Daftar Isi (Table of Content)

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Eco-Theology in Indonesian Islam: Ideas on Stewardship among Muhammadiyah Members

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ABSTRACT

In response to environmental degradation, Muslims worldwide have been developing Green Islam and Eco-Theology. This article focuses on Indonesia, particularly on Muhammadiyah members. The authors advocate an empirical approach, based on an analysis of the beliefs of Muslims rather than on the source texts of Islam. Terms frequently used by Muslims to refer to the relationship between humans and nature is "steward" and "stewardship". By conducting interviews the authors aim to get a deeper insight into how these terms are used in constructing Green Islam. Interviewees say on the one hand that "all creatures are the same", on the other hand that humans act "as stewards, as leaders" of nature. This ambiguity raises a dilemma for Eco-Theology in Indonesian Islam: between deep ecology and eco-modernity. The interviewees, however, also see a need to go beyond this dichotomy, by moderation and balancing, or the Middle Path. The Middle Path is a life orientation that promotes "harmony between humankind, the rest of nature and the Transcendent."

Keywords: Eco-Theology, Indonesia, Islam, stewardship, Muhammadiyah

ABSTRAK

Menanggapi degradasi lingkungan, umat Islam di seluruh dunia telah mengembangkan Islamdan Eco-Theology. Artikel ini berfokus pada Indonesia, khususnya pada anggota Muhammadiyah. Para penulis menganjurkan pendekatan empiris, berdasarkan analisis keyakinan Muslim daripada pada teks sumber Islam. Istilah yang sering digunakan oleh umat Islam untuk merujuk pada hubungan antara manusia dan alam adalah "penatalayanan" dan "penatalayanan". Dengan melakukan wawancara, penulis bertujuan untuk mendapatkan wawasan yang lebih dalam tentang bagaimana istilah-istilah ini digunakan dalam membangun Islam Hijau. Orang yang diwawancarai mengatakan di satu sisi bahwa "semua makhluk adalah sama", di sisi lain bahwa manusia bertindak "sebagai pelayan, sebagai pemimpin" alam. Ambiguitas ini menimbulkan dilema bagi eko-teologi dalam Islam Indonesia: antara ekologi dalam dan eko-modernitas. Orang yang diwawancarai, bagaimanapun, juga melihat kebutuhan untuk melampaui thadalah dikotomiy, dengan moderasi dan keseimbangan, atau Jalan Tengah. Jalan Tengah adalah orientasi hidup yang mempromosikan "harmoni antara umat manusia, seluruh alam dan Transenden."

Kata Kunci: Eco-Theology, Indonesia, Islam, pelayanan, Muhammadiyah

INTRODUCTION

In August 2015, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science, in collaboration with Islamic Relief Worldwide, released The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (Islamic Foundation 2015). This was at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium in Istanbul. It was not the first expression of environmentalism in the Moslem world. Already in 1968, the Moslem philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr, wrote about environmental degradation, criticising modern science and technology and arguing in favour of a spiritual renewal (Nasr 1968). In 2001, the Global Environmental Forum from an Islamic Perspective issued the Jeddah Environment Declaration from an Islamic Perspective, and in 2002 the First Islamic Conference for Ministers of the Environment issued the Islamic Declaration on Sustainable Development. Increasingly Moslem activists worldwide promote green and clean Islam (Schwencke 2012: 28-29).

In this article we focus on Indonesia, not only because it is the largest Moslem population in the world, but also it is named the third largest polluter in the world. Rivers such as Ciliwung and Citarum belong to the most polluted rivers in the world. Their water contains micro-plastics, chemicals, metals, and anti-biotics (Asian Development Bank 2016). Indonesia lost 80% of its rain forests, which causes climate change, because deforestation reduces the carbon-absorbing power of trees. Indonesia is the second highest emitter of greenhouse gas, and the second biggest contributor to plastic waste, causing health problems and floods (Jotzo 2012). But Indonesia is also taking the lead in developing a green and clean Islam (Schwencke 2012: 26-27).

