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Revisiting Religious Environmentalism in Indonesia: Navigating Ethics, Politics, and Policy

Testriono & Savran Billahi

How Green is Green Islam? Religious Environmentalism and Public Policy in Indonesia

Frans Wijsen

Beyond Instrumentalization: Lived Religion, Politics, and Justice in Indonesian Muslim Environmentalisms

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Zainal Abidin Bagir

Beyond Instrumentalization: Lived Religion, Politics, and Justice in Indonesian Muslim Environmentalisms

Abstract: *Indonesian "green Islam" has been celebrated as a prominent case of religious engagement with environmental issues. This article reviews recent empirical and theoretical literature on religion and environment in Indonesia and beyond. It assesses some trends in the discourse and suggest new directions in the study of Muslim environmental engagement. I start with problematizing a question that stands out in the literature about the effectiveness of the so-called "green Islam:" does it contribute to the achievement of environmentalist goals? I suggest an expansion of the Islam and environment discourse in several directions. From the critical perspective of religious studies, I suggest paying closer attention to lived Islam, in contrast to insular theologizing that revolves around texts without attention to practices. I then argue for engaging with questions of justice and politics of environmentalism. Such an approach reveals that religions, including certain versions of Muslim understanding, are ecologically ambivalent.*

Keywords: Green Islam, Instrumentalization, Environmentalism of the Poor, Lived Religion, Justice, Political Ecology.

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Abstrak: *"Green Islam" di Indonesia kerap dipuji sebagai contoh keberhasilan keterlibatan agama dalam isu lingkungan. Artikel ini mengkaji literatur empiris dan teoretis mengenai agama dan lingkungan di Indonesia maupun di dunia internasional, untuk melihat beberapa kecenderungan dan menyarankan ditempuhnya arah baru dalam kajian mengenai aktivitas lingkungan Muslim. Saya akan memulai dengan memproblematisasi salah satu pertanyaan yang menonjol tentang efektivitas "green Islam": apakah ia berkontribusi pada pencapaian tujuan-tujuan gerakan lingkungan? Saya menyarankan perluasan wacana Islam dan lingkungan ke beberapa arah. Dari perspektif kritis studi agama, saya menyarankan untuk lebih memperhatikan Islam sehari-hari dan lebih banyak mengangkat pertanyaan-pertanyaan tentang keadilan dan politik gerakan lingkungan. Pendekatan sedemikian menunjukkan bahwa agama-agama, termasuk beberapa versi pemahaman Muslim dalam isu-isu lingkungan, bersifat ambivalen.*

Kata kunci: Green Islam, Instrumentalisasi, Environmentalisme Orang Miskin, Agama Sehari-hari, Keadilan, Politik Ekologi.

ملخص: غالباً ما يُشاد بمبادرة «الإسلام الأخضر» (Green Islam) في إندونيسيا كنموذج ناجح لإشراك الدين في قضايا البيئة. تستعرض هذه المقالة الأدبيات التجريبية والنظرية المتعلقة بالدين والبيئة في كل من إندونيسيا والسياق الدولي، وذلك لرصد بعض التوجهات واقتراح مسارات جديدة في دراسة النشاط البيئي الإسلامي. سأبدأ بمساءلة أحد الأسئلة البارزة حول فاعلية «الإسلام الأخضر»: هل يساهم حقاً في تحقيق أهداف الحركات البيئية؟ كما أقترح توسيع الخطاب حول الإسلام والبيئة في عدة اتجاهات؛ فمن منظور نقدي للدراسات الدينية، أقترح إيلاء اهتمام أكبر بـ «الإسلام اليومي» (Everyday Islam) وإثارة المزيد من التساؤلات حول العدالة والسياسة في الحركات البيئية. ويشير هذا النهج إلى أن الأديان، بما في ذلك بعض التفسيرات الإسلامية للقضايا البيئية، تتسم بنوع من الازدواجية أو التردد (Ambivalence).

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإسلام الأخضر، التوظيف الأدواتي، بيئوية الفقراء، الدين اليومي، العدالة، الإيكولوجيا السياسية.

In the global discourse of religion and the environment or religious environmentalism, Indonesia has been celebrated as a prominent case of religious, and especially Islamic, engagement with environmental issues (Christian Science Monitor 2025; New York Times 2024). The reports use the term "green Islam", which has also been used in scholarly works on Indonesia for more than a decade (Reuter 2015; Testriono et al. 2025). Acknowledging Indonesia as the largest Muslim country, they show how Muslim environmental activisms promise to be a mobilizing force to deal with grave environmental problems. However, there have also been voices critical of the way religion (especially Islam) is engaged (Dewayanti and Saat 2020; Grossmann 2019). Others are skeptical of its effectiveness in addressing environmental problems, while at the same time see that it has significant potential (Fikri and Colombijn 2021).

"Green Islam" has been used as an umbrella term to refer to the discourses and practices related to the environment by Muslims. The examples provided in the above media reports and scholarly works show a wide spectrum of Muslim environmental discourse and activism, ranging from pro-environment campaigns by mainstream Muslim organizations (such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, Lembaga Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, and the Indonesian Council of Ulama) to the many environmental activities in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and smaller, more local initiatives from the grassroots communities. Precisely because of such a wide spectrum of discourses and activisms, calling them all instances of "green Islam," without making further differentiation between them, lacks precision in terms of making assessment of effectiveness.

