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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

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Testriono & Savran Billahi

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

Abstract: *This special issue revisits the study of religious environmentalism in Indonesia by bringing together essays that both engage with and critically examine Islam as an active, lived force in environmental activism. Collectively, the contributions open new pathways in the study of religion and the environment by demonstrating that the integration of Islam into environmental conservation is not frictionless. The essays make a substantive contribution to strengthening the methodological foundations of Islam and environmental studies through a rigorous multidisciplinary approach, marking a clear shift from predominantly theological justification toward empirically grounded analyses that combine field-based evidence with sensitivity to religious values. Beyond portraying the current state of the field, this special issue advances a more demanding, empirically grounded, theoretically informed, methodologically robust, and analytically rigorous research agenda for future scholarship.*

Keywords: Religious Environmentalism, Islamic Ethics, Green Islam, Environmental Politics, Environmental Policy.

Abstrak: Edisi khusus ini meninjau kembali studi tentang agama dan lingkungan di Indonesia dengan mengumpulkan esai-esai yang membahas dan mengkaji secara kritis Islam sebagai kekuatan aktif dalam aktivisme lingkungan. Secara kolektif, artikel-artikel dalam edisi ini membuka jalan baru dalam studi agama dan lingkungan dengan menunjukkan bahwa integrasi Islam ke dalam tata kelola lingkungan bukanlah proses yang tanpa hambatan. Esai-esai dalam edisi ini memberikan kontribusi substansial untuk memperkuat fondasi metodologis studi Islam dan lingkungan melalui pendekatan multidisiplin yang ketat, menandai pergeseran yang jelas dari pendekatan yang didominasi teologis menuju analisis berbasis empiris yang menggabungkan bukti lapangan dengan kepekaan terhadap nilai-nilai religius. Lebih dari sekadar menggambarkan keadaan terkini studi Islam dan lingkungan, edisi khusus ini sekaligus mengusulkan agenda penelitian yang lebih berlandaskan empiris, kokoh secara metodologis, kuat secara teori, dan ketat secara analitis untuk kajian di masa mendatang.

Kata kunci: Environmentalisme Religius, Etika Islam, Islam Hijau, Politik Lingkungan, Kebijakan Lingkungan.

ملخص: تراجع هذه العدد الخاص دراسات الدين والبيئة في إندونيسيا من خلال تجميع مقالات تبحث وتفحص بشكل نقدي الإسلام كقوة فاعلة في النشاط البيئي. تفتح المقالات الواردة في هذا العدد، بشكل جماعي، مسارات جديدة في دراسات الدين والبيئة من خلال تبيان أن دمج الإسلام في الحوكمة البيئية ليس عملية خالية من العوائق. كما تقدم المقالات مساهمة جوهرية في تعزيز الأسس المنهجية لدراسات الإسلام والبيئة عبر مقاربات متعددة التخصصات تتسم بالدقة، مما يمثل تحولاً واضحاً من المقاربات التي يهيمن عليها الجانب اللاهوتي (التديني) إلى تحليل قائم على الأدلة التجريبية يجمع بين المعطيات الميدانية والحساسية تجاه القيم الدينية. وبدلاً من مجرد وصف الحالة الراهنة لدراسات الإسلام والبيئة، يقترح هذا العدد الخاص في الوقت ذاته أجندة بحثية أكثر استناداً إلى الواقع الميداني، ورصانة منهجية، وقوة نظرية، ودقة تحليلية للدراسات المستقبلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحماية البيئية الدينية، الأخلاق الإسلامية، الإسلام الأخضر، السياسة البيئية، السياسات البيئية.