What we see as challenges in Islamic thought is first a gap between theory and practice in environmental ethics, and second, in relation to this, a tension between top-down (deductive) and bottom-up (inductive) theories (Bagir & Martiam 2016). In this paper we advocate an empirical approach in developing eco-theology in Indonesian Islam. An empirical approach in theology does not interpret the source texts of a religion but analyses the beliefs of its practitioners (Van der Ven 1988).

THEORY AND METHOD

In its preamble, the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change says: "Our species, though selected to be a caretaker or steward (*khalifah*) on the earth, has been the cause of such corruption and devastation on it that we are in danger ending life as we know it on our planet" (Islamic Foundation 2015).

The reference to the human being as caretaker or steward is widespread in writings by Moslem authors (Nasr 1968: 96; Khaled 2005; Bagir & Martiam 2016: 81; Mangunjaya 2011). However, it is an ambiguous concept, as it is interpreted in different, sometimes contradicting ways, not only in Islam, but also in Christianity, that has the same concept.

In our project on Eco-Theology in Indonesian Islam we use a mixed method approach combining quantitative and qualitative research, making use of questionnaires and interviews. In a small-scale pilot study, spreading a questionnaire among hundred respondents, we made use of the Humans and Nature scale (De Groot, Drenthen & De Groot 2011; Duong & Van den Born 2019). This scale explores images of human and nature relationships, using a typology based on literature: humans as masters over nature, humans as stewards of nature, humans as partners of nature, and humans as participants in nature. Already Nasr (1968: 81-113) explored various images of human – nature interaction.

We found that most respondents supported a nature-centric version of stewardship, thus not a type of steward that is master over or leader of nature, but a steward as partner of or participant in nature (Wijsen et al., 2023). In this paper we aim to acquire deeper insight into this finding making use of the qualitative research. The qualitative research is based on semi-structured interviews among twenty Nadhlatul Ulama members and twenty Muhammadiyah members conducted between 2019 - 2022. Here we limit ourselves to interviews with Muhammadiyah members. We analyse these interviews making use of insights taken from discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992, 2001).

In the questionnaire respondents were asked to grade statements on a four-point scale, ranging from "fully agree" to "fully disagree". The analysis showed that statements such as "God commends humans to wisely manage the earth's resources for the sake of human betterment", and "being religious, humans must protect the rights of nature", showed the highest levels of agreement. Exploitation-oriented statements such as "The ability to think puts humans above Nature", or at the other end of the spectrum, participation-oriented statements such as "God, humans and nature are one", got a relatively lower level of agreement.

All Creatures are the Same

The term "steward" as such was not used in the questionnaire, but it was used frequently by respondents whom we interviewed. As one interviewee said:

> "Nature is God's creation, Allah. Because nature is God's creation everything in nature has the same function, status and responsibility as a creature, as nature, but in carrying out its function each type of creature it is different… But the point is the same. They are nature. The only one is Allah as Creator … Because the status [and] function is different, but the relation must be the same, there must be appreciation and respect between one creature and another, especially because humans are created as stewards, as leaders, as subjects for nature. It does not mean that humans treat nature as they want. No, but he

must be full of responsibility according to his nature as a creature. [He] must respect [nature], he must preserve the creature even though it can be used, but must not damage or eliminate respect for that creature. The general view is like that."

The interviewee who is a board member of *Majelis Tarjih* (Muhammadiyah council of *fatwa*) uses various alternative words to describe the complexity that on the one hand all creatures are the same, but on the other hand they are different: function (mentioned three times), status (mentioned two times), responsibility (mentioned two times). By adding "the general view is like that", the speaker naturalizes the debate (Fairclough 1992: 67), marginalizing contrasting views. The word "must" (mentioned six times) indicates a normative statement with obligational modality (Fairclough 2001 105-106).

