

Engaging Muslim youth in environmental change

Case studies form a faith-based organisation

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Abstract: In 2018-19, the ‘Greta effect’ on climate change activism cast a spotlight on the influence that young people currently have in the movement to tackle environmental degradation, such as climate change. While young people have more to lose from the effects of climate change, they can be flexible in their thinking and clear in their commitment to action. This descriptive paper focuses on the case study of IFEES/EcolIslam as an example of activism based on Islamic environmental teachings and their application for youth action around ecological issues.

Keywords: environmental activism, climate change, faith-based organisations, Islam, youth

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1. The role of young people in environmental and climate change action

The 2019 Amnesty International ‘Future of Humanity Survey’¹ found that 18-25-year-olds identified climate change as one of the most significant issues facing the planet. The generation to which these young people broadly belong (‘Gen Z’) is the first in which many cannot remember a time when climate change was not a topic of discussion (Mier 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that younger generations have more to lose from the effects of environmental degradation, young people are increasingly taking action to address this problem.

We can see evidence of this in two speeches by young people on the international stage one generation apart. At the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992, twelve-year-old Severn Suzuki made an impassioned address to the United Nations delegates (Suzuki 1994: 227–30). Her address made it clear that she was there to represent her and future generations and looking to the adults to act. She said: “I’m only a child and I don’t have all the solutions, but I want you to realise, neither do you! ... If you don’t know how to fix it please stop breaking it!”

Twenty-seven years later, another young girl – this time sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg – addressed the 2019 UN Climate Action Summit in New York. Thunberg’s talk took a similar (albeit more forceful) tone, again taking the adults to task over their inaction: “This is all

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/climate-change-ranks-highest-most-important-issue-facing-world-amongst-18-25-year> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!"²

Despite the similarities in their messages, the differences in how people responded seems to point to a wider shift in attitudes in the 30 years between them. About Suzuki's 1992 speech, Tiffany Crawford writes: "The world listened, but little changed" (2019). By contrast, when Thunberg spoke in 2019 there was intense interest from international mainstream and (the by now markedly more pervasive) social media. Significantly, this time young people were listening to what another young person had to say to world leaders (Lee et al. 2020). In March 2019, Thunberg inspired a mass youth protest called the *Global Climate Strike for Future*, where children refused to attend school on Friday to protest for action on climate change. It is estimated that 1.4 million people took part in this action (Carrington 2019).

The 'Greta effect' – as it has become known – has had the capacity to motivate young people and contributed to the environment and climate change becoming a primary concern for many (Thackeray et al. 2020). Sabherwal and van der Linden (2021) found that this 'Greta effect' extends beyond children and has also had an impact on adults and in particular policymakers.

2. 2018-19 environmental awareness and activism

The two years preceding the outbreak of COVID-19 saw an increase in environmental awareness and activism beyond the school strikes mentioned above (Thackeray et al. 2020).

2. 1. BBC's The Blue Planet 2

The final episode of the BBC's *Blue Planet 2* dealt with the catastrophic global effects of plastic pollution. Much has been made of the influence of this programme on people's awareness and willingness to combat plastic pollution. An illustrative example of its effect on consumer choices can be seen in a report undertaken by the supermarket Waitrose, whereby the *Waitrose & Partners Food & Drink Report 2018-19*³ found that 88% of those who watched the programme claimed to have altered their behaviour as a result. David Attenborough – who narrated and presented *Blue Planet 2* – said: "I think we are changing our habits, and the world is waking up to what we've done to the planet" (Shukman 2021). However, a study by Dun et al. (2020) questioned *Blue Planet 2*'s effectiveness as a behaviour-changing intervention. Nonetheless, the study highlighted evidence that the considerable media attention around the programme "may have led to upstream changes in allowing the topic of marine plastics to become more salient and therefore creating a window of opportunity for policy change" (ibid: 8).