In this article, I will start by looking briefly at how the existing literature portrays so-called green Islam and their examples to understand their variety and, to some extent, their dominant patterns. I will then note three trends in the discourse and practice of green Islam. *First*, green Islam, just like any other religious environmentalisms in general, was driven to solve problems related to the environment. The urge to solve problems, and the belief that religion may contribute to solving those problems, have led to instrumentalization of religion. While there is nothing essentially undesirable about its motivation, narrow instrumentalism has its pitfalls. One of the implications of narrow instrumentalist discourses and practices is their over-attention to what is regarded as authoritative voices and institutions.

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This discourse disadvantages lived religion, which leads to my *second* point: the need to embrace broader forms of lived religion, including those regarded as unauthoritative, as they may be more effective and grounded in particular local contexts and may demonstrate richer Islamic environmentalist expressions.

Third, another dimension that is often overlooked in green Islam is the politics of religious environmentalism and the question of social justice; this results in less attention given to politically contentious environmental issues such as communities' struggles against extractive industries. This last trend is also related to the optimistic expectation, which is also evident in many of the mass media reports and the literature, of religion as playing positive roles in environmentalist causes. The fact is that religions in general are often ecologically ambivalent—they are arguably ecologically friendly on certain issues, but not necessarily so on other, contentious issues. In this article, these three points are suggested to provide a broader picture of green Islam and a more realistic assessment of its ecological potential. This critical look is not intended to weaken the drive for Islam, or any religion for that matter, to be "green", but it is essential for a better understanding of the roles of religions in environmentalisms and their potential and to temper unrealistic expectations.

Has "Green Islam" Worked?

The term "green" or "greening" (of religion) has been widely used by scholars. A systematic study of religious environmentalism makes the greening of religion as a hypothesis (Taylor 2016; Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016). "The Greening of Religion Hypothesis" simply states that "the world's religions are becoming more environmentally friendly" (Taylor 2016). Examining more than 700 articles, almost a decade ago, Taylor and his co-authors concluded that there was little evidence supporting the claim. The religions do not contribute significantly to environmental movements; examples of people who contribute to environmentalism "speak more of the *promise* of what is unfolding, rather than about its significance or effectiveness" (Taylor, van Wieren, and Zaleha 2016, 350). Reflecting this tendency, a recent work (Koehrsen and Ives 2025) speaks about the great "potential" of religious actors, due to the resources they have, in advancing a sustainable future.

Looking at Indonesia, a number of authors have voiced their skepticisms of the effectiveness of green Islam. Fikri and Colombijn (2021) asked, "Is Green Islam going to support environmentalism in Indonesia?" While many Muslims do interpret their interaction with the environment in religious terms, in a way that may have positive effects on the ecosystem, the authors contend that "Muslim religious frameworks do not lead to an activist environmentalism" (Fikri and Colombijn 2021). Grossman (2019) expressed a similar sentiment by calling "Green Islam" a toothless tiger, especially when it is faced with the state-supported development agenda based on resource extraction and fossil fuels. Dewayanti and Saat (2020) suggested that though some major Indonesian religious organizations seem to show its concern to address environmental problems, including by issuing *fatwā* (religious opinions), their works do not seem to leave significant impact.

At this point, it is important to ask, what exactly is green Islam? While not providing precise definitions of the term, those authors seem to imply that green Islam is a general term denoting Muslims' environmental activism. That broad term comprises many types of enterprises, so without further differentiation, it is difficult to make a sweeping claim about effectiveness that applies to them all. To be fair, the authors do make some differentiation, though not in a systematic manner. Fikri and Colombijn (2021) studied how in *daily activities* dealing with environmental issues, people invoke Islamic teachings, but they were skeptical of the impacts of *elite-driven* environmental discourse, such as the production of environmental fatwas. Grossman (2019) viewed *small-scale* Islamic socio-ecological projects such as a Muslim permaculture farm in Yogyakarta and a *pesantren* producing biofuel as successful while being especially critical about the possibility of dealing with *extractive industries*. Dewayanti and Saat (2020) made a distinction between environmental programs developed by *mainstream national Muslim organizations*, some of which are supported by the government or international NGOs, and those that are *grounded in local problems and communities*. The authors classified Muslim environmentalism based on its actors, target, and the kind of issues they address. They seem to agree that the everyday community-based movements are more effective than the ones run by large (national) organizations and driven by elites. For obvious reasons, movements dealing with relatively "softer" issues such as small-scale farming or

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waste management face less obstacles compared to those that oppose extractive industries. In this regard, the same question about effectiveness may also be asked of environmental movements in general, not only their religious variants.

A 2024 large-scale study titled Religious Environmentalism Actions (REACT, PPIM-UIN Jakarta) provided a more systematic picture. The study viewed green Islam as environmental movements that are motivated by Islamic values, whose actors are Muslims or Muslim communities (Halimatusa'diyah et al. 2024, 221). In its research to gauge Indonesians' knowledge of green Islam, the examples given were *ecopesantren* movements, MUI fatwas on environmental issues, and *fiqh* of waste management, while the issues addressed include water used for ablution, mining activities or bottled mineral water industry by *pesantren*, forest logging, or plastic waste disposal. Another work published by REACT (Testriono et al. 2024) sees green Islam as the Islamic variant of religious environmentalism, with the latter term being defined as environmental activism that uses religious resources. It is a way to realize Islamic teachings that holds the integral relationship of Islamic faith and environmental preservation, or "a collective work that employs the principles of Islamic teachings for natural conservation" (Testriono et al. 2024, 5–7). In this study, green Islam is defined by reference to Muslim actors and Islamic values/teachings as its motivation. The adjectives "Muslim" and "Islamic" undoubtedly open many possibilities of expressions. As such, the definitions and the examples given still leave a very large, undifferentiated area of what may be called "green Islam".