Thus, as creatures of God, humans and nature are the same. But humans have a special function "as stewards, as leaders". In fact, the respondent combined the "humans and nature" (partnership or interaction) and "humans in nature" (participation or inclusion) model.

Another interviewee who is the chairman of Central Java Muhammadiyah Regional board puts it this way:

"We always use [a Quranic verse] in *al-Baqarah* chapter (sûrah): 'It is He who created for you all of that which is on the earth. Then He directed Himself to the heaven, [His being above all creation], and made them seven heavens, and He is Knowing of all things', everything that exists [on earth] is for humans. but [it] is limited by [the rule] 'And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation', do not do any damage. So please take advantage, but do not do damage. Please use it, but do not damage it. Please construct, but do not destruct."

The alternative wording and over-wording (Fairclough 1992: 193) in this text clearly shows the preoccupation of the speaker with the theology of using nature without damaging it.

Who Waters the Trees?

The texts analysed above give the theory. But in practice this is not easy. As the above-mentioned chairman of Central Java Muhammadiyah Regional board said:

"Sometimes it is difficult for us to differentiate which one is constructive and which one is destructive. At the same time, we construct and deconstruct. Now the toll road is being constructed. How many trees have been cut down? In fact, do toll roads construct or destruct? Constructing and destructing are only slightly different, even though our

theological foundation is welcome: 'And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation', do not destruct it. That is the most basic thing we propagate."

The word "toll road" is a metaphor. Metaphors structure the way we think and act (Fairclough 1992: 194). In this case, the toll road symbolizes progress, and progress seems at odds with nature conservation. "(De)construct" is mentioned nine times. Mentioning the cutting of trees for the sake of building the toll road, he said:

> "Therefore, anyone who cut down one [tree] should plant one [tree] so that it becomes the basis for maintaining the equilibrium of life [and] maintaining balance ... I think there is a philosophy of cutting one [tree] [and] planting one [tree]. Do not forget, cut down one [and] plant one. We are busy cutting down [but] forget to plant. It is fun to cut [tree] but forget to plant [tree]. I think it is. That is why an imbalance occurs."

The interviewee draws on a philosophy of "cutting one, planting one". Asked where this philosophy came from, he said that it was based on his own observation. The interviewee mentions "(im)balance" twice. Conservation of nature is about finding the right balance. "Moderation" and "balancing" are key words in our respondents talking about Islamic dealings with environmental issues.

The interviewee explicitly appeals to the image of "man as steward".

> "I think an environmental slogan of 'one tree a million benefits' is true, because with trees the air is beautiful, with trees there is oxygen, with threes there are birds, caterpillars can be there, butterflies can be there. Everything is there because of trees ... Allah is Creator (*khaliq*), God (*ilahun*), but also Manager (*rabbun*). He creates as well as manages nature. But it is impossible for Allah to come down [into the world] and then water the trees. Who waters trees? We do. So that the function of our stewardship is to protect trees, to protect rivers. This (nature) is for humans but do not spoil it. So that the steward's value includes protecting environment. That is why the real meaning of steward is extraordinary, because it [is in] all aspects of life."

The question "Who waters the trees" is a rhetorical strategy (Fairclough 1992: 187) strengthening what is described as "the function of our stewardship" (mentioned three times). It is because God cannot come down to earth to water the trees, that human must do it. This is the steward as viceregent.

Nature is a Subject

The informants link the cutting of trees for the sake of human progress with environmental degradation and floods. But floods are not "natural disasters". They are caused by humans because they go against the laws of nature. Because nature is not an "object" that people can use at will. Nature is a subject.

> "In my opinion, nature was created by Allah perfectly and has a law of nature that necessitates a balance of ecosystems. So that if the law of nature is followed, then this nature will be sustainable and that nature will bring mercy to humans. In my opinion, the occurrence of natural disasters is because humans do not enforce the actual law of nature. Law of nature is a *sunatullah* (law of God) … So that if the water becomes flood or becomes a source of disaster, it is not because takdir Allah (God's destiny) in the sense that God wants flood, but takdir Allah (God's destiny) works because *sunatullah* (law of God) is not fulfilled by humans because besides nature was created with perfection also with balance."