2.2. Extinction Rebellion

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is an activist group that has sought to bring to prominence what they term the "climate emergency" through non-violent direct action and civil disobedience (Mansfield 2020). In 2019, XR carried out mass actions to disrupt and occupy various sites in London on two occasions in April and October, leading to nearly 3,000 arrests and garnering strong media attention (ibid:379). One interesting aspect of the XR movement was that while

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

³Waitrose report here:

<https://www.waitrose.com/content/dam/waitrose/Inspiration/Waitrose%20&%20Partners%20Food%20and%20Drink%20Report%202018.pdf> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

containing many people stereotypically associated with eco-radicalism, the movement also includes large numbers of “ordinary people” (Shah 2019), many of whom were willing to be arrested for their activism (Khaleeli 2021).

3. Effect and aftermath of COVID-19

The severe lockdown in the initial stages of the pandemic in early 2020 halted the sort of mass actions described above. At the same time, it led to an unprecedented curb on many of the activities that environmentalists had described as unsustainable, such as fossil fuel-hungry travel (Rousseau and Deschacht 2020). Some individual countries saw a reduction in emissions by as much as 24% (Le Quere et al. 2020). Moreover, there were also noticeable reductions in water and noise pollution (Rume and Islam 2020).

The experience of these environmental changes due to a reduction in human activities has the potential to allow us to imagine a different future and envisage a “new normal” (Hopkins 2020). The concept of a “green economy” existed long before the pandemic, although an agreed definition can be elusive (Loiseau et al. 2016:369). Nonetheless, COVID-19 prompted people to look for a ‘green recovery’ based on this idea as the way forward towards a sustainable and financially secure post-pandemic future (Dixson-Declève 2020; McClements 2020). Such a green recovery would need to extend beyond the “business as usual” financial base and have environmental sustainability at its heart (McClements 2020). The shift appears to be away from the exponential growth model and towards a more sustainable and equitable one (Ashford et al. 2020). There is a move away from financial-based gross domestic production as a measure of a country’s well-being towards measurements that reflect environmental impact and the well-being of citizens (Pulselli et al. 2008:xii).

4. Role of faith-based organisations

In 2012, the Pew Research Centre estimated that 84% of the world’s population are affiliated with a religion,⁴ with this percentage likely to increase by 2050.⁵ To the extent that a person’s religion guides their activity in other aspects of their lives, we should consider the impact that faith will have on how people conceptualise their place in the environment and influence how they interact with it. Accordingly, as we look towards taking a more human-centred approach to development and recovery post-COVID, it is important to ask what role faith can play.

Thomas Dunlap (2006: 329) suggested that environmentalism should be thought of as a “secular religion,” while noting that many environmentalists find the language and concepts of religion unfamiliar and uncomfortable. However, in more recent times, there has been a greater recognition of the role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) and people of faith in efforts towards tackling environmental issues (Abumoghli 2018; Arkin 2017; Dahl 2017; Lyons, Walters, and Riddell 2016). For example, while essentially being a secular organisation, the United Nations has initiated the *Faith for Earth*⁶ initiative within the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). Moreover, in the realm of traditional, secular, science-based academia, we can see a move towards understanding the role of faith when researching communities where faith is important. An example of this is Plymouth Marine Laboratories having conducted a project looking into resilience to climate change within Western Indian

⁴ <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

⁵ <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

⁶ <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment/faith-earth-initiative> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

Ocean Coral communities.⁷ Recognising that many of the communities in the study were Muslim, IFEES/EcolIslam was brought in as a researcher partner (Hattam et al. 2020). IFEES/EcolIslam is a Birmingham-based FBO that has been at the forefront of raising environmental awareness among Muslims for the last 30 years. At the same time, Muslims are taught about the inherently ecological nature of their faith through promoting a specific *Islamic environmental ethic*. According to founder Fazlun Khalid (2019: xv): “The ethos of Islam is that it integrates belief with a code of conduct which pays heed to the essence of the natural world.”

5. Islamic environmental ethic

As the environmental crisis has worsened, environmentally concerned Muslims around the world have increasingly looked to Islamic sources for answers (Al-Damkhi 2008; Gilliat-Ray and Bryant 2011; Hamed 1993; Izzi Dien 1997; Khalid 2017; Koehrsen 2021; Kula 2001).