Religious environmentalism has emerged as an increasingly important theme within scholarship on Muslim societies in Indonesia and beyond. A growing body of research has examined religious environmentalism (Ansori, Juliansyahzen, and Prihantoro 2025; Arofah et al. 2025; Gade 2019), religion and ecology (Bagir, Northcott, and Wijzen 2021; Halimatusa'diyah et al. 2024), and religious environmental movements in Indonesia (Arofah et al. 2025; Testriono et al. 2024). Together, these studies demonstrate that religious traditions—including indigenous belief systems—provide ethical foundations that are translated into social capital, manifested through social networks, diverse forms of cooperation, and collective action in support of environmental stewardship.

The literature has made important contributions by documenting the ethical foundations and internal dynamics of religious environmental activism, particularly the roles of religious leaders, activists, and spiritual communities in responding to environmental and climate crises. However, it has paid little attention to the political dynamics and policy processes through which religious environmentalism is translated into political action and policy practice. Specifically, existing studies rarely examine how policymakers foster interfaith collaboration or build sustained partnerships with faith leaders and religious communities to generate more effective and durable responses to environmental and climate-related challenges.

Motivated by a shared concern over the limited scholarly engagement with the intersections of ethics, politics, and policy in religion and environmental studies in Indonesia, the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat or PPIM), Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University Jakarta, in collaboration with the Faculty of Social Sciences, Indonesian International Islamic University (Universitas Islam Internasional Indonesia or UIII), Depok, convened the conference “Religious Environmentalism in Actions: Knowledge, Movements, and Policies” to foster international dialogue, intellectual exchange, and scholarly collaboration. Despite the rich development of Islamic studies in Indonesia over the past 75 years (Hoesterey 2025), systematic academic inquiry at the intersection of ethics, politics, and policy within religious environmentalism have remained marginal. Drawing on selected papers from the conference, this special issue seeks to move beyond ethical narratives by foregrounding movement-

centered analyses and integrating the political and policy dimensions of religious environmentalism in Indonesia, signaling an important shift in contemporary studies of religion and the environment.

Approaches in the Study of Islam and the Environment

Within academic discourse, at least two major approaches can be identified in the study of religion and the environment. The first is a doctrinal-textual approach, which gained prominence after Lynn White Jr. (1967) famously criticized monotheistic religions as contributing to the roots of the ecological crisis. In response to this argument, Seyyed Hossein Nasr advanced a sufi-inspired vision of the unity of the cosmos, highlighting the link between environmental degradation and spiritual crisis in the modern world (1997). Nasr's ideas provided an intellectual foundation for the early global articulation of "green Islam"—understood as the practice of Islamic teachings that ground faith in a deeply intertwined relationship with the natural environment, a perspective later echoed and developed in the works of scholars such as Mawil Izzi Dien (2000) and Fazlun Khalid (2000). These scholars establish Islamic theological and philosophical foundations for environmental conservation, centering on ethical principles such as *tawhīd* (the unity of God), *khalifah* (human stewardship as God's vicegerent on earth), and *mīzān* (balance).

The second is a more empirically oriented approach that examines the extent to which religion supports environmental conservation in practice. More recently, diverse expressions of belief, values, and ethics articulated through religious narratives have increasingly been recognized as valuable resources for environmental conservation (F. Berkes, Colding, and Folke 2001). Scholars such as Jenkins et al. (2018) and Hulme (2016) argue that a deeper understanding of religion is essential for explaining how religious ideas and institutions shape pro-environmental practices and cultural dynamics in efforts to address environmental degradation and climate change.

Much of the current research on Islam and the environment focuses on the second approach or on a synthesis of the two approaches. For example, Schwencke's (2012) study presents extensive chronological data documenting the rise of Islamic environmental movements from the early 1970s up to the publication of his article in 2012. The study highlights the evolution of eco-Islamic discourse through two major phases. The first is

the theoretical phase, spanning from the 1970s to the early 2000s, during which scholarly attention focused on conceptual debates about Islam and nature. This phase was also marked by normative classical interpretations that aimed to identify environmental references in the Qur'an and hadith and to articulate their broader implications. The second phase is the era of action and practice, in which the discourse shifted from theory to application and activism. During this period, theological principles were increasingly translated into concrete programs and practices across various sectors, institutions, and policy domains. These developments included the emergence of Muslim policymakers with an environmental focus, initiatives in business and finance such as eco-certified halal products, growing attention to Islamic green finance, and lifestyle-oriented movements aimed at "greening religion" through the adoption of renewable energy, clean technologies, and organic or locally sourced food.

