

IFEES/EcoIslam: Turning the Theological into the Practical

Mark Bryant

Abstract: There is a growing recognition of the importance of faith-based organisations in the field of environmental activism and combating the effects of climate change. The following report outlines the work of IFEES/EcoIslam, who have been translating the theological basis of Islamic environmental ethics into practical activism for 30 years. It is a summary of a presentation given at the December 2021 conference for EMEL (European Muslim Eco Lab).

Keywords: climate change, faith-based organisations, Islam, activism, eco-Islam.

Contact: bryantMW@cardiff.ac.uk

For over three decades now, the Foundation for Environmental and Ecological Sciences or IFEES/EcoIslam has been the leading organisation working in the field of Islamic environmentalism.

The organisation mainly focuses on education and raising awareness of the intrinsic environmental nature of Islam and Muslims' responsibly as custodians of God's creation. Fazlun Khalid is the founder and former director; he has been described as "perhaps the single most active 'Islamic' environmentalist alive today" (Foltz, 2005, p. xiii). He has been working tirelessly to – as he puts it – "Make the world a place my grandchildren can live and flourish in." At the age of 88, he has stepped down from the directorship of IFEES/EcoIslam but remains very active with the organisation. In addition to practical, grassroots work and contributions to various publications, Fazlun has produced his definitive book *Signs on the Earth* (2019), which not only sets out how we find ourselves so out of touch with our environment but also gives ways to tackle the issue.

IFEES/EcoIslam have been instrumental in work on the ground, translating the theological Islamic environmental ethic into practical action. Arguably the best example of this was Misali Island Project in Zanzibar. Fishers were dynamiting the reef, an environmentally destructive form of fishing that was obviously unsustainable for ecosystem around the coral, threatened the food security of the communities reliant on it and affected potential tourism income. Despite the efforts of NGOs and the government, it had not been possible to control this activity. In 1998, in a joint venture with ARC, CARE International, and WWF International, the local Islamic Scholars on Misali 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/EcoIslam of the Teachers Guidebook for Islamic Environmental Education (Khalid and Thani, 2008), which was available in English and Swahili. The key to the success of the program 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 can 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. An indication of the success of the project was illustrated by one fisherman who noted: "It is easy to ignore the government, he said, but no-one can break God's law" (Dickinson, 2005). IFEES/EcoIslam has continued its work with local religious leadership, such as by holding imams' workshops and initiating events such as "plastic free iftars" in Birmingham and Cardiff.

In addition to localised, practical projects, IFEES/Ecolslam 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 the major traditions in Ohito, Japan. This workshop was attended by experts from faith-based environmental organisations and the outcome was the Ohito Declaration for Religion Land and Conservation (ODLRC).¹ The ODLRC represented a consensus by the different faiths of shared spiritual principles 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. 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 clear, unified Muslim position on the climate change debate. IFEES/Ecolslam is currently working with the United Nations Environment Assembly's Faith for Earth initiative and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) to develop *Al-Mizan: A Covenant for the Earth*.² *Al-Mizan* can be seen as a definitive Islamic outlook on the environment comparable to the Pope's Encyclical letter *Laudato si'* for Catholics or the more secular Earth Charter. Like the 2015 Climate Change Declaration, *Al-Mizan* represents a unifying Islamic view but goes beyond the Declaration's narrower focus on climate change to present the Muslim voice on protecting nature.

While these declarations and charters are important, the extent to which they resonate with young people is unclear.

The work of IFEES/Ecolslam reflects the recognition of the increasingly significant role of young people in securing a sustainable future for the planet they inherit. It is worth highlighting that there are several projects that IFEES/Ecolslam has initiated or been involved in that are youth-based and youth-focused. In 2010, IFEES/Ecolslam established the Schools 4 Trees project in West Java. 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 local national park. The project aimed to go beyond the classroom, allowing the children to make connections between our lifestyles and the impact human behaviour has on the natural world. The Children's Eco Village in Tanzania is an initiative by Islamic Help, established in 2012 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/Ecolslam has worked with the village to develop sustainable best practice based on Islamic environmental principles. The village includes an Eco-mosque and conservation area or *Hima*. 'Footsteps' is a multi-faith group from Birmingham and according to their website, "the main themes running through Footsteps' work are faith and values,

¹ <https://www.ifees.org.uk/resources/ohito-declaration/>

² <https://www.unep.org/al-mizan-covenant-earth>

earth care, community, encouragement and working with young people”. IFEES/EcoIslam developed and conducted educational workshops with Small Footsteps (an offshoot of Footsteps aimed at young people), which discussed how Islamic environmental teachings are an example of the role of faith in environmental stewardship. IFEES/EcoIslam is currently part of an alliance of Muslim organisations coordinated by Greenpeace MENA (Middle East and North Africa) called Ummah for Earth. 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.

References

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