The first source to which Muslims would typically turn is the Qur'an, which Khalid describes as “inherently environmental” (Khalid 2019:148). Within its pages and in the wider context of Muslim theology, Muslim environmentalists find a basis for understanding ecological issues, the role of science, the principles for engaging with the environment, and the responsible use of the Earth's resources. A few Islamic tenets form the backbone of the Islamic environmental ethic.

Tawhid is the principle of absolute monotheism, expressing the uniqueness of God as Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Khalid (2016: 135) tells us that “*Tawhid* leads us to recognize that the Creator is One and His Creation is a unified whole.” Related to this, the Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossain Nasr notes:

“The cosmos itself is in fact God's first revelation, and upon the leaves of trees, the faces of mountains, and features of animals, as well as in the sounds of the winds and the gently flowing brooks, are all to be found signs of God” (Nasr 2003).

Mizan refers to the perfect state of balance that exists in God's creation. God designed the natural world to exist in a state of balance and harmony, as highlighted in the Qur'an:

“The sun and the moon follow their calculated courses; the plants and the trees submit to His designs; He has raised up the sky. He has set the balance so that you may not exceed in the balance: weigh with justice and do not fall short in the balance” (Surah 55:5-9).

Khalifah is the principal that humans have been made stewards of the Earth with the responsibility for maintaining this balance and caring for creation. Again, the Qur'an notes: “Later We made you their successors (*khalaifah*) in the land, to see how you would behave” (Surah 10:14). This also refers to the fact that Muslims believe that they will be held accountable for the degree to which they have fulfilled their duties on Earth.

Many Muslim environmentalists understand the current environmental malaise as an imbalance in this natural order put in place by God as a result of dependence on the positivistic model for understanding the natural world that became prevalent through the Enlightenment (Khalid 2017: 130), which – to them – secularises nature (Özdemir 2003). By contrast, what is seen as the motivation for Islamic scientific enquiry is the exploration of seemingly endless signs of God found in nature to more fully understand the greatness of its Creator (Islam 2004; Nasr 2003). While much of the modern world – influenced by positivism – looks to scientific and technological solutions for the current environmental crisis, Islamic environmentalists argue that this understanding of secular science separated humans from God by detaching humankind from nature (Al-Damkhi 2008; Ammar 2001; Hamed 1993; Khalid 2019; Kula 2001; Nasr 1996; Wersel 1995). For them, the solution requires a rejection of the positivistic

⁷ https://www.pml.ac.uk/Research/Projects/Coral_Communities [Accessed 15.12.2021].

paradigm that is so prevalent in the West, and a return to an awareness of the sacred dimensions of the natural world.

6. Application of the environmental ethic

IFEES/EcolIslam have been instrumental in work on the ground that takes the Islamic environmental ethic and turns the theological into the practical. Arguably the best example of this was the Misali Island Project. Off Misali Island in Zanzibar, fishers were dynamiting the reef in a destructive form of fishing that was obviously unsustainable, threatening the food security of the coral communities in the area. Despite the efforts of NGOs and the government, it was not possible to control this activity. This destructive form of fishing was detrimental to local food security as it is indiscriminate, damages the reef, and therefore threatens the sustainability of the fishery. High levels of poverty in the region meant that some individual fishers resorted to this practice for a short-term benefit, although the unsustainable nature of this form of fishing threatened future fish stock and therefore those dependent on it for their livelihoods and subsistence.

In 1998, in a joint venture with ARC, CARE International, and WWF International, the local Islamic scholars on Misali island came together to explore Islamic teachings about the appropriate use of God's creation. From these studies, the sheikhs concluded that dynamite fishing was illegal according to Islam.

This led to the development by IFEES/EcolIslam of the *Teachers Guide Book for Islamic Environmental Education* (Khalid and Thani 2008),⁸ which was available in English and Swahili. The key to the success of the programme was to involve not only the local religious leaders but also locally-formed community groups. This project showed that the introduction of aspects of the *shariah* (religious law) in dealing with environmental issues could prove an effective means of engaging Muslim communities in managing their environment and increasing food security. Misali island can now be described as a *hima*, essentially an Islamic conservation zone or reserve, belonging to the whole community and preserved for the betterment of all (Khalid 2017:141). An indication of the success of the project was illustrated by one fisherman noting: "It is easy to ignore the government, he said, but no-one can break God's law" (Dickinson 2005).

