

Combining a German Muslim Identity with Environmentalism: The Case of Hima

Laura Wickström

Abstract: This research aims to identify and discuss the religious sources of the Islamic German environmental organization Hima. Furthermore, it illustrates how Hima fills a spiritual gap by constructing a German Muslim identity with environmentalism. Since no national teaching or methodology in environmental theory has been designed specifically for Muslims in Germany, the sources for Islamic environmentalism can all be found in transnational currents. By appropriating influences and ideas that transnational networks provide from a broad spectrum of times and places, Hima has formed its own spiritual approach to eco-Islam. The main sources inspiring the religious framework of Hima come from classical Islamic environmental theological and contemporary initiatives. Among the key theological contributions are Nasr's philosophical approach and the more contemporary approach presented in Green Deen.

Keywords: Islam, environmentalism, identity, Germany, Hima

Laura Wickström (born 1981) is a PhD student at the Department of the Study of Religions at Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU) in Åbo/Turku, Finland. She holds an MA degree in the study of religions and a Master's degree in public international law with a specialization in human rights law. Her main research interests include Islam and ecology.

Contact: laura.wickstrom@abo.fi

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify and discuss the religious sources of the Islamic German environmental organization Hima. Furthermore, it illustrates how Hima fills a spiritual gap by constructing a German Muslim identity with environmentalism.¹

2. Hima

Hima e.V. (Hima) is a German Islamic environmental organization founded in 2010. The name derives from a principle common to Islam that is based in *sharia* but in fact already pre-Islamic, namely the institutionalization of conservation. A small group of young German Muslims studying at different universities were inspired to start an environmental organization based on Islamic principles as propounded by the prominent figure of Islamic environmental activism, Fazlun Khalid (b. 1932). Hence, he was invited as one of the speakers to the seminar "Umwelt und Klimaschutz aus islamischer Perspektive – Wie grün ist der Islam" ("The environment and climate protection from an Islamic perspective – How green is Islam?") in November 2010 in the village of Loccum in Lower Saxony, Germany. The title of his presentation was "Why Eco-Islam is Necessary: The Role of Muslims in Conservation and Fighting Climate Change". The primary focus of Hima is environmental protection based on Islamic principles, and its work is entirely voluntary.

¹ This is a short version of the upcoming chapter "The German Environmental Organization Hima from a Transnational Perspective," which will be part of the publications of the workshop "CILE International Seminar. Reassembling Creation: Green Ethics (GE) and the Scholarly Disciplines in the Islamic Tradition", held at 12-14 October, 2021 in Doha, Qatar, and on Zoom. The workshop contributions will be published in the *Journal of Islamic Ethics*.

Hima can be comprehended as a part of a worldwide (Islamic) network that promotes a greener (more environmentally friendly) way of life, economy and nutrition, elaborated by Schwencke (2012). Islamic environmental discourses today relate to social justice, human development, poverty alleviation, governance, and economic systems, thereby blending with global ethics. The representatives of such movements have made declarations and created networks. This research focuses on Hima as an example of how such transnational currents coalesce around questions of religion (in this case Islam), environmentalism, and identity.

3. The need for Hima among environmental Muslims in Germany

Since no national teaching or methodology in environmental theory has been designed specifically for Muslims in Germany, the sources for Islamic environmentalism can all be found in transnational currents. The lack of national religious (Islamic) guidelines has been experienced as a major challenge among the active members of Hima who have converted to Islam or are Germans with a migration background. Irrespective of which of these two categories the individual belongs to, there is one common denominator, namely that in important domains these young Muslims identify with German norms and values (Amir-Moazami 2010, 199–200). For these active members, upholding both a Muslim and an environmental identity is in no way contradictory.

One reason why it is seen as important to emphasize that one can simultaneously be a Muslim and an environmentalist can be found in the environmental history of both the West and Turkey. Not so long ago, environmentalism was often considered to be predominantly a result of left-wing politics and thus not compatible with a religious identity in general and with Muslim identity in particular (Dobson 2007, 19; Wickström 2014, 132). In order to transcend these limits, Hima expresses the need for projects and organizations to engage in or cooperate with, but – above all – for the support and encouragement of other Muslims. Zbidi (2013) highlights that several of the main activists in Islamic environmental organizations are Western-born Muslims. She sees the result as a synergy of the Western-influenced environmental movement and Islamic values (Zbidi 2013, 3). Fazlun Khalid – the founder of the largest Islamic environmental organization in the West, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) – holds a similar view but also underscores the contradictory nature of the situation: “There is an awakening amongst Muslims to the realities of global warming for example and therein lies a paradox: A secular articulation of current concerns appears to be a motivation for Muslims to look for answers from within their own traditions” (Khalid, 2010: 16) The statement correlates with previous research showing that the Islamic environmental movement – and the questions related to it, such as climate change and contamination – has largely received its inspiration from the global environmental movement.

4. The sources of environmental inspiration

Hima’s religious sources are identified and characterized based on my semi-structured interview with the then-spokesperson of Hima, Kübra Tan, in 2015. She emphasizes that Seyyed Hossein Nasr and the green lifestyle presented by Ibrahim Abdul-Matin’s *Green Deen* are essential for Hima’s interpretation of sharia from an environmental perspective. Tan also mentions contemporary Islamic thinkers as inspirations for Hima’s approach. Hima is a strict Islamic environmental organization, meaning that it derives its sources from the Qur’an and *ahadith*.

