My worldview is richly invested with spiritual and religious education, but also with a great respect and love for nature. Despite technological advances and the Internet revolution, I still believe in the power of the soul to transcend matter, to be divinely supported in times of pain and to cry out when the frogs are dying because pesticides have damaged their ecosystems.

What are people talking about when they throw around abstract words like soul, spiritual and divine? To offer definitions are Doctoral theses in themselves, so I offer my own intuitive understanding. I can conceive of a world in which, after my death, I am buried into the ground and all that is left of me are the genes I pass on to my offspring or the book I wrote that sits on a shelf in the library. But such a world has little meaning to me. To feel a connection to all my friends and to all my strangers, those who came before and those who are not yet born, is a much more meaningful way of conceiving of the world. The matter that constitutes my person is perishable—it will eventually disintegrate and return to the earth—but my connection to all the people who will ever live cannot die. It is eternal. It exists as energy-immaterial, not necessarily caused by the neurons moving around my brain, but by a presence deeper than that which the human investigator can ever grasp. Whether we connect to this presence or not is up to each individual will. But for myself, I know that there is a resource in the wind and the trees and the lines in my knees.

Nature is the ultimate Saint. She gives and gives, gets used, beaten, dumped on and tortured and she never says a word. She continues to give of herself, day after day, only reminding us of her power from time to time, through a really awful earthquake or a devastating avalanche. It is easy to forget as we walk through the city, that everything around us comes from the earth, that we would peter out if denied of the basic resources of life: water, air, fire and earth. Humans have the power to destroy all this, but we also have the power to live in harmony with the cycles of the moon, the changing of the seasons and the beauty of the land. My hope is that we choose life over destruction, to connect rather than look away.

—Carolyn Ross

Carolyn is in her last semester in Religious Studies at McGill. She recently attended the Interfaith Retreat Weekend organized by McGill Chaplaincy Services, along with 15 other fabulous, fun creative folks.



—Erykah Zelfand



Not Even For a Righteous Cause

“He it is Who made you vicegerents on earth.” (Qu’ran 35:39) This verse makes clear what Allah, the author of the Holy Qu’ran, expects of human beings in relation to their surroundings. The crucial part of this verse is to understand how it describes the relationship between a person in authority and that which he is responsible for. In this verse human beings are described as “vicegerents” and this is when one has the right to make choices but is held accountable for these choices. In contrast with the Islamic conception, there is “dominion” which is a relationship where one is in authority but not accountable for what one does, and thus their hand is free to act as they please. Thus it is important to look at some of the restrictions that we as “vicegerents” must respect in terms of the land and water, plants and animals.

Now, the following *hadith* (prophetic tradition) should also illustrate the general framework that the Muslim must work within. Allah’s Apostle (Muhammad, PBUH) happened to pass by Sa’d as he was performing ablution. Whereupon he said: “Sa’d what is this extravagance?” He said: “Can there be any idea of extravagance in ablution?” Whereupon he (the Prophet) said: “Yes, even if you are by the side of a flowing river.” In this case, the messenger of Allah, Muhammad (PBUH) tells us that we are not permitted to waste water, even if it is from a seemingly unlimited source, or used for a righteous cause, in this case fulfilling a religious duty. If we extend this reasoning, it is hard to imagine the permissibility of corporate waste of our natural resources.

The Islamic tradition also favours the well-being of plant-life. Among the sayings of the Prophet, we see that cutting a tree without a legitimate justification is condemned, while the planting of trees, which is “considered almsgiving on his behalf until the Day of Judgement”, is encouraged. Furthermore, animals are certainly not excluded in terms of their rights and our responsibilities to them. The prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: “A good deed done to a beast is as good as doing good to a human being; while an act of cruelty to a

beast is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being.” Muhammad (PBUH) also told us of an incident that happened to another prophet in the past. This prophet was stung by an ant and, in anger he ordered the whole of the ants’ nest to be burned. At this, God reprimanded this prophet, saying, “Because one ant stung you, you would have burned a whole community which glorified Me.” And the Qu’ran states that: “There is not an animal on Earth, nor a bird that flies on it’s wings, but they are communities like you.” (6:38).