Anna Gade (2019) adopted an anthropological approach to "mediate" between textual-doctrinal approaches and critical studies of Muslim environmental practice. She introduced the concept of "Muslim environmentalism" to explain the social and cultural foundations of environmental ethics in Islam, offering a framework for understanding the diversity of environmental activism among Muslim communities. Gade, for example, notes that Indonesian Muslims often regard local religious practices, such as the *labuhan* ritual performed by Muslim communities on the slopes of Mount Merapi, as forms of "impure" Islam due to their perceived syncretism. In contrast, Gade interprets these practices as part of a historical Islamic tradition that emphasizes balance (*al-mīzān*) among land, water, and air. For Gade, the core of environmental concern lies not primarily in doctrine, but in ethics. Her research thus broadens the analytical space for treating local religious practices as a legitimate subject within the study of religion and the environment.

Other scholars, Smith, Adam, and Maarif (2024), acknowledge the complex relationship between religion and the environment within specific socio-cultural contexts. They highlight forms of "religious creativity" at the local level in Indonesia, showing that local communities do not passively receive religious doctrine from centralized authorities. Instead, they actively reinterpret religious teachings to address concrete environmental crises, such as mining, deforestation, or water scarcity. The study also illustrates how local communities link Islamic values

with indigenous knowledge to strengthen the ethical legitimacy of their movements. In this view, religion is not treated merely as a body of texts, but as a lived practice capable of mobilizing collective resistance to environmental destruction (Smith, Adam, and Maarif 2024). While other studies often emphasize the role of Indonesian Ulama Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* or MUI) fatwas or government-led programs (Mangunjaya and Praharawati 2019), Smith, Adam, and Maarif (2024) take a more critical stance, arguing that meaningful change frequently emerges from local-level negotiations. Religious creativity, they suggest, becomes most visible when formal religious institutions are perceived as slow or insufficiently responsive to immediate environmental threats.

The literature treats religion as a significant variable that adds ethical weight to otherwise secular environmental movements and policy processes (Krantz 2021; Rollosso 2010). Many recent studies move beyond theological justification to provide grounded empirical evidence, examining Muslim responses to environmental problems and the roles of religious institutions, such as religious leaders, Islamic schools, Islamic philanthropy, and houses of worship, in the institutionalization of environmental agendas and the development of local faith-based conservation initiatives. In Indonesia, this dynamic is evident in the rise of the green Islam movements across various localities (Testriono et al. 2024). Schwencke (2012) highlights several key efforts, including the “Faith and Environment” program initiated in Bogor in 2002, which engaged Islamic leaders in promoting conservation messages through Islamic schools. A related series of workshops on environmental stewardship later culminated in the publication of *Konservasi Alam dalam Islam* (2005). The government-initiated eco-pesantren program, implemented in ninety Islamic boarding schools in Yogyakarta, further reflects institutional attempts to integrate Islamic teachings with environmental practice. Yet, scholars caution that the very effectiveness of religion also makes it vulnerable to instrumentalization, enabling it to legitimize environmentally harmful practices (Bagir 2015; Fikri 2020).

Essays in this Issue

This special issue brings together essays that both engage with and critically examine religion as an active, lived force in environmental activism. Collectively, the contributions open new pathways in the study of religion and the environment by demonstrating that the integration

of religion into environmental conservation is not frictionless. While religious institutions play an increasingly important role in promoting more equitable and sustainable forms of environmental governance at national and global levels, this engagement is challenged by persistent anthropocentric frameworks and calls for a rethinking of the ethical standing of religious values, including Islamic principles, within environmental conservation.