As well as contributing to the development of the Misali Island Marine Conservation Area (MIMCA), the project has influenced the work of organisations such as the Mwambao Coastal Community Network⁹ and formed the basis of imam workshops conducted by IFEES/EcolIslam globally.

7. IFEES/EcolIslam work on the world stage

In addition to localised, practical projects, IFEES/EcolIslam and its founder have a long history as a leading voice representing the Islamic perspective on the environment internationally. In 1995, Khalid chaired an international workshop set up to discover common ground between all of the major traditions in Ohito, Japan (Johnston 2012:229). Experts from faith-based environmental organisations attended this workshop, and the outcome was the Ohito Declaration for Religion Land and Conservation (ODLRC).¹⁰

⁸ Full text: https://ifees.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/teachers_guide_book_english..pdf [Accessed 15.12.2021].

⁹ <https://mwambao.or.tz/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁰ <https://www.ifees.org.uk/resources/ohito-declaration/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

The ODLRC represented a consensus by the different faiths of a shared spiritual principle towards tackling environmental degradation and recommended actions that faith leaders, faith organisations and people of faith can take.

In 2015, the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium in Istanbul brought together Islamic scholars and teachers from 20 countries. The event saw the grand muftis of Lebanon and Uganda endorsing the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change.¹¹ The declaration is based on a core Islamic environmental ethic, which can be defined as Knowledge of Creation (Ilm ul khalq). In addition to outlining the relationship between God and creation, it also recognises the responsibility that humans have as guardians of creation as well as our role in its current degradation. The declaration also calls upon all Muslims to tackle climate change and environmental degradation following the example and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Khalid worked with Islamic Relief as the convenor of a panel of scholars who drew up the declaration, which does not represent any one particular Islamic school of thought and thus provides a clear, unified Muslim position on the climate change debate.

IFEES/EcoIslam is currently working with UNEA's *Faith for Earth* initiative and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO)¹² to develop *Al-Mizan A Covenant for the Earth*.¹³ Al-Mizan can be seen as the Islamic outlook on the environment in the same way as the Pope's Encyclical letter *Laudato si'*¹⁴ for Catholics or the more secular Earth Charter.¹⁵ Like the 2015 Climate Change Declaration, Al-Mizan represents a unifying Islamic view, although it extends beyond climate change and gives the Muslim voice on the protection of all nature.

8. IFEES/EcoIslam work with young people

While these declarations and charters are important, the extent to which they resonate with young people is unclear. In discussions with Kamran Shezad (Co. Director, IFEES/EcoIslam), he reported that "young people are seldom aware of statements such as the Climate Change Declaration and when they are, they generally don't feel they speak to them". In a London workshop with Greenpeace in late 2019, a young Muslim activist said: "The Climate change declaration doesn't really resonate with young Muslims." A young Catholic delegate responded: "Yes. We find the same with *Laudato si'*."

Given what has already been said about the role of youth in environmental activism, this disengagement is something that activist organisations like IFEES/EcoIslam need to address. This is something that does seem to be significant in the minds of older generations of activists. According to Khalid, his motivation for his environmental work was to secure a sustainable future for his children and grandchildren.

The work of IFEES/EcoIslam reflects the recognition of the increasingly significant role of young people in securing a sustainable future for the planet that they inherit. It is worth highlighting that several projects that IFEES/EcoIslam has initiated or been involved in are youth-based and -focused.

¹¹ <https://www.ifees.org.uk/about/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹² <https://www.icesco.org/en/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹³ <https://www.unep.org/al-mizan-covenant-earth> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁴ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁵ <https://earthcharter.org/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

8.1. Schools 4 Trees

In 2010, IFEES/EcoIslam established the Schools 4 Trees¹⁶ project in Sukabumi, West Java, in conjunction with Gedepahala Consortium, Conservation International, and the Indonesian Park Authority. An Islamic environmental framework was used to integrate classroom lessons on the natural world with the consequences of deforestation at the Pesantren Husnayain School.