In these passages Allah reminds the human being of how he is similar to the inhabitants of the animal kingdom. This is not to say that Allah is equating animals with human beings, as is clear from the verse about “vicegerents”, but instead He is simply reminding us of our responsibility to other creatures and the compassion we should have for them.

I suggest that people read further about Islam’s balanced conception of the environment, keeping in mind that this is a tradition that was revealed nearly a millennia and a half ago. It seems to me that Islam represents a real “middle path”, as it does in all domains, in this case between a vision of a world where human beings are free to do what they will with the world, and one where we conceive of ourselves as part of the animal kingdom. If we follow this conception of the world, God willing, we can step up to our responsibility to maintain and heal the earth. We would therefore be able to use its resources in a way that does not exceed our needs, as opposed to the current system where the resources are near depletion due to our extravagant wants.

—Owen Weiss

Owen is studying in UI Linguistics



Movie Review—25th Hour: Artistic or Racist?

In the recently released movie, “25th Hour”, the depiction of a drug dealer’s last day before he is sent to prison for seven years has a profound message beneath the script: cherish each day of your life and don’t do anything that will jeopardize those days. Although I would recommend the movie and found parts of it, and the overall premise, to be unique and thought-inspiring, I would like to draw your attention to an aspect of the movie which I found particularly disturbing and highly inappropriate. There is a part in this movie where, out of sheer frustration, the drug dealer lashes out at the city of New York, particularly targeting the various ethnic and racial denominations found within its walls. His tirade begins with, “F**k the Sikhs...” and he goes on to describe them as “turban wearing” and “terrorist wielding”. As a Sikh, I obviously found this description to be extremely insulting, but moreover, it inspired a feeling of terror and disbelief within me. How could a statement that is so obviously false and wholly ignorant make its way into mainstream media?

After the September 11th, 2001 attacks, a Sikh man was attacked and killed in the United States. This man was killed because he wore a turban and was mistaken for a Muslim. I thought, at the time, that maybe this was one freak incident, not representative of the ignorance that is out there. I am now starting to think that I was wrong. Statements such as the one in this movie reinforce the ignorance that is already so prevalent in the world. The goal should be to educate the public, and certainly not to hold a larger commu-

nity responsible for the actions of a few. But how do we accomplish this goal? Further still, how do we undo the damage caused by movies like this? These are difficult questions, and I am definitely not pretending to have all the answers. That said, I absolutely do not think that scenes such as this one should be allowed in mainstream movies. There are people out there who are impressionable and would take what is said here to be true. This kind of undeserved, negative attention should not be aimed at any visible minority, for the effects can be harmful and devastating.

Media needs to recognize its responsibility where the public is concerned. The overall goal in cinema is obviously to entertain, but a message is still being transmitted through this sort of media. I’m not saying that moviemakers should necessarily attempt to educate the public, but it would be nice wouldn’t it? At the very least, they shouldn’t attempt to heighten the ignorance or reinforce the misconceptions that already exist within our society. If you ask me, that’s not very much to ask of them.

—Reena Kaur Baweja

Reena is in U3 biochemistry. She is also known to be loud and fond of eating Lucky Charms



How To Mix Plants and People...

Unfortunately, I cannot walk around naked in the streets of Montreal for extended periods of time in the winter without dying of frostbite and hypothermia. And that sucks. Bears can do it, as well as squirrels. But I, with my meager fur, would die if I attempted such a thing. Clearly, as humans we need to have a certain degree of separation from nature, even if only in the form of a coat and long-johns to protect us from her harsher elements. But has this separation gone too far? After too many days spent in comfortably climate-controlled cars and buildings, it can be easy to forget the earth that provided it all for us.