Frans Wijisen's essay, which revolved around a fundamental question: *"Does religion actually exert a significant influence on environmental issues?"* articulated an emerging shift in the studies of religion and the environment. Rather than expressing skepticism toward religion, the question invites a reconsideration of how religion is conceptualized within environmental debates. It challenges established assumptions and opens space for a broader reorientation in the study of religion and the environment. In this perspective, scholarly attention shifts beyond a narrow focus on classical textual interpretation toward careful empirical inquiry into religious practice. This includes the environmental behavior of Indonesian Muslims, the dynamics of Muslim activism, and the strategic role of Islamic institutions in concrete action and policy engagement. At the same time, the reflection also underscores the need for more rigorous methodological approaches in Indonesian scholarship on religion and the environment.

Despite the growing body of research on the intersection of Islam and environmental issues, Wijisen's article seeks to examine this correlation using data from the national survey on Religious Environmentalism Action (REACT) conducted by PPIM UIN Jakarta alongside findings from the Humans and Nature (HAN) study. Wijisen shows that the results of both studies appear somewhat paradoxical and difficult to interpret. A majority of respondents in the REACT survey believe that humans are entitled to modify nature, while simultaneously affirming the need to protect it. Similarly, the HAN study identifies what it terms eco-centric stewardship, suggesting that religious values play a dual role in environmental ethics, exhibiting both positive and negative correlations with pro-environmental beliefs.

On this basis, Wijisen questions the recommendation advanced in the REACT study that "it is important to integrate religion into environmental policies and programs in order to produce better environmental outcomes." If the findings indicate that religion is not

consistently decisive, why should public policy place particular emphasis on religion? For Wijzen, the notion of “socialization” often becomes a trap for scholars and policymakers when approached in a realist and managerial manner. The REACT data show that the Indonesian public does not suffer from a lack of information: as many as 79.45 percent of Indonesians report awareness of climate change. The problem, he argues, lies elsewhere. Environmental information is inherently interpretive and discursive, shaped by positionality, normative frameworks, and competing interests—a condition of bounded rationality. Even within the same individual, perspectives may vary, reflecting what he describes as the “multi-voiced self.” Addressing environmental challenges, therefore, is not merely a matter of information dissemination, but of managing meaning and building discursive coalitions among key stakeholders, including activists, policymakers, academics, and business actors. Such coalitions are essential for forging shared understandings of environmental degradation.

Zainal Abidin Bagir’s contribution offers an additional perspective by advancing a critique of the instrumentalization of religion in analyses of Muslim environmentalism—a caution he first articulated in his earlier study (2015). He cautions against the pitfalls of narrow functionalism, which tends to disregard the lived experiences of grassroots communities. Within such a functionalist framework, religion is deemed relevant only insofar as it serves to legitimize or support secular development agendas. His findings show that policymakers frequently engage only with religious elites, while overlooking the complexity of religious life at the grassroots level.

Moreover, religion is often invited to participate in ongoing political projects not as a source of radical critique or authentic theological perspectives rooted in community experience, but as a supplementary legitimizing tool. To move beyond this narrow instrumentalization, the article calls for a focus on “lived religion,” examining how ordinary people practice religion and engage with environmental issues in their everyday lives—often in hybrid forms that blend religious commitments with customary traditions and local knowledge. While acknowledging the importance of religion, Bagir argues that religious ecological orientation is often ambivalent: highly supportive in relation to “soft” issues such as waste management, yet hesitant or silent when confronted with contentious issues such as resistance to state-backed extractive industries.

This critique is not intended to undermine efforts to render “green Islam,” but rather to provide a more realistic understanding of the conditions under which faith-based environmentalism operates. The effectiveness of religiously grounded environmental movements cannot be assessed solely through fatwas or elite declarations, but must be evaluated in terms of how these values are lived, negotiated, and contested in the everyday practices of communities directly confronting environmental crises.