The interviewee, who is the general secretary of Muhammadiyah Central Board, mentions "law of nature" four times and he says that the "law of nature is a "law of God" (mentioned two times). He repeats the phrase "in my opinion" (over-wording) to show that he speaks for himself, at the individual (micro) level of discourse, not as an official within Muhammadiyah or the institutional (meso) level of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 56). The core of the problem, according to this interviewee, is the anthropocentric thinking of man and the making nature an object. But nature is a subject.

> "Human survival is very dependent on nature, but our understanding of nature is still very anthropocentric in the sense that nature was created for humans. So, humans can do anything to nature. I think that nature must be interpreted as a separate being so that it does not become an object but becomes a subject. [As I said] earlier, for example, the flood was actually part of behavior of nature, so it was a subject that had his own system."

He qualifies nature is a "separate being" that is a subject (mentioned twice). So clearly, this is the humans and nature model, where humans and nature are seen as separate entities that interact. For him, both humans and nature are subjects.

The Mission of Stewardship is Inherent in Humans

Another interviewee was inspired by a Quranic verse on the mission of stewardship when introducing environmental programs at a grassroot level. One of the missions is to reflect on the "sustainability" of the earth (mentioned twice).

"I was inspired by the mission of stewardship which is inherent in humans in the verse: 'He (Allah) has created you from the earth (land) and made you prosperous.' We understand the efforts, steps to make the earth prosperous, not only enjoying what is there, not only exploring and even exploiting. But he also has an obligation to think further about sustainability. The sustainability of this earth must be enjoyed not only [by] today's generations but also future generations".

The interviewee who is a member of *Majelis Tabligh* of Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah Regional Board classifies two types of human relationship to nature. First, there are those who make the earth prosperous and think deeply about its sustainability. Second, there are those who enjoy the earth by exploring and exploiting it without considering its sustainability. The words "must" in the sentence "The sustainability of this earth that must be enjoyed not only [by] today's generations but also future generations" contains a normative statement with obligational modality (Fairclough 2001: 105-106) in regard to the way human beings utilize the earth.

Another interviewee spoke about the mission of stewardship using alternative words, namely "duties / duty" (mentioned four times), "commands" (mentioned two times), "ordered" (mentioned once), "assignment" (mentioned once).

"We are created by God [as] stewards on earth. They [other creatures] support us. Since they support us, I think it is good if we recompense them by giving them kindness. So, if [our actions] are at risk, we do the ones with the least risk, right? They give us clean water; how can we give dirty [water] to the environment. They give us clean air; how can we give dirty air to them ...? [As] we are created [by] God [as] *khalifah fi al-ardh* (stewards on the earth], we should have duties and responsibilities. In my opinion, [we] have duties and responsibilities. What is [our] duty? Our duty [is] to worship, but [the meaning of] worshiping here [is] not worshiping in narrow [meaning, but] worshiping in a broader [meaning, that is] carrying out all of God's commands and staying away from his prohibitions. [We] always carry out his commands. Allah is all-powerful and all-helpful, all-protective, all-giving and [we] are always given good qualities, [so that] we should inherit [these good qualities]. So, when I was ordered by Allah to be a manager in this world, I tried to inherit those qualities and then I deliver them to [other] creatures. His creatures can be the same as me, living beings as humans and other creatures, other creatures that God created for us. God created [other creatures] for us. I did this because of the assignment from [God]... In my opinion, it means that if we become stewards, we are the ones who manage [nature], managing [nature] with [God's] rules...".