The Iranian-American scholar of Islam and contemporary religion – Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) – is presented as perhaps the “founding father” of Islamic environmentalism. Nasr is mostly known for his historical work about Islamic philosophy, Islam in the context of modernity and comparative religion, and for his “perennial” work about “knowledge, science, and the sacred”. He has written extensively on Islamic cosmology, mysticism, and metaphysics (Schwencke 2012). Nasr published his book *Man and Nature* in 1968 and ever since then has returned to his central thoughts about religions and nature. Nasr has also become a central source for how Hima interprets the environmental question in relation to Islam.

Hima also mentions a more contemporary initiative – Green Deen – as its inspiration and role model for modern Islamic environmental activism. Green Deen refers to Ibrahim Abdul-Matin (b. 1977), the founder of an Islamic environmental movement and a proponent of an eco-sensitive lifestyle. With his book *Green Deen: What Islam Teaches about Protecting the Planet* (2010), he reaches out to young Muslims in particular and manages to engage them in environmentalism by outlining a pragmatic and practical “green” lifestyle guide for fellow Muslims. Hima is an example of a specific type of discourse that focuses on “greening up” lifestyles and the economy.

Abdul-Matin does not propose any radical system changes and clearly favors a gradual reform of the economy, which – in his view – needs to transform into a “green economy”. Combining deep philosophical and theoretical discussions with practical environmental action, his book *Green Deen* has been well received by young Muslim environmentalists. This influence can be clearly observed in the core inspiration of Hima, which is expressed as living in harmony with nature. As quoted on the Hima website: “By reflecting on Islamic principles, we want to live a change that takes environmental protection as a matter” (*italics added*). *Green Deen* is a collection of thoughts, stories, analyses, and pieces of practical advice for anyone interested in an environmentally friendly form of lifestyle, thus offering help and understanding for young Muslims.

Through *Green Deen*, Abdul-Matin propounded a contemporary green faith – namely a green way of life – as both a spiritual and a scientific path. The main idea is that the whole earth is a large mosque, as noted in the hadith collection of Bukhārī (Sahīh).

5. Conclusions

By appropriating influences and ideas that transnational networks provide from a wide spectrum of times and places, Hima has been able to form its own spiritual approach to eco-Islam. The main sources inspiring the religious framework of Hima come from classical Islamic environmental theological and contemporary initiatives. Among the key theological contributions are Nasr’s philosophical approach and the more contemporary approach presented in *Green Deen*. The characteristics of eco-Islam can be identified by the actions and jurisprudence of Hima, such as putting the theoretical framework into practical action.

Hima grounds its ideology in Islamic belief. Its members regard Islam as a self-contained but dynamic religion, which implies that the solutions to environmental crises can be found within the Islamic tradition itself, whether in the scripture, in its jurisprudential discourse, or even in traditional lifestyles. The philosophies of Nasr and the examples of *Green Deen* are consciously transformed into practice, such as the notion of ‘*adl*, justice. Environmental justice includes the generations to come, as well as hitherto ecologically neglected groups in the Muslim community. Hima argues that a Muslim should be connected to nature – moderate, humble, respectful of creation, and not prone to excess – but simultaneously also live as a contemporary German Muslim. Hima makes use – to varying degrees – of the religious

language and codes of both the broader Islamic religious movement and the environmental movement. However, its preferred findings are channeled through an Islamic lens so that Islamic teachings, theology, and normativity can be upheld as the key touchstones of its activities, reflecting a framework that appeals to Muslims as actors who energetically live up to modern challenges.

References

- Amir-Moazami, Shirin (2010). Avoiding “Youthfulness?”: Young Muslims Negotiating Gender and Citizenship in France and Germany. In: Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (eds.): *Being Young and Muslim. New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 189–205.
- Dobson, Andrew (2007). *Green Political Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Franke, Patrick (2021). Introduction to Khidr. Presentation given at the “CILE International Seminar. Reassembling Creation: Green Ethics (GE) and the Scholarly Disciplines in the Islamic Tradition” given by Patrick Franke, Doha, Qatar, 10/12–14/2021. Presentation shared with all participants, which can be requested by the author.
- Khalid, Fazlun M. (2010). The Environment in Islam – Islam and the Environment – Ethics and Practices. In: The 15th General Conference, The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 27–29 August, Amman.
- Schwencke, Anne Marieke (2012). *Globalized Eco-Islam, A Survey of Global Islamic Environmentalism*. Leiden Institute for Religious Studies (LIRS): Leiden University. In: <http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/report-globalized-eco-islam-a-survey-schwencke-vs-24-february-2012-pdf.pdf>.
- Wickström, Laura (2014). Secular and Religious Environmentalism in Contemporary Turkey. In: *Approaching Religion*, 4 (2), 125–140. doi: <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.67556>.
- Zbidi, Monika (2013). Aufruf zum Öko-Dschihad. Die islamische Umweltbewegung [A call for eco-jihad. The Islamic environmental movement]. In: *Art&Thought / Fikrun wa Fann*, 2 (5), 3–6.