Beyond critical analyses on religious environmentalism, Anna Gade offers a reflection on the ethical construction of “future generations” within environmental discourse. Although this notion has served as a foundational moral pillar in global sustainability ethics since the early twentieth century, including in the development of ecotheology in Indonesia, Gade remains skeptical of its theoretical grounding. Through a comparative engagement with post-Christian and Western moral philosophy, she advances the thesis that Quranic ecotheology provides a more adequate framework for addressing this challenge.

Gade interrogates a recurring impasse in Western thought, which often remains trapped within logics of rights and property when grappling with the question of how moral obligations toward non-existent subjects can be justified. As an alternative, she foregrounds Islamic ethics as an apparatus for apprehending the incommensurability of the climate crisis through lived and embodied experience. Gade argues that the Quran integrates narratives of environmental destruction with discourses of eschatological accountability. The Quranic depiction of the Day of Judgment is thus understood not merely as a futuristic event, but as a dialogical space that reciprocally connects intergenerational accountability across past, present, and future. This perspective repositioning the Earth not as a passive commodity or form of property—as often assumed in Western paradigms—but as a living witness endowed with agency to testify to the ecological burdens imposed upon it by humanity.

Focusing on the role of religious institutions in the environmental issues, Nadia Farabi offers an important analysis of how the Istiqlal Mosque, as a domestic religious institution, interprets, translates, and localizes global sustainability norms in culturally grounded and institutionally actionable ways. Istiqlal has adopted several sustainability practices, including the use of reverse osmosis technology to recycle

ablution wastewater, the installation of energy-efficient smart lighting, and the use of solar panel. While continuing to articulate Islamic doctrinal discourses on environmental issues, Farabi demonstrates Istiqlal's capacity to contextualize sustainability norms through the language of Islamic ethics, thereby enhancing their legitimacy and facilitating public acceptance. Through the intersection of global governance, national regulation, and religious authority, sustainability becomes embedded not only in physical infrastructure, but also in the moral fabric of religious life.

The strength of Farabi's analysis lies in its institutional perspective, which treats the mosque not merely as a site of architectural intervention but as an organizational actor embedded within broader governance arrangements. By situating Istiqlal at the intersection of global sustainability frameworks, national regulatory regimes, and Islamic moral authority, the article illustrates how religious institutions can function as non-state actors that mediate, authorize, and routinize environmental norms. The study shows how sustainability is institutionalized in Istiqlal's governance and religious communication, but it remains unclear how durable these initiatives are and how far they extend beyond its immediate community through mosque networks to generate lasting behavioral change, pointing to important directions for future research.

Another empirical study on religion and the environment is Muizudin's contribution to understanding the institutionalization of Muslim environmentalism within ecological movements, through a case study of Syarekat Perjuangan Rakyat Padarincang (SAPAR) and its resistance to the geothermal project on Mount Parkasak. Muizudin emphasizes how Islamic values, such as *khalīfah*, *amānah*, and *mīzān*, function not merely as doctrinal teachings, but as framing devices for ecological mobilization. This movement reflects a hybridization of Islamic values and local ecological knowledge, thereby challenging the dominant narrative of "green energy." Based on these findings, Muizudin argues for more inclusive policies that recognize local communities as key actors in natural resources governance.

Beyond its empirical contribution, Muizudin's study is significant in demonstrating how Muslim environmentalism operates as a narrative of resistance rather than as a formalized environmental movement. By foregrounding Islamic ethical concepts as moral and political resources,

the article shows how religious language problematizes development projects that are otherwise framed as technocratic necessities. Muizudin thus moves the discussion beyond the binary of pro- versus anti-development, illustrating how faith-based ecological claims can unsettle state narratives of sustainability and expose the ecological injustices embedded in energy transition projects. In doing so, the article contributes to broader debates on religious environmentalism by highlighting the capacity of Islamic principles to be mobilized to generate alternative environmental ethics rooted in justice, locality, and moral accountability.