In fact, we depend on the environment for all of our needs be it a warm jacket, a warm house or a hot meal, but we rarely consider this providence. As carbon dioxide levels rise and concerns heighten about the growing global climate change crisis, it is becoming more and more clear that long due consideration is owed to the earth we live on. It seems that humans are approaching a junction in which there are two extreme options: To diverge completely from nature or to become one with nature.

The latter option can never be realized, for the already mentioned reason that nakedness and Quebec do not mix safely. Nevertheless, natural systems have already solved some of our greatest problems and have survived and thrived for far longer than humans have graced the earth. Finding a way to join up on the immortality of nature can't be bad for our cause.

On the other side is the option of complete divergence from nature. In this option we enter into a world entirely of our own making. Creative scientists are already beginning to develop ways of artificially recreating the fundamentals of nature. The problem here is the mentality that the "fundamentals" of nature are only considered in terms of a human perspective. While we sometimes like to think that the human perspective is omniscient, it is not. We will never be able to foresee all the potential consequences of our actions and therefore can never conclusively define what is fundamental or detrimental, even to our own existence.

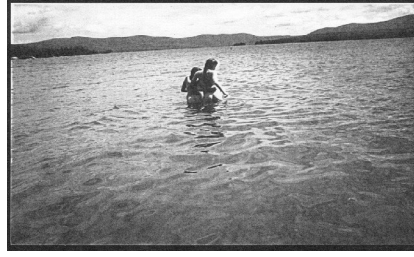
So, if both of these extreme options are no good, what do we do? One in-between is Montreal's own Biodome. On the front of the Biodome brochure is the slogan: "Wall to wall nature." Um. . .no. Actually, the Biodome only showcases those elements of nature that people would be willing to pay \$10 to see. I guess it's, "Wall to wall pretty parts of nature" (except for the concrete path, electronic sliding doors, and fences to keep the nature in its place). Nevertheless, people come by the thousands and leave feeling as though they've gone on a hike in a very strange, but *natural*, environment. Then they drive home, content to let the "real" thing perish.

The benefit that the Biodome provides, on the other hand, is that it instills an appreciation of nature into a primarily urban-dwelling society. It is hard to recognise the importance of the environment if you are unable to see it alone in its natural beauty. As humans, it is essential for us to acquire an interest and appreciation of nature. If we are to sustain our massive and growing population and our numerous needs, we need sustainable development that draws from the infinite wisdom of our natural environment, a system that has proven its endurance for millions upon millions of years.

I'm not going to give suggestions on the "best way of living sustainably" or anything like that. I would suggest, though, that you make a trip up Mount Royal some time and enjoy the warm chalet that's open to the public at the top. The twenty minute walk gives a picture of the beautiful natural environment that is indigenous to this part of Quebec. It's wall-to-wall nature without the walls.

—Evan Forward

Evan is a first year IDS student from Vermont U.S.A. He likes to hack.



—Rachel Davidson

In A Perfect World We'd All Be Pantheists

Many Eastern and Native religions are concerned with the conservation of nature and the preservation of the environment. Pantheism is an ancient religion that developed well before Buddhism or Taoism; not only does it care for nature, but it holds that the earth is the most sacred order there is. Pantheism is not an exclusive religion in that most of the time it is not in a category of its own. Many Taoists and Buddhists, Pagans and ecologists, are Pantheists. The average environmentalist may also be a Pantheist and not even realize it.

Modern Pantheism is often misunderstood, as it is not theistic, nor is it atheistic. Pantheism does not involve a belief in deities, spirits or any supernatural powers. Instead, Pantheists believe that what is divine is right here on earth; in fact, it is earth. Pantheism's central tenet is that the universe, the earth and nature are divine and so they should be treated as sacred. So although modern, or scientific, Pantheists don't believe in supernatural deities or powers, they do believe in the divine greatness of the earth, and that is why the earth is so deeply revered. In place of worshipping the supernatural, Pantheists venerate what is natural. This may seem bizarre to the Western world, as what is usually considered divine lies above and beyond this earth. So here is the Pantheistic world view in a simplistic equation: God=Universe. Due to the fact that greatness lies within this very earth, Pantheists believe that it should be loved, valued, protected and revered. In this way, Pantheism is a religion that promotes environmentalism.