Nine species of indigenous forest trees cultivated in local nurseries were planted on one acre of land in the Halimun-Salak National Park. The project aimed to extend beyond the classroom, allowing the children to make connections between our lifestyles and the impact of human behaviour on the natural world. The head of school – K.H. Chalil Ridhwan – felt that the initiative had the potential to be replicated worldwide.

8.2. Children's Eco Village

The Children's Eco Village in Tanzania is an initiative by Islamic Help established in 2012.¹⁷ The village was developed to house orphaned children and make a lasting positive impact on their lives. Built on principles of environmental sustainability and biodiversity, the village was set up to provide sustainable, low-impact homes for children, giving them the opportunity to grow and develop within a healing and sustaining natural environment.

The children are taught how to live sustainably and in harmony with the natural environment and understand the value of good environmental practices. It is hoped that by imbuing the children with environmental principles of sustainable living, they are being equipped to go out into society and make a positive contribution going forward. Since its inception, IFEES/EcoIslam has worked with the village to develop sustainable best practices based on Islamic environmental principles. The village includes an eco-mosque and conservation area or *hima* (Khalid, 2019).

8.3. Small Footsteps

Footsteps is a multi-faith group from Birmingham, and according to their website, "the main themes running through Footsteps' work are faith and values, Earth Care, community, encouragement and working with young people."¹⁸ IFEES/EcoIslam developed and conducted educational workshops with *Small Footsteps* (an offshoot of footsteps aimed at young people) discussing how Islamic environmental teachings are an example of the role of faith in environmental stewardship.

8.4. Ummah for Earth

IFEES/EcoIslam is currently part of an alliance of Muslim organisations coordinated by Greenpeace MENA (Middle East and North Africa) called Ummah for Earth.¹⁹ The goal of the alliance is to tap into the strong connections between Islam and the environment to help to engage with young urban Muslims and energise a massive Muslim climate movement. The alliance uses current social media platforms familiar to 'Gen Z' to appeal to the youth and make the message of environmental activism relevant.

¹⁶ <https://www.ifees.org.uk/projects/schools4trees/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁷ <https://www.islamichelp.org.uk/what-we-do/development-projects/environment/eco-village/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁸ <https://footstepsbef.org.uk/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

¹⁹ <https://ummah4earth.org/en/> [Accessed 15.12.2021].

8.5. Muslim Council of Wales

IFEES/Ecolslam is currently working with the Muslim Council of Wales to develop its environmental and climate change policies. Significantly, the IFEES/Ecolslam Youth Ambassador for Wales has been tasked with heading up the formation of a climate and environmental sustainability group to guide the MCW's environmental policy.

9. Conclusion

Young people such as Severn Suzuki and Greta Thunberg have proved to be a powerful force for change in tackling human-based environmental degradation, inspiring an international environmental movement centred on youth. Their speeches communicate a frustration at older generations, highlighting that it should be *their* responsibility to safeguard the future of their children. There is also anger at the inaction of the generations who have benefitted most from their overconsumption of the Earth's resources but will suffer the least from the negative consequences.

There has recently been a general movement towards an acceptance of the role of humans in climate change. Indeed, young people see it as the most important issue facing the world today, and the mass climate change movements in the two years prior to the pandemic were dominated by young people.

As we look towards a post-pandemic future, the role of young people is likely to continue to be a powerful feature in finding a "new normal". For society to succeed in preserving the viability of life on this planet, it must find ways to empower and enable youth to be involved in making the decisions that affect their future. Organisations such as IFEES/Ecolslam working with young people have a role in supporting them in their own efforts and entrusting them to have a say in policy. When dealing with Muslim youth, support is also needed in fostering a connection with the environmental nature of their faith. However, this is most effective when achieved through a process of meaningful consultation and a willingness to work within the platforms that best resonate with them.

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