Taken collectively, the essays brought together in this special issue make a substantive contribution to strengthening the methodological foundations of religion-environment studies through a rigorous multidisciplinary approach. They signal a clear shift from predominantly theological justification toward empirically grounded analyses that are credible academically. The distinctiveness of this special issue lies in how it brings together strong field-based evidence with sensitivity to religious values. By doing so, it helps bridge the long-standing communication gap between policymakers and grassroots communities, where religious norms often serve as an important link for wider policy acceptance.

Concluding Remarks

This special issue does not merely portray the current state of the field, but it also advances a more demanding, empirically grounded, theoretically informed, methodologically robust, and analytically rigorous research agenda for future scholarship. The literature on religion and the environment has begun moving into underexplored terrain, emphasizing political ecology analyses that critically interrogate how religious actors and institutions interact with extractive industries and concentrations of capital, both nationally and transnationally.

Religion has often been sidelined in environmental politics, both in scholarship and in the engagement between major environmental organizations and governments (Kidwell 2020). Even as religious leaders issue pivotal statements, such as Pope Francis' encyclical linking social justice with environmental conservation, the complex interplay between faith and environmental governance at local, national, and transnational levels remains largely overlooked (Kidwell 2020). At the same time, the integration of religion into environmental activism

remains marked by tensions between formal religious authorities that often accommodate state agendas tied to extractive industries and grassroots movements that advance more radical claims for ecological justice.

In the Indonesian context, the recent turn toward politics and environmentalism has set a new benchmark for advancing evidence-based environmental policy analysis. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has recently introduced “ecothology” as part of its strategic plan, integrating environmental stewardship into religious discourse and practice under the ministry’s national policy framework (Ministry of Religious Affairs, Republic of Indonesia 2025). This emerging policy orientation underscores the need for systematic research to examine how such initiatives are implemented on the ground, including how ethical sensibilities embedded in religious values shape policy practice, how religious institutions interpret and enact ecological responsibilities, and what broader lessons can be drawn for the study of religion and the environment. The political dimensions of environmental issues, particularly when religion is involved, are often contested. In practice, forging cross-sectoral coalitions is therefore essential to mainstream faith-based environmental policies capable of generating the tangible impacts expected by the public. Future studies should also examine how such cross-sectoral coalitions are formed and how they shape environmental action.

Furthermore, an important question raised by Cope, et.al. (2023) concerns whether religion independently predicts environmental concern or whether political affiliation plays a more significant role in explaining variations in environmental attitudes. He demonstrates that religious identity does not consistently predict environmental attitudes once political variables are accounted for. In contrast, political affiliation emerges as a stronger and more stable predictor of environmental attitudes among rural residents. These findings suggest that the influence of religion on environmental views is likely mediated or even overshadowed by political ideology—especially in contexts where religion and politics are deeply intertwined culturally and socially (Cope et al. 2023). This debate has been relatively underexplored in the Indonesian context, thereby offering opportunities for further research.

Beyond this, the rise of digital environmentalism calls for sustained scholarly attention to the role of social media in shaping discursive

coalitions among diverse stakeholders. The faith actors can actively define and communicate environmental issues through religious language. Digital activism amplifies these faith-based framings, allowing them to reach wider audiences and contribute to public discourse, social mobilization, and potentially policy agendas (Salter and Wilkinson 2024). This should be coupled with an expanded empirical focus on urban settings, examining how urban Muslim communities negotiate “green” lifestyles amid contemporary consumption pressures—an area that remains underexplored by existing studies. Examining this interplay offers a promising avenue to understand how religious narratives, mediated online, inform environmental awareness especially among urban Muslims, bridging the study of religion, environmentalism, and policymaking.

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The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

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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.
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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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