Now that you know what Pantheism is, you might be ready to write it off as a religion that seems to be for the tree-hugging hippie types. But before you pass judgment so quickly, I invite you to consider just what exactly the beliefs of Pantheists could do for our world. Pantheism is a simple religion that has much to offer. It provides the strongest support for environmental ethics, as it is based on treating the earth as a sacred entity. Today, with the destruction of the biosphere, the over-consumption of natural resources and the need for an ecologically valid ethical system, Pantheism is placed in a new position. What would the world be like if we all loved the earth as much as Pantheists do?

Pantheism offers an interesting solution to the environmental crisis. Perhaps the first step towards saving the environment is simply loving the earth and enjoying nature in all its beauty and splendour. It seems to me that the rest would follow from there. Loving the earth is a powerful impetus that ensures an eco-friendly lifestyle. It works much in the same way that loving anything does: if you love something, you want to protect it, cherish it and preserve it. Love the earth as you love that first spring flower, and reusing, reducing and recycling will seem less like a chore and more like a natural duty.

Pantheism may not be the sole solution to revising human attitudes and behaviour towards the environment, but its loving-kindness approach towards the earth can play a key role in helping the environment.

—Laura Gallo

Laura is a U1 major in World Religions. She doesn't consider herself a Pantheist



In a Perfect World We'd All Be Anthropocentric

In environmental discussions, Christianity is often accused of being arrogantly anthropocentric. There are Christians who are arrogant and anthropocentric. However, I believe that Christianity, lived truly, is not so. This is, paradoxically, because of an anthropocentrism, namely Christocentrism, which is very different from arrogance. It alone is truly anthropocentric, because it focuses on Christ, God, who is truly human, and the most perfect of all humans.

All things were created in Christ, and the beauty of creation bears witness to God. Creation gives God glory by obeying His commands. In the heart of creation God placed human beings, to whom He gave an immortal soul and the dignity of being made in His image. This dignity is completely undeserved. The symbolism of this informs the Genesis narrative in which God forms man, (adam) out of dust (ha'adam) and breathes life into his nostrils. Man is kept humble in the face of his Creator by remembering that he is dust. In Psalm 104, we read: "When you take away your breath they die, and are turned again to their dust. When you send forth your breath (or your Spirit), they shall be made: and you shall renew the face of the earth." Humans are here likened to the face of the earth, a thought echoed by St. Maximus the Confessor who called them the microcosm of creation.

God also ordained humanity to co-create with Him, to transform reality. He gave them "dominion" over the natural world, to "cultivate and keep" it. This command was meant not as permission to damage creation, but rather to facilitate the fulfillment of creation. The model for living this "dominion" is provided by Jesus Christ, who is Lord (*Dominus*) and who emptied Himself of dominion and sacrificed himself for the world. Truly Christian anthropocentrism, for this reason, can never be selfish. Dr. Richard Chartres, Anglican Bishop of London, says that human beings are called to stand before God to offer up creation, and to stand in the heart of creation on behalf of God. They may modify it by skill and technology only so that they may once again offer it to the Creator.

But how should we do this concretely? Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew jointly remind us of the first principle: "we must regain humility and recognize the limits of our powers, and most importantly, the limits of our knowledge and judgement," "be humble regarding the idea of ownership and...be open to the demands of solidarity" and "not take irreversible actions...during our brief stay on this earth." They describe the key to sustainability, profoundly, as the "love for our children that will show us the path that we must follow into the future."

Bishop Chartres describes the second principle: "Whereas humanity is sometimes described as the 'crown of creation', it is more faithful to the Genesis account of the seventh day to see the Sabbath itself, as the crown." The Sabbath is a time of regeneration (reminding us of the Levitical injunction to let the land lie fallow every seventh year). But more than this it is a time of thanksgiving in which we proclaim the fullness of God's perfection and give thanks for the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Bishop Chartres says that, "these perceptions inform the distinctive Christian attitude to matter...St John of Damascus speaks for Christian Orthodoxy when he says, 'Because of the Incarnation, I salute all remaining matter with reverence.'"