Testriono et al. (2024) further differentiated between actors (institutional, non-institutional and those based on collective identities), strategies (bottom-up and top-down), and networks. In relation to strategy, they also note groups that focus more on changing personal behavior and anti-establishment groups that focus on changing the structure. In their survey, Smith, Adam and Maarif (2024, 7) provided a more detailed categorization of environmental movements in terms of their aims. Movements may aim to change the behavior of (1) individual people, (2) religious or charitable institutions, (3) local communities, (4) government laws or practices, or (5) corporate or business practices. In practice, there is a diversity of actors, working to achieve different environmental goals, even imagining different ecological ideals, using

different strategies. The actors may be official religious organizations, secular environmental NGOs working with religious organizations, religious environmental NGOs, religious educational institutions, or community-based movements.

Both categorizations are valuable since there have not been many attempts to categorize religious/Muslim environmentalisms based on Indonesian data. However, while they may provide a more comprehensive outlook, they do not relate the categories with an assessment of the movements' effectiveness. Different aims may require different criteria to judge effectiveness. As a matter of fact, Smith, Adam and Maarif (2024) deliberately avoided making such an assessment, instead aiming to understand the (creative) process of the movements, within their own different contexts, to create new environmental practices. They suggest "more studies on processes of change rather than outcomes, as the successes of social movement may be fleeting, and the outcomes of intervention are uncertain" (Smith, Adam, and Maarif 2024, 11).

The remainder of this article focuses on two main issues. *First*, while the question of effectiveness may not be avoided, it has its pitfalls. On one hand, the urge to evaluate effectiveness is understandable as the very field of religion and ecology is driven by the need to make changes, responding to what is perceived as dire environmental problems. On the other hand, however, the focus to make changes may be problematic since it may easily lead to narrow-minded instrumentalization of religion, which impoverishes the discourse and practices of religious environmentalism. It may also have biases in its understanding of religion, since it would need to be careful not to offend religious majorities and mainstreams, which are expected to be the source of change (Taylor 2005, 1376). The next section problematizes this drive to instrumentalize religion for the sake of environmentalist goals.

Second, regardless of the question of effectiveness, and realizing that effectiveness is not the most important question one may ask of religious environmentalisms, the following two sections suggest the need to broaden the discourse and practice of Muslim environmentalism through the notion of lived religion and the questions of justice and politics. This broader understanding of those two terms may also suggest a new way to differentiate environmentalisms.

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Instrumentalization and Its Pitfalls

There are many reasons to be suspicious of instrumentalist approaches to religion and ecology. For this we may learn from the field of religion and development, as the pitfalls of instrumentalization of religion for the sake of developmentalist goals have been much discussed, and to some extent the religion and the environment discourse may be seen as a subset of the religion and development discourse. While the awareness among development agencies and practitioners of the importance of paying serious attention to religion has emerged, there is a strong criticism of "pernicious instrumentalism" in dealing with religion (Tomalin 2015, 3). This instrumentalist outlook comes from what some have called the functionalist paradigm of religion, that is, looking at religion mostly in terms of its functions. In religious studies, this paradigm can be traced back to the classical Western scientific study of religion, which purports to be academic, thus secular. Those secular blind spots have marginalized religions; in practice, from a (narrow) functionalist paradigm, religion is deemed important only insofar as it contributes to the (secular) development agenda (Gräb 2024, 42).[1] Similarly, Ager and Ager (2015) argued that secular humanitarianism, if not privatizing or marginalizing, often instrumentalizes religion:

> "[Secular humanitarianism] recognizes the resources that are available through local faith communities and seeks to co-opt these for non-religious purposes. This arrangement can be open and of perceived mutual benefit. However, again, gross asymmetries in power risk co-option that is extractive, disrespectful—and undermines local religious communities." (Ager and Ager 2015, 12).

From that perspective, religion is important insofar as it benefits predetermined developmentalist goals (Cf. Feener and Fountain 2018). The instrumentalist way of looking at religion may bring about certain consequences. Due to what many regard as development practitioners' low religious literacy that overlooks the complexity of religious lifeworlds, there is a tendency to choose to engage only with certain types of religions that suit the developmentalist goals. There is also less interest in the religious communities' own views of certain developmental agendas and in engaging them genuinely. In a post-secular world, there should be other ways of engaging religion more genuinely (Tomalin 2015, 7).

The same instrumentalist tendency is visible in the environmentalist engagement of religion, and in the scholarly discourse of religion and the environment/religion and ecology. While a mix of scholarship and activism surely is expected to contribute to problem-solving, it has its pitfalls (Taylor 2005, 1375–76). The discourse itself emerged around six decades ago, motivated by the realization of grave environmental challenges. As such, since the beginning, and even more in the latter trend that started two decades ago (marked especially by the Harvard conferences and publication of the World Religion and Ecology series, in 1990s), the academic field of study of religion and ecology has been concerned not only with scholarly discourse but also ethical concerns and activism on environmental issues, that is, the drive to solve problems. A focus on solving environmental problems, indeed, may lend itself easily to a functionalist view of religion. And just like in the broader field of religion and development, an instrumentalist approach in the field of religion and environment may carry many consequences, not only to the religious communities, but also in terms of achieving the environmentalist goals themselves. A pragmatic functionalist view is also prone to essentializing tendency.

