

BOOK REVIEW BY HARFIYAH HALEEM

TACKLING WICKED PROBLEMS THROUGH TRANSDISCIPLINARY IMAGINATION, eds Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris, Jacqueline Y. Russell, Earthscan, (London & Washington 2010) 312 pp. inc. index. ISBN 978-1-84407-925-4 p/b

Question: What is a wicked problem? Answer: Climate Change, for example: i.e. an extremely complex problem that can't be solved by any simple method. Also, as one contributor to this book, John Schooneveldt remarks, 'Wicked problems cannot be understood in the context that give rise to them' (p.141). (It's a bit like trying to remove the plank from one's own eye, to quote a biblical image.) The whole drift of this book is to introduce and justify a more open approach to making decisions that affect the environment, labelled 'Open Transdisciplinary Inquiry', sometimes including the word 'Imaginative'. This means an inquiry or research method that seeks to break down barriers between various 'knowledges' or specializations, and provide windows of understanding between them. In each chapter of Part 2, the various kinds of knowledge or world view are specified as part of the synopsis at the beginning of each chapter, and in the theory section (Part 1, p.65) there is a table listing the various kinds of knowledge. Muslim readers and the billions of other believers should note that 'religions' are given a very small place at the bottom of this table, in the row 'Socio-Cultural' and the column 'Epistemological Divides (*multiple constructions of knowledge*)', together with 'humanist' and 'agnostic'. As the final chapter acknowledges (p.290), 'The course recommended here, ... has been to base their collective inquiries on the full set of knowledges currently informing the Western tradition of knowledge.'

A couple of 'religious' viewpoints do surface in the book, one by an ex-Catholic (Cesidio Parissi, Chapter 9c), concerned with the difference between religious 'Truth' and scientific 'truth'. The other is the Australian Aboriginal view (p.225) that 'all knowledge is Universe referent' (p.260). 'Health', in Aboriginal belief is harmony with all creation, whereas in Western science it is only 'physical well-being'. An interesting study by a health worker, trying to educate Aboriginals about scientific explanations of human reproduction, notes how, confronted with Aboriginal understandings of the world, he constructed a thesis about viewing things from both sides, only to be told by the Aboriginals that they still preferred their own way.

In spite of the large numbers of Muslims now living in Australia and many other parts of the world, as usual not one reference is made to or by Muslims or their contributions to knowledge and ways of knowing. As all researchers proverbially conclude, there is still much scope for [Muslim] contributions to this field of research, maintaining the balance between '*aqli* and '*naqli* modes of knowing, lost to the West in its 'Enlightenment' concentration on empiricism and gradual exclusion of revelation altogether from the realms of 'science'.

Already, in broadening their approach beyond strict scientific specializations, some of the writers of this book are feeling excluded. Chapter 7a is entitled,

'Now I'm Not an Expert in Anything' and explains the career problems of someone trying to adopt a more inclusive view of knowledge. On the other hand, another interviewee quoted in Chapter 10 (p.236), explains, 'If I focused on one area/field of research I would be out on the streets,' and therefore chooses to pursue multidisciplinary research. The struggle to find research funding either way may have something to do with the funding being made available for research, and the politics behind this, some of which are explored in Chapter 7b. It notes (p.133) that the health problems affecting the poorer nations receive far less research funding (10%) than those affecting the rich ones (90%). Perhaps with the shift of wealth eastwards in recent decades, more attention and funding will be given to research on problems affecting the erstwhile poorer countries.

The book is written mainly by academics based at the Australian National University, some of them at the Institute for Human Ecology, to which Chapter 12 is devoted. Unusually, the book itself involved a degree of networking and mutual support between the various contributors. Most of them have PhD degrees or are still working on PhD theses, and a couple of them are consultants with years of experience and even some awards. One contributor (Kelly Arabena PhD) is from an Aboriginal background. One of the consultants, John Schooneveldt (also an academic and government adviser), criticises the academic propensity to concentrate on 'problems' (p.139). 'For consultants', he says, 'there are no problems, only options.' 'There are no problems in nature', he declares (p.140). However he admits (p.140) that 'Decisions to change culture are much more difficult than societal arrangements: look at the snail's pace of ... the imperative to sustainability.' The final chapter of the book (13, p.288) says that 'Traditional forms of decision-making... have a very poor track record in times of social change. The search for unilateral certainty is giving way to a recognition of the rich ... collective understanding of each other's interests.'

The studies are couched in a great amount of highly abstract language, even where actual inquiries are used as examples, in Part 2 of the book, so that, frustratingly, the reader only gets glimpses of the work on the ground, like the box devoted to the Philippine fishery project (p.165). Fishers were dynamiting fish and destroying their habitat, as were the fishers in Misali, referred to by Prince Charles recently in Oxford, where Islamic principles were successfully used (by IFEES) to persuade the Muslim locals to stop this unsustainable practice. In the Philippines, a board game was used to engage the fishers and help them to see the results of their practice. Without such empirical examples it is difficult for the reader to see where all the theory is coming from or leading to. The chapters on students (10a) and PhD students (10c) note the usefulness of field research in developing the imagination of students and their relationships with each other and their teachers, as well as their aspirations for the future. Faced with a real environmental situation, like the uses of the Snowy Mountains National Park, and all the complex conflicts and interactions of the users, real discussions could arise about how to balance all the interests involved most sustainably.

Power relationships feature in several chapters, whether in relation to research funding, as mentioned above, or in consultations, e.g. in the Netherlands, where the elite corporations had control of the process (Chapter 8a), or in Kelly Arabena's assertion that 'Colonization was based on a knowledge-system that perpetuates the suppression of a global society founded on the respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace' (p.262). Although several other chapters mention the search for a core set of principles, hers is the only one that mentions the Earth Charter, a remarkable practical example of collaboration between representatives of all the world's religions and sciences to arrive at a common set of principles for sustaining the earth, as a basis for a proposed United Nations charter to be enforceable in international law. Here indeed is an example of 'basing collective inquiries [and actions] on the full set of knowledges' not just 'in the Western tradition of knowledge', but worldwide.

Published in the *Muslim World Book Review* 2010/11