When Christians fail to focus on Jesus, we cannot remember how it is that we must live. The Eucharist—the source and summit of Christian life—is, in the words of John Paul II, "bound to the earth. The bread and wine which we bring into it are symbols of the gifts of the earth, gifts of the Creator and fruit of man's labor." The Pope and the Patriarch counsel us towards "genuine *conversion* in Christ...repentance and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation."

Pope John Paul II says, "the more the ministry of the Church is focused on man...the more it needs to be theocentric, that is directed toward the Father." This lent, as the Church implores the Father for conversion of heart and renewal in the image of His Son, I pray that the Holy Spirit will grant us humility to learn to love all of God's creation and perceive the divine mystery in all things.

—Kim D'Souza

Kim studies Environmental Studies and Political Science, and also enjoys writing for the Tribune



Waltz—

I like the word waltz, so I kept it for the title.
 Though it has no immediate relevance
 to this serenade of randomness;
 no particular thing to say:
 only a desire to soar with you
 in our minds,
 with our hearts;
 as kindred spirits can only do.

The other day while I was on the bus,
 burdened by burdens,
 i thought of heaven.
 I never really thought of heaven like I did that day;
 it brought tears to my eyes.

How I longed for heaven at that time:
 i saw the beauty;
 i found my hope:
 “What I most look forward to in heaven,” I thought to myself,
 “is the sublime sharing of souls.”

How I long to share with another being;
 for us to understand each other completely:
 in thoughts, in feelings;
 without misunderstandings, without physical boundaries;
 but in a way,
 to liquefy together;
 to share a moment.

It saddens me
 not to be able to fully understand someone
 and not to be understood by them.

There is no true union on this earth;
 only a semblance and an attempt.

For now, I will continue to waltz,
 and try not to go round and around.

—Sara Cornett
Sara is pursuing a degree in Humanistic Studies and East Asian Studies



Planet Under Siege

The continuing ecological degradation that is transpiring across the face of our planet presents a matter of pressing urgency in the eyes of many scientists. Although the attention of the news media has recently been diverted toward the struggle between the West and "terror", there is no gainsaying the fact that the environmental dilemmas of yesteryear are still waiting to be addressed. I believe that the values of *Halakha* (system of Jewish religious law) can potentially help humanity handle the pollution crisis it currently faces.



—Indi Samarajiva

Firstly, as a prerequisite to effectively handling the present crisis it is essential to develop a sound perspective on the environment. The Torah furnishes us with precisely such a multi-dimensional perspective*. There are at least six facets

to the Judaic perspective on nature, namely that nature (1) represents the Creator's handiwork, (2) serves as a ritual vehicle for the praises man ought to offer the Creator, (3) serves as a source of moral instruction (4) is completely divorced of any sacred or deified status, (5) is the raw material that man is charged with being industrially creative and productive with and (6) serves as the theatre in which man must exercise protective stewardship.

From these points it emerges that the environment must be appreciated and not wrecklessly abused, but at the same time some degree of human intervention in nature is expected. Human craft is an intrinsic component of nature's beauty (see Psalms 104); thus, a careful balance must be struck between caring for the planet and promoting the human mission to subdue the planet.

Secondly, Torah law very much concerns itself with the subject of environmental damages. It is strictly forbidden for a person to take actions that damage another's life, health or property, and one who does so is legally held responsible. One who has fear of Heaven and who realizes that the divine law forbids causing harm to a fellow human being will take the pains, as a matter of conscience, to avoid causing excessive pollution. Indeed, when the Talmud (Shabbat 30b) declares that the whole universe is created for the sake of any person who fears the Almighty, this is no hyperbole. For only such a person is guaranteed to champion the integrity of the cosmic components, at least insofar as they affect human welfare.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the conundrum of automobile driving, an enjoyable activity that is very much essential to contemporary society, but also contributes massively to air pollution. If the idea of asking automobile travellers to limit the overall amount of driving for the sake of ecological protection seems unreasonable or unprecedented, attention may be called to the Talmudic description of the Yom Kippur service in the Temple (Yoma 53b). The high priest is reported to have offered a brief prayer, which concluded with the curious petition that "the prayers of road travellers not be accepted before You." Rashi explains that wayfarers would beseech the Almighty to suspend rainfall, apparently hoping to enable navigation of roads. Since drought would be catastrophic to the local ecosystem in Israel, the high priest, as the representative of the Jewish People, was justified in demanding that the aspiration of travellers be frustrated for the sake of the greater good...