This is, to be sure, not a specific trait of *Islam* and ecology discourse, but, as Willis Jenkins (2016) noted, scholars in the field tend to reduce complex, pluralist, and contested religious traditions in general essentialized pictures of ecological thought, asking question such as "is Buddhism an ecological religion?" (Jenkins 2016, 25–26). Jenkins reminds us that when speaking of religion, we also need to be aware of whose religion ("whose enactment of which Buddhism in what contexts").

This subtlety tends to be overlooked in studies of movements as well as scholarly discourse more broadly. The instrumentalist approach may be influenced externally, when international environmental agencies, NGOs or the government try to mobilize religious communities to achieve their environmentalist goals, but we also see quite a few Muslim leaders take this approach. An example is "green fatwas" issued to respond to environmental NGOs' requests. The dominant questions posed by literature discussed in the previous section of this paper indicate that trend. In the early 2000s, international environmental NGOs and agencies wanted to engage religious organizations, especially the leaders, in the hope that they may help to spearhead the global conservation agenda (Adam 2025, 79–80; A. M. Gade 2012, 37). The

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Indonesian government's Ministry of Environment also mobilized mainstream leaders and organizations to help achieve the national environmental agenda (Adam 2025, 83–89).

The objection toward this approach stems not only from its being influenced by external forces, but more importantly, because it tends to be framed by mainstream environmental and developmental agendas—which may not always sit well with religious communities' own agendas. Religions are sought after to provide solutions to the problems that they did not define themselves. Speaking about climate politics, Evan Berry criticized the instrumentalist mode of engagement which, again due to the secularist bias, mostly sees religion as a mobilizer of ethical norms to be put in service to address climate change, while being indifferent to the possibility that certain religious understanding may diverge from climate scientists or policymakers' moral consensus. Berry (2022) stated that "the invitation to religion is an invitation to partnership in political projects already underway; it is not an invitation to prophetic radicalism or to any form of apocalypticism" (Berry 2022, 126). One of the consequences of this invitation is that, to return to the Islam and ecology discourse, when Muslim communities are engaged to provide the expected solutions, Islamic texts and practices are read into already existing concepts in the global discourse of religion and ecology. In other words, these discourses are not grounded in the religious communities' own experience. In a way, this is a paradox, because initially environmental groups engage religion to provide a kind of moral vernacular that works in the communities.

Speaking about local/religious particularities does not necessarily mean forgoing the possibility of cross-religious or religious-secular cooperation, but it serves as a reminder of the need to respect differences. Particular religious or theological articulations are not necessarily exclusive, and they "may allow constructive conversation in the moral vernaculars already in use in some community and may be a form of respecting the local differences of an interpretive world" (Jenkins 2016, 25–26). This conversation needs to be accompanied by the awareness that differences may not be only inter-religious but intra-religious as well, reflecting the reality of multiple articulations of religious traditions ("whose religion"). These multiple articulations are the source of multiple possibilities of religious environmentalism, and they enable support for positive ecological movements. At the same time, as I shall argue later, they may as well be a source of tensions.

A broader point may be made here. While the problem-solving orientation in the field of religion and ecology may indeed lend itself easily to the narrow functionalist or instrumentalist view of religion, there may be other approaches that avoid such pitfalls. The question is how to negotiate the tensions between the drive for activism and accommodation of particular religious communities' own needs and aspirations, if not their authenticity. What is objected to here is not the aspiration to make religions useful or serve certain environmentalist objectives; the challenge is how to make such an engagement between religion and ecology not narrowly conceived in a way that reduces the complexity of both enterprises and could even hinder the achievement of environmentalist goals.

How may we go beyond the narrow instrumentalist discourse? Writing about the field of religion and development, Bolotta, Scheer and Feener (2019) recommended ethnographic studies of lived stories of religious actors in particular socio-political contexts. In a similar way, Feener, Fountain, and Bush (2018) urged scholars to give more attention to detail, texture, and specificity in order to "provide more material to better inform our understandings of the ways in which working conceptions of 'religion' and 'development' are constantly re-shaped and re-deployed over diverse contexts. Such an approach requires in-depth fieldwork in particular 'sites' while remaining cognizant of the broader political ecology" (Feener, Fountain, and Bush 2018, 244). This viewpoint is in line with Gade's observation that work in the field of Islam and the environment tends not to discuss living people. For her, "for interpreting humanistic theory in terms of religious lives in the present, and to some degree even in the past, ethnographic perspectives would be guided by sound knowledge of how Muslims' lifeworlds are (and are not) informed contextually by shared scripture and tradition" (Gade 2019, 5). This is the subject of the next section.

Lived Religion and the Politics of Environmentalism

Narrow instrumentalism tends to simplify religion. Partly as a ramification of that instrumentalization tendency, but also because of certain influential understandings of religion, the dominant discourse of religion and the environment exhibit other tendencies which foreclose deeper and richer religious engagement with environmental issues. To broaden the discourse of Muslim environmentalism, there is a need to

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broaden the notion of religion by problematizing the way "religion" is conceived. New methodological lenses that are already established in contemporary studies of religion carry important consequences that help cast a wider net to capture more types of religious environmentalisms while making distinctions between different modes or orientations of environmentalism.

One of the important weaknesses of the current or dominant discourse of Islam (or other religions, for that matter) is, as discussed earlier, its over-attention to what is regarded as authoritative religious voices. That discourse is oriented to make changes in environmental behavior or policies by influencing the most authoritative persons and targeting the largest number of people, and for that it tends to be focused on what are regarded as authoritative traditions or institutions that are believed to be capable of influencing the majority of believers. An example which has gained much attention is the *fatwa*s of the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia) on a number of environmental issues, a few of which were issued at the request of environmental civil society organizations. Regardless of whether or not they are effective (A. M. Gade 2012, 42), this seems to stem from the belief that such authoritative fatwas are capable of influencing the majority of Muslims.