The interviewee speaks for himself ("In my opinion"), at individual level of discourse, not as a representative of Muhammadiyah, at institutional level (Fairclough 1992: 56). Apart from re-wording and over-wording (Fairclough 1992: 193), the interviewee uses questions ("how can we give dirty [water]", "how can we give dirty air") as a rhetorical strategy (Fairclough 1992: 187). The interviewee qualifies the steward as "manager" (mentioned three times) and managing as "worship / worshipping" (mentioned four times). By doing so, the focus shifts from interaction between humans and nature (other creatures) to interaction between humans and God, the Creator. This was also expressed by another speaker.

> "Humans as *khalifah fi al-ardh* (stewards on the earth) were created [by God] in the best [form] to be good stewards on the earth. Then of course it must be in accordance with what Allah has commanded. Allah created the best nature and we are allowed to consume. However, [we are] also [commanded to] maintain. [the meaning of] *khalifah fi al-ardh* (stewards on the earth) here in a broad sense [is] not only for personal but also for *rahmatan lil'alamin* (mercy for the worlds). For example, Aisyiyah [was established] not only for Aisyiyah [but also] for all, for society, both human and non-human."

The speaker who is the chairperson of Aisyiyah Central Java Regional Board also uses the word "commanded". She refers to the ambiguity that humans "are allowed to consume" nature but also are commanded to maintain nature.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we aimed to acquire deeper insight into the ambiguity of the stewardship model by making use of interviews. We advocated an empirical approach in developing eco-theology in Indonesian Islam, starting from the religion as it is lived in every-day experiences (micro level of discourse) and not from the religion as it is learned in Islamic institutions (meso level of discourse). The interviewees spoke for themselves and not as officials within Muhammadiyah.

One of the challenges of Eco-Theology in Islam is to show the contemporary relevance of the paradoxical position of humans as servants of God as well as the stewards of God. In this case, nature has been subjugated for them (*taskhir*), but in an environment-friendly sense. The use of nature must not go beyond the limits that have been determined in Islam, namely what is good (*halal*) and harmful (*haram*), what is just (*'adl*) and unjust (*zulm*) (Baharuddin 2011). In other words, God authorizes human beings to be able to make use of the nature within the framework of the Islamic ethics (Taqavi, Kafaee & Ravanbakhsh 2021).

From our small sample we conclude that in practice our respondents easily move between various images of human and nature relationship, images that theoretically are separated. There is not much support for the image of the human being as master over nature, but the respondents mix the partner model and the participant model: the human being is part of nature, but also above nature.

The ambiguity of "all creatures are the same", but humans act "as stewards, as leaders" of nature raise some dilemmas for Eco-Theology in Indonesia Islam: the dilemma between deep ecology and eco-modernity, between going back to the past (e.g. organic farming) or move to the future (e.g. green technology), between more market (e.g. circular economy) or less market (e.g. limits to growth), and basically, between an optimistic or a pessimistic view of humanity.

What our respondents put forward, however, is a need to go beyond these dichotomies, between models that theoretically can be distinguished, such as interaction and inclusion, but in practice are not, and to value moderation and balancing (*al-Wasatiyya wa al-Tawazun*), or the Middle Path. The Middle Path is a life orientation that promotes "harmony between humankind, the rest of nature and the Transcendent."

This also signifies, that scholars have to go beyond popular distinctions such as "modernist Islam", assuming that Islam must adjust itself to and is compatible with the values of modernity, and "traditionalist" Islam assuming that Islam is to be built on and must adjust itself to the local traditions of the past. These are stereotypes that simplify the reality on the ground.

Taking inspiration from mediaeval Islamic thinkers such as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, who did not make a separation between rationality and revelation, eco-theology in Indonesian Islam can take a middle path between small and smart solutions for the environmental crisis. Based on this, we also have to balance pessimistic ("it is too late" to mitigate climate change) and optimistic ("yes we can" mitigate climate change) moods. In this sense, Nasr (1968) and the Islamic Declaration (Islamic Foundation 2015) that we quoted in the beginning of this article seem to be too pessimistic.

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