Let these be some of the ideas that illuminate the current ecological debate, which may in turn serve as a springboard to protect man and his world. With the Almighty's assistance, and the heroic

Radix is a student-produced publication.
 The views expressed are those of individual contributors and are not necessarily shared by McGill Chaplaincy Services or its Chaplains

Layout

Erica Crawford

Cover Design, Graphics

Indi Samarajiva

Editorial Board

Esha Bhandari
 Loren Carle
 Erica Crawford (editor)
 Marie Eclache
 Beth Hopwood
 Maryam Ishani
 Reena Kaur Baweja
 Nina Kim
 Sheila McKnight
 Indi Samarajiva
 Khurram Sher
 Sarede Switzer
 Erica Zelfand

Current Events, Timeless Wisdom

Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) is believed to have once told his companion, "If you leave one-tenth of what I have given you, you will be punished, but there is coming a time on my Ummah when, if they hold on to one-tenth, they will go to paradise." Though in the Western world one will quite often hear how incompatible Sharia laws and prophetic tradition are with contemporary thinking, Muslims are steadfast in their belief that what was prescribed during Muhammad's time is still applicable and relevant today. It is our dedication and admiration of the Prophet which has taught us that when he spoke, he spoke in utter prophetic wisdom, addressing not only those present at his time, but all generations of Muslims and humanity. In his comment to his companion, Muhammad acknowledged that a day will come when practicing Islam will prove to be a contested course, and that day, no doubt, has come.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that in the past five hundred years, the image of Muslims to Westerners has come full circle. During the Middle Ages, Islam was commonly viewed as being 'spread by the sword'. Today, though the chivalrous impact of the sword has waned, Muslims are plagued by the inaccurate image of being crusade-hungry avengers once more. Muslims are responsible for preserving the profound works of Aristotle, making notable advances in astronomy, introducing the concept of just inheritance laws for females and instilling religious tolerance in communities as early as Jerusalem 635AD; nevertheless, Islam has come to be seen simply as the religion of extremes. To most, it is a religion sadly teeming with the indisputably evil and the truly downtrodden.

Though the suffering of Muslims worldwide has become increasingly palpable following the current "War Against Terrorism", there remains a habitual tendency for the world to adopt the motto, "out of sight, out of mind" for impoverished Muslims. Contrary to widespread belief, the suffering of Afghanis, Palestinians and Iraqis did not begin when the media took notice of their plight, and it does not end when their stories cease to appear in the headlines. We have failed each other by allowing our concern for these people to be navigated by the media. Though it is our altruistic compulsion to alleviate suffering, we are unquestionably guilty of giving heed only when the media does, and disregarding the downtrodden once the spotlight is off of them. Unfortunately, this is not the only problem facing Muslims today.

Nobel prize-winning author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, made

an address to Harvard graduates in 1978. Emerging from the Communist regime of Russia, he knew how bewildering ancient, self-contained cultures are to Western reasoning: "the persisting blindness of superiority continues to hold the belief that all the vast regions of our planet should develop and mature to the level of contemporary Western systems...Countries are judged on the merit of their progress in that direction." Indeed, it is true that while