A limited understanding of what "normative Islam" is (and its impacts on Muslims) has resulted in the marginalization of what are considered non-mainstream beliefs and practices. This tendency is not limited to Islam. Scholars of religious studies have critiqued conceptions of religion that spring from an essentialist conception of religion. Instead of focusing mostly on beliefs and institutions, studies of religion's engagement of ecological issues need to pay more attention to embodied experiences, hybrid cultural flows, and everyday practices (Jenkins 2016, 23). Writing more than a decade ago, Eleanor Finnegan criticized that trend in the Islam and ecology discourse:

> "By focusing on the textual tradition and perceived mainstream, scholars miss the lived experience of many Muslims, the diversity of interpretations of Muslim texts, the other resources that influence Muslims' interactions with and ideas about the environment, the role of practice in the lives of many Muslims, and the negotiation that happens among religious believers as they attempt to live their religious and environmental ideas." (Finnegan 2011, 71).

A decade later, studies examining lived religion had proliferated significantly. Nevertheless, the general trend criticized by Finnegan seems to be still dominant. A 2024 study of more than two hundred environmental movements in Indonesia found that studies of religious environmentalisms still tend to focus on theology and philosophy rather than practices of religions, or on statements of leaders, such as Islamic fatwas on environment (Smith, Adam, and Maarif 2024, 2). Their study tries to understand lived religion in grassroots environmentalisms. Probably not surprisingly, when one looks at lived experiences, what emerged is hybridity: mainstream religions blended with indigenous traditions and *adat* (Indigenous) practices, and they further engaged with economic, legal and scientific concepts (Smith, Adam, and Maarif 2024, 10). The studies showed how vulnerable communities mobilize religious and *adat* concepts to gain legitimacy, as they faced powerful opponents in their environmental movements. Rather than focusing on evaluating the effectiveness or religious authenticity of such movements, the authors tried to understand *the process* of how lived religion is engaged by those movements creatively, and, by considering existing political opportunities in specific local and temporal contexts, how they motivated new environmental practices. In many cases, local communities worked with secular environmental and religious activists to co-create hybrid discourses that crossed the boundaries of the "religious," the "cultural," and the "secular."

Lived religion defies strict definitions of religion, which means that it includes forms of religion that may not be "mainstream" or considered authoritative. As such, it may evade an instrumentalist lens, which, for the purpose of influencing communities regarded as religious, is biased toward what are considered authoritative voices. Yet, from the standpoint of scholars of religion, lived religion is no less real, or even more concrete, as it reflects what really happens on the ground. Ammerman described studying lived religion as:

> "To study religion this way is to expand our lens beyond the official texts and doctrines so as to see how ideas about the sacred emerge in unofficial places. It is to include the practices of ordinary people, not just religious leaders" (Ammerman 2021, 5).

Ammerman further noted that "to start from the everyday is to privilege the experience of nonexperts…that does not mean that "official" ideas are never important, only that they are most interesting

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to us once they get used by someone other than a professional" (Ammerman 2007, 5).

When it comes to Islam and ecology, many studies show that people may not start with a deliberate project of "green Islam", but they express their environmentalist engagement, explicitly or implicitly, in religious terms as an after-the-fact. Others express concepts that at the outset do not seem to have ecological connotations but fit their own experience well. These interpretations may not be authoritative, but they are deeply authentic in terms of their own personal or communal experiences.

A few examples may illustrate this. In the Kali Code riverside community of urban Yogyakarta, a woman who was involved in collecting and reusing plastic waste described her motivation by saying that the activity, which does not provide significant profit, is her "long prayer mat" (*sajadah panjang*), referring to the very popular religious song created by the popular music group Bimbo, in the 1980s (Anam 2024). Managing waste is a form of *sadaqah* (*sedekah*), and taking time and energy dedicated to it is a kind of *waqf* (*wakaf*); they are performed in this world with the hope of gaining prosperity in the hereafter. Both terms, *sadaqah* and *waqf*, are also prevalent in other forms of Muslim environmentalisms in Indonesia. Waste *sadaqah* is a movement taking place in many places and the term has become popular and used disparately in many places (Cf. Chubachi 2025; Yandri, Budi, and Putri 2023). These concepts, popular in everyday Muslim discourse, may be regarded as a central element of Muslim environmentalist ethics, in which works toward solving environmental problems are oriented toward Judgment Day, when Muslims are asked whether they have fulfilled their responsibility. This case echoes Anna Gade's observation that eschatology makes up a central part of Muslim environmentalist expression (Gade 2019, 113, 214). For Gade, the translation of popular concept such as *khalifah* in Islam and ecology discourse into *stewardship* shows the influence of the dominant Christian idea of the term, while a closer reading of Qur'an indicates that *khalifah*, understood in the context of environmental responsibility, actually puts an emphasis on eschatology.

Another illustration comes from Muslim organic farming, which in today's context poses particular challenges because of the dominant conventional farming that relies heavily on chemical fertilizer and pesticide. Some farmers expressed their motivation to convert to

organic farming in terms of *jihad*, by which they meant a difficult activity which requires sacrifice of short-term gains for the sake of future rewards (Winarsih 2025). Similarly, Muslim organic farmers in East Java understood their chemical-free farming as act of worship; they said that they were tested to prove whether their faith lies in chemical fertilizers or pesticides rather than in the goodness of nature and God (Hasan, Bagir, and Akhda 2025). Those farmers, who are embedded in the *nahdhiyyin* environment, also easily mixed their religious expression with Javanese notion of *memayu hayuning buwana* (loosely translated as "to beautify or maintain the well-being of the universe"). Many such examples have been shared.[2] Muslim everyday environmentalism, characterized by grassroots environmentalism and lived Islam, mobilized concepts that do not always feature in the mostly text-based, abstract discourses.