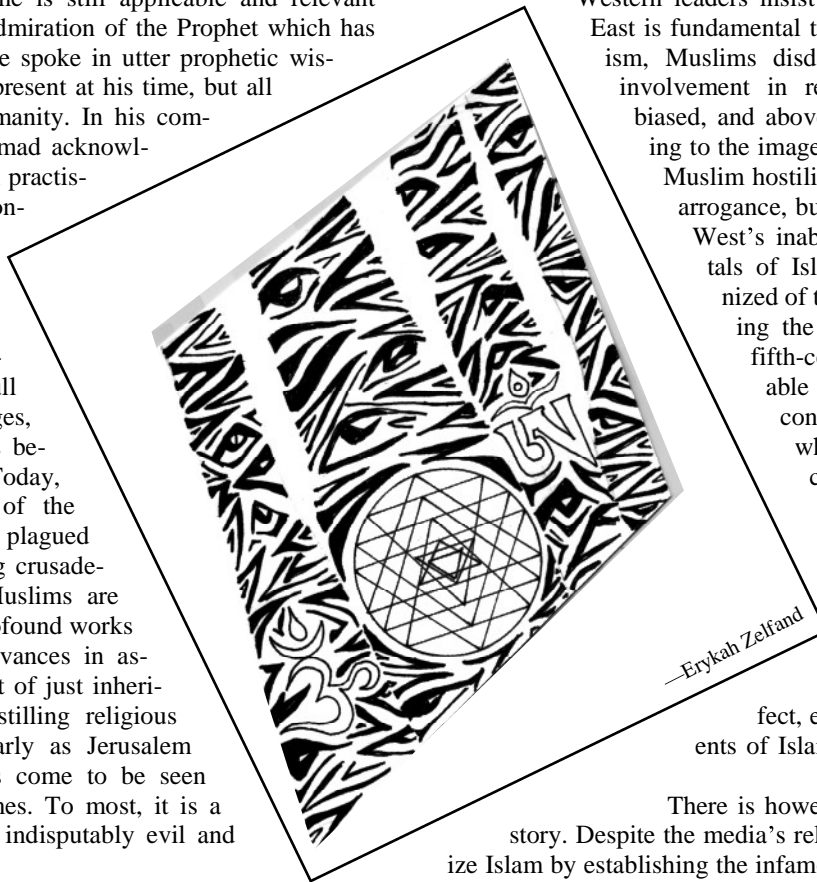
Western leaders insist their presence in the Middle East is fundamental to the campaign against terrorism, Muslims disdainfully construe the West's involvement in regional politics as intrusive, biased, and above all else, irrevocably damaging to the image and traditions of Islam. Open Muslim hostility should not be interpreted as arrogance, but rather as frustration with the West's inability to accept the fundamentals of Islam. Perhaps the most scrutinized of these practices is women wearing the veil. It is baffling to me, if fifth-century B.C. Sophists were able to intelligibly conceive of the concept of cultural relativism, why the North American public continue to find it so perplexing that Muslim women choose to cover out of their own free will. The obsession with Islamic dress for women and the urgency to "smoke-out"

Muslim terrorists has, in effect, established the image of adherents of Islam as either victims or threats.

There is however, an optimistic side to this story. Despite the media's relentless attempt to sensationalize Islam by establishing the infamous as its 'poster-boys', I have faith that the ever-enduring words of the Qur'an and our Prophet have not fallen on deaf ears. For all the newsstands, bookshelves, and television outlets dedicated to exposing Muslim terrorists and 'Islamic fanaticism', Islam continues to be the fastest growing faith in the world today.

—Nadia S. Zaman

Nadia is studying Economics and Middle Eastern Studies, U2



planet under siege, cont'd from pg 6

resolve to do what is necessary as a matter of conscience, we can prevail over pollution.

—Shalom Spira

Shalom is currently working on a second undergraduate degree, related to Judaism and the Environment

* For further reading on the subject, see: Spira, Shalom. "Nature Viewed Through the Prism of Judaism", available in the McGill University coursepack for 260-270: Religious Ethics and the Environment, Eastman Systems, Inc., Montreal: 2002)

Interested in
contributing to the
Radix?
Email us at
radix@yours.com
Writers, artists, board
members needed for
2003-4

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.