Many such cases of activism did not originate from an explicitly religious motivation but gained religious significance as a way to strengthen them. When it comes to lived experiences and community-based environmentalism, another useful distinction is between explicit and embedded environmentalisms (Baugh 2019). Writing in the context of Latina/o Catholic communities in Los Angeles, Baugh sees that "religion and ecology scholarship has focused primarily on the presence or absence of explicit forms of environmentalism as a distinctive focus in religious life, while overlooking embedded environmental expressions where religious outlooks shape relationships with nature in subtler, less overtly political ways." The adjectives *explicit* and *embedded* here refer to kinds of environmentalisms, but at the same time there is a differentiation between functional religiosity serving environmentalist concerns and environmental values as part of religious commitments.

In the context of Muslim environmentalisms, Anna Gade's project in the book *Muslim Environmentalisms* explained how to move from instrumentalized, externally driven environmentalisms to ones that are more grounded in Muslims' own (localized) experiences through several methodological shifts (Gade 2019). Gade conceived "Muslim environmentalisms" partly as a critique of this instrumentalist approach. An alternative approach Gade suggested is to look at a form of Muslim environmentalism that emerges from internal Muslim religious commitments and lived experiences. The book's chapters themselves are conceived to progress from instrumentalized Muslim

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environmentalism to environmentalism as religious commitment, to achieve religious ends (Gade 2019, 34).

One of Gade's criticisms of the dominant discourse of Islam and ecology is that it tends to overlook Muslim lived experiences. Rather than focusing on the so-called authoritative sources or voices interpreting them, it prefers an ethnography of Muslim lifeworlds (Gade 2019, 4–5). A consequence of this perspective is giving more attention to community-based practices rather than the religious elite-driven efforts to formulate "green fatwas" or declarations understood as solutions to environmental problems, using standard key Islamic concepts such as *khalifah* in abstract (Gade 2019, 46). Paying attention to lived experiences means looking at how environmentalism grows organically from Muslim experiences, which may or may not be directly/explicitly informed by Islamic texts and traditions, and the hybridity of the (religious) concepts or expressions in the movement.

The discussion thus far, regarding contrasts between the abstract, authority-based discourses and the practice of lived Islam, and the different modes of religious environmentalisms and their politics, suggests the importance of making distinctions between different modes of environmentalisms. Without such distinctions, any assessment of green Islam as described in the beginning of this paper is bound to over-generalize. The methodological consideration of broadening the notion of religion is aimed to enable us to capture more forms of Muslim environmentalisms as well as more possibilities for religious engagement with environmental issues.

Justice, Politics, and Tensions within Muslim Environmentalisms

At this point, it is important to see another neglected side of green Islam, which is justice and politics. Attention to different types of environmentalism would reveal more variety and point to neglected types of environmentalism. At its root, this is directly related to the variety of ecological ideals. What would be the goal of a green Islam movement or Muslim environmentalism? Does the very adjective "green" attached to Islam (or movements) indicate a particular ecological ideal which pays attention more to green or "pristine nature?" What is the place of people in this concept? Views on the relation between humans and nature may motivate different types of environmentalisms.

The term environmentalism itself is "an all-encompassing word,

covering different ideas of nature and society, as well as different forms of activism" (Armiero and Sedrez 2014, 7). Environmentalism has multiple origins, historically and in terms of its ideas. A simple way to see the variety of ecological ideals and its relation to environmentalism is to contrast two main views. One of the most popular ideas of nature and society, which was dominant in environmentalism until recently, is the Western romantic view of nature that speaks about the preservation or conservation of "pristine nature," nature untouched by humans, as its ecological ideal (Fletcher et al. 2021). Another view rejects the notion of "pristine nature" and does not see humans as separate from nature. This view has many variations, some of which contradict each other. The dominant idea of environmentally sustainable development sees nature as a resource to be used for human benefits. This idea is not necessarily harmful to nature, as it also has an interest to ensure that nature provides for humans not only for the short-term, but also for future generations.

However, when speaking of benefits to humanity, which humans are in the mind of proponents of sustainable development? Another idea that rejects "pristine nature" looks more to the marginalized—the poor, the Indigenous, or the racialized peoples. This latter idea may be in conflict with the others. In the first idea, humans or the communities which live in forests or mountains may be "removed from nature" for the sake of maintaining the supposed pristine nature, as in the modern idea of natural parks. From the perspective of sustainable development, the community may be removed when they are seen as sitting on untapped wealth of natural resources which are a "common good."

Depending on the ecological ideals and types of environmentalisms associated with them, the analysis of how we got to today's local and global environmental crisis (and its solutions) may look only at personal behaviors and neglect unequal power relations and social inequalities or examine the local and global political-economic structure deeper. The key idea here concerns disproportionate environmental burdens for marginalized communities, who in most cases contribute least to the problem, but are affected most. This is a question of justice and a central concern of political ecology.

The typology of environmentalisms proposed by Joan Martínez Alier (Martinez-Alier 1991, 2002, 2014) and Ramachandra Guha (2000; Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997) helps to accentuate those

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neglected dimensions of environmentalism. Their typology initially aimed to broaden the discourse and free it from its Western roots. One of their key contributions is the distinction between the "full-stomach" environmentalism of the North and the "empty-belly" environmentalism of the South (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, xxi). Martinez-Alier envisioned three competing notions of environmentalism: 1) the cult of wilderness, 2) the gospel of eco-efficiency, and 3) the environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2002). The first may be referred to as the "green movement," which imagines a pristine wilderness to be protected in the creation of US national parks, for example. The second is manifested in the idea which lasts until today as sustainable development. The third is concerned mostly with the (social) justice dimensions of ecological problems and is also well-known by Martinez-Alier's term "environmentalism of the poor."

Both Guha and Martinez-Alier pay most attention to the third, since this movement, born in the Global South, in the "developing" countries, is a neglected variety of environmentalism. Without this third type, the history of environmentalism would mostly be a history of the Western or "First World," while the global poor who are the major victims of environmental problems and the most vulnerable group to experience the negative impacts of the degradation of the environment, are rendered invisible. Environmentalism of the poor foregrounds the poor (in both the "developed" and "developing" countries) as both the victims *and* the environmentalists who demand justice for *both* the environment and the people, though not always explicitly couched in environmentalist terms. It originates in "social conflicts over access to and control over natural resources: conflicts between peasants and industry over forest produce, for example, or between rural and urban populations over water and energy" (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, xxi).

This typology may not be exhaustive of all types of environmentalisms in their recent developments, yet it invites an imagination of how we may map different types of Muslim environmentalisms and, more importantly, as discussed earlier, to see the neglected political and justice dimension of environmentalism. Much of the environmentalism of the poor concerns conflict over land use and exploitation of natural resources or environmental management that disadvantage the poor, in which religious institutions may be complicit, in situations where

those institutions side with the parties with more power, usually the government or corporations. At the same time, victims of these conflicts may engage in resisting it, and they too may invoke religious language to frame their resistance. There are many such examples from Indonesia (Cahyono 2025); yet, with a few recent exceptions, this issue has not been well represented in the discourse of green Islam. Justice is a central value in environmentalism of the poor, but not considered in the other two environmentalisms, and as such it may oppose those forms of environmentalism when they victimize the poor. When it comes to the issue of justice, considerations about politics of environmentalism become even more relevant. This is yet another neglected side of religious environmentalism.

While environmentalism is a political movement, there is surprisingly scant attention paid to politics in discussions of religious environmentalism. The politics of religious environmentalism may be understood in the framework of political ecology, which has developed for the past four decades. However, not only is religion and ecology discourse oblivious to this dimension, studies of political ecology have also largely ignored religion (Tomalin 2015, 264; Wilkins 2020). If religious environmentalism really cares about making a difference, it is a necessity to engage with political ecology, which, in Paul Robbins's words, is concerned with "the deep, structural factors that drive the terrifying environmental changes" (Malik 2024, 3).

Religious communities may be affected by struggles over exploitation of natural resources or the politics of waste management. They may be part of the ineffective or even exploitative structure, or they may resist it. Looking at religious environmentalism politically leads to questioning the notion that religion is inherently good for the environment. The question is: on whose side does religion (religious authorities, organizations, communities) stand? Taking the example of Hindutva engagement with environmental movements, Tomalin asks whether it is a form of the "greening" or the "greenwashing" of religion (Tomalin 2024, 264–65).

The same question may be posed to Indonesian Muslim environmentalism. The recent controversy in Indonesia over mining concessions for religious organizations, especially those offered to the Nahdlatul Ulama (Hasyim 2024) and Muhammadiyah (Halimatusa'diyah 2024), invites the same question. Despite the organizations' long history of environmental engagements, the rhetoric of "environmental-friendly"

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mining may be a form of greenwashing of religion. Similarly, building mosques in contested reclaimed areas is another case that has taken place in some areas in Indonesia, despite the fact of that such reclamation, by private corporations, mostly for economic gain, has damaged coastlines.[3] Is not the presence of such mosques a form of greenwashing of religion to support the reclamation? Cases like this need to be part of the studies of green Islam, especially because the major driver for religion and ecology or the religious environmentalism discourse is to show religion as a force for environmentally good practices.

These cases further show the existence of multiple tensions in religious environmentalisms: intradenominational, interdenominational, interreligious, and religious-societal tensions (Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber 2023). The decision by the elite leadership of Muhammadiyah and NU to accept mining concessions offered by the government was met with strong criticism from other factions within the organizations and environmental activist, an example of intradenominational and religious-societal tensions.[4] The question of "whose religion," discussed earlier, is relevant here.

The neglect of politics in religious environmentalism is unproductive in relation to the greening of religion's practical motive to help the environmentalist cause. Not only in terms of its practical side, but the tendency also to disregard the power relations driving environmental changes does not help to understand religious environmentalism. The tendency to overlook the material, political, and economic contexts of religious engagement with environmental issues miss out much of what really matters in environmental contestation (Berry 2022, 123). For Berry:

> "Political opportunity holds as much or more explanatory power than do theological ethics; religion comes into play in climate politics primarily through highly contextual, historically specific moments or spaces where religious intervention is meaningful or where religious activity is especially suited to counter other forms of public reason…. Religious actors, according to the specific legal and political parameters within which they operate, pursue advocacy work through scripted social processes, and these processes operate according to a set of rules in which certain kinds of religious ideas may be more or less viable as political claims." (Berry 2022, 140).

Engagement with political ecology, the politics of religious environmentalism (and religious politics as well) give a broader and more relevant understanding about how religious involvement works

in addressing environmental issues. Looking at political opportunity structure also promises a better answer to questions about effectiveness of religious environmentalisms.

Closing Remarks

The goal of this article has been to broaden and enrich the Indonesian discourse of "green Islam" or Muslim environmentalisms as part of the global discourse that falls under the disciplines of religion and ecology (or the environment or nature). I first criticize the tendency toward narrow instrumentalization of religion in the discourse. While acknowledging that such a discourse (or, for that matter, the religion and ecology discourse in general) has been activist in its origin, oriented toward contributing to the solution of environmental problems, the narrow instrumentalist approach impoverishes the discourse and may not even achieve its own pragmatic goal. Furthermore, the question of effectiveness of such a movement is not the most interesting or productive question about Muslim environmentalisms.

Drawing on the more critical literature on religious environmentalism, I suggest broadening the notion of religion (Islam) and ecology by giving more attention to the very contested understanding of "religion," especially the importance of lived experiences of Muslims—regardless of whether or not they are called environmentalists, or whether their environmentalism is explicit or embedded. In practice, religious language is (re-)invented and combined with other discourses. This hybrid expression may invite the question of (religious) authenticity, but in practice, in particular contexts, the issue of authenticity is almost a moot point. Through meaning-making processes grounded in everyday practices, concepts that at first glance do not seem to be ecological may gain ecological significance. While (religious) framing is certainly important, the success of a movement also depends on mobilization and political opportunity structures. Yet politics is another neglected dimension of the discourse.

The last part of this article suggests another means of broadening the discourse by paying attention to the question of justice and politics, which is related to the variety of ecological ideals. Discussion about environmental issues, and ecology in general, cannot avoid the question of justice, as the context of environmental problems and attempts to address them involves unequal power relations. Examining

the question of justice would bring the discourse to focus more on marginalized communities, including Indigenous Peoples, who often are doubly marginalized by religious mainstream groups because of their "unorthodox" religiosity. This despite the fact that religious environmental movements often draw from a variety of sources (including Indigenous knowledges) in their movements.

As indicated above, assessing effectiveness is indeed hard, not only for religious environmentalisms, but also environmentalisms in general—or, even more generally, for social movements. What is certain is that no sweeping assessment about the effectiveness of green Islam is possible, since its forms are varied, in terms of the ecological ideas, their aims, and practices. Moreover, while normatively (certain proponents of) religions may claim to be green, in practice they may take exactly the opposite positions. The best one may say is that religions are ambivalent—and, again, the ambivalence partly has to do with what environmental and other situations they face.

In general, assessing the effectiveness of environmental movements and discourses, be it secular or religious, is a complex task. Yet it is not less important to understand their mechanisms, processes, and strategies. The least we may say is that, regardless of such an assessment, it is only proper that religion, as in other sectors of life, engages with the issues, as well as the environmental challenges, along with their impacts on vulnerable communities, are real and urgent. If not for anything else, it is a way to make religion relevant. And when such an engagement is attempted, there is a need to be aware of the highly complex situation. In many cases, religious communities work with secular environmental NGOs and agencies, with governments, or with other religious communities, and as such are always involved in power relations. It is this complexity that needs to be addressed in religious environmentalisms discourse and practices.

With all these concluding notes, some disclaimers are due. In criticizing instrumentalization of religion, I do not negate the expectation that Muslim environmentalisms, in the end, are expected to contribute to addressing environmental problems, as this is the main motivation of the field of study. My suggestion is to take religion more seriously and consider richer expressions of religions, especially as lived by its practitioners. In recommending the more empirical approach of lived religion, I also do not negate the importance of

normative, theological discourse, as it may also animate movements. What is objected to is an "insular theology" that revolves in abstract, around texts only without attention to contexts and practices. Lastly, engagement with the question of justice and politics does not mean that movements that address non-structural issues or attempt to change personal behaviors are unimportant. It is, instead, a recommendation to study more varieties of expressions of environmentalisms. As some Indonesian examples show, that also means remaining open to the possibility that religions are not necessarily "green," so taking a critical look at religious engagement with environmental issues is a necessity.

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Endnotes

1. Grab here refers to P. Öhlmann's Religion and Development: Studies on African Initiated Christianity and the Economic Impact of Religion (2021).
2. Smith, Adam and Maarif (2024) studied many such cases of lived religion addressing environmental issues.
3. There have been at least two cases of mosques built on the reclaimed coasts, in Makassar (protested by the environmentalist organization Walhi (Djafar 2020) and the mosque officiated by the Minister of Religious Affairs in the controversial Pantai Indah Kapuk 2 area (Kompas Cyber Media 2025).
4. Another interesting case of tension, though not directly relevant with environmentalism of the poor, is the contention between Majelis Ulama Indonesia and Muhammadiyah's designation of recycled wastewater for ablution as halal versus NU's rejection of it. (Jamil 2023).

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
3. Feener, Michael R., and Mark E. Cammack, eds. 2007. *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*. Cambridge: Islamic Legal Studies Program.
4. Wahid, Din. 2014. *Nurturing Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht University.
5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

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Letters: *'*, *b*, *t*, *th*, *j*, *ḥ*, *kh*, *d*, *dh*, *r*, *z*, *s*, *sh*, *ṣ*, *ḍ*, *ṭ*, *ẓ*, *'*, *gh*, *f*, *q*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *h*, *w*, *y*. Short vowels: *a*, *i*, *u*. long vowels: *ā*, ī, ū. Diphthongs: *aw*, *ay*. *Tā marbūṭā*: *t*. Article: *al-*. For detail information on Arabic Romanization, please refer the transliteration system of the Library of Congress (LC) Guidelines.

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