The Earth Is Your Mosque (and Everyone Else's Too): Online Muslim Environmentalism and Interfaith Collaboration in UK and Singapore

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Abstract

The environmentalist group Wisdom in Nature (WIN) and the online network Project ME: Muslims and the Environment have been chosen for analysis, from the UK and Singapore respectively, to illustrate examples of Muslim environmentalists who use the Internet, as a complement to community-based activism, to raise awareness of environmental concerns among both Muslims and non-Muslims. I will explore how WIN and Project ME seek to promote an interpretation of Islamic practice that is both environmentally responsible and open to close collaboration with non-Muslims as a consequence of being holistically protective of all in existence, both human and otherwise. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how the Internet is used to facilitate the introduction of interested Muslims and non-Muslims into practical, off-line environmentalism, seen as an emotional community (Hetherington 1998), by minimizing the differences in culture, communication styles or religious belief that could otherwise pose difficulties.

In recent years, despite there being many Muslims who participate actively and contentedly in non-religious environmentalist groups and activities, there are a growing number who prefer to have a specifically Islamic platform from which to express their concerns about the environment. The rising popularity of groups such as IFEES (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences), which from humble beginnings in the 1980s has become an internationally recognized charity organization, together with the birth of several other self-defined Islamic environmentalist groups

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worldwide, are evidence of a growing number of Muslims who consider environmental protection to be something worth expressing through a specifically Islamic framework.

In this article, I will briefly discuss some basic precepts of Islamic environmentalism and their implications for Muslim interfaith collaboration as well as the importance of drawing a distinction between Islamic environmentalism and Muslim environmentalism. I will then illustrate how the UK based Wisdom in Nature (hereafter abbreviated to WIN) and the Singaporean Project ME: Muslims and the Environment (hereafter simply Project ME) are examples of self-identified Muslim environmentalist groups who use the Internet to complement offline activism as well as raise awareness of environmental concerns. While a shared religious background makes Muslims the primary target audience of these groups' outreach efforts, non-Muslims are considered to be very important and, when engaged by either group, become equally part of the environmentalist community, seen in these examples as a community of emotions (Hetherington 1998). These two examples are not presented as being in any way representative of groups or other networks espousing Islamic environmentalism as a whole. Instead, WIN and Project ME were selected as informative online examples of an emerging Muslim discourse that is not limited to one particular country, region, community or other demographic, and also not limited to the Internet. At present, scholarship that specifically considers environmentalism as a part of online Islamic discourse is yet to be developed despite the ever increasing presence of "Islamic environmentalism"[1] on the Internet.

Research methods

Methodologically this article has been based on both online and offline research. My research with WIN began in 2008, when the group was named London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE). As I never had the occasion to go to London and participate in the events and activities organized by LINE, despite being warmly invited to do so, my research was conducted, with the exclusion of several telephone interviews, as a

cyber-fieldwork (Hine 2000, Howard 2002, Puri 2007) through email, their Facebook page[2] as well as their website[3] and blog.[4] Although emails and chat logs do provide a convenient and accurate record of discussions with research respondents, the so called "digital divide" is important and does have an impact upon the research process, denying the researcher access to observing the interpersonal dynamics which are central to ethnography (Varisco 2010:174). I have taken this into account when preparing my analysis of all data resulting from my exchanges with respondents from this group, which took place over an extended period of time from April 2008 to the time of writing, September 2012. Considering the speed with which online content, such as websites and blogs, can be updated or vanish altogether, it is important to highlight that data is time-specific to the period in which it was collected, which in this case was from February to September 2012.

In contrast to my research with the members of WIN, my research with the members of Project ME was very much based on traditional ethnography and participant observation, yet with an analysis of web content and online activities remaining an important aspect. In 2009, my research on Muslim environmentalism in Singapore began with my participation in a public seminar, hosted by the Young Association of Muslim Professionals (YAMP) and organized in association with 350.org,[5] entitled "Going 350: Muslims and the Environment," where Sofiah Jamil,[6] a YAMP board member, organizer of the event and thereafter a key informant in my research in Singapore had invited me to give a speech on the topic. Ms. Jamil founded Project ME wishing to foster interest in environmentalism among the local Muslim community. A research project carried out for the preparation of a book chapter on engaging local Muslim youth in environmentalism (Jamil 2009) together with the perceived success of the "Going 350" seminar inspired her in the endeavor. In Singapore, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Ms. Jamil and five other participants (three female, two male) in the Project ME network. I also conducted participant-observation and unstructured interviews with members and supporters of other groups at various local environmentalism-themed events, all of which took place

between October 2009 and September 2011. I actively engaged with and collected data from the Green Bush blog and the Project ME Facebook community forum between February and September 2012.

Approaching Islamic environmental discourse

Scholarly discussions of religion and environmentalism frequently make reference to Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), which is essentially a critique of Western Christianity, seen as an anthropocentric religion and fundamental cause of the worldwide ecological crisis. Despite that White was a historian and not an expert in either environmental or religious studies (Harper 2008:6), his seminal 1967 essay has stimulated debate and shaped discussions of environment and religion since its publication (Proctor and Berry 2005:1571). Although White's criticisms are perhaps more widely known, his influential work was narrowly preceded by a series of lectures given by prominent Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Foltz 2003:252). In 1966, in the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago, Nasr linked environmental degradation to a spiritual crisis of modern humanity (Murad 2011:146).[7] More than half a century later, Muslim environmentalists contend that the very same spiritual crisis continues to burden the earth in increasingly harmful ways.[8]

As the basis of the problem is perceived to be fundamentally spiritual, so too is the solution (Özdemir 2008, Rahim 1991). Muslim environmentalists see environmental responsibility as being central to the Qur'anic concept of khilāfa, or stewardship (Foltz 2003:253), citing Qur'anic verses[9] which suggest that humankind has been placed on earth as a custodian. The role of humanity is often expressed in terms of a trusteeship, expressed by the Arabic word amānāh[10] in the Qur'anic verse 33:72, where all people – regardless of religion – are understood to have a moral responsibility for the care and proper maintenance of Creation (Khalid 2002:7). Stewardship of the earth, then, is understood by many Muslim environmentalists as a moral test for humankind, and not just for Muslims. For this reason the members of WIN and Project ME, and many others besides them,[11] emphasize the opportunity for interfaith engagement that environmental activism provides. Indeed,

involvement of Muslims in environmental interfaith activism is common, both as organizers and participants, and some consider it to be an excellent way to further the environmental cause (Abdul-Matin 2010:51–56).

So what exactly is Islamic environmentalism as an object of study? Just as ideals of piety can vary between individuals, so too can ideals of what "environmentalism" is and requires of a person when it is put into practice. Kay Milton, an anthropologist who has written extensively on environmentalism and conservation issues, has summarized the definition of environmentalism as being a quest for a viable future that is "pursued through the implementation of culturally defined responsibilities" (1993:2, emphasis added). This concise definition may appear useful in that it allows for varied expressions of environmentalism across different cultural contexts, whether religiously inspired or not. However, when scholars speak of culturally defined responsibilities, individual interpretations of what those responsibilities mean are often overlooked (Keane 2003).

Indeed, as Milton later clarifies, her summarized definition is not always the best description of environmentalism when it is to be objectified in social-scientific analysis (1993:8). It is incomplete as it is, and Milton elaborates on it by proposing that, for analytical purposes, environmentalism may be usefully seen as a trans-cultural discourse that can be described as a "field of communication through which environmental responsibilities (those which make up the environmentalist quest for a viable future) are constituted" (Milton 1993:9). Viewing environmentalism as a discourse emphasizes the role of communication and allows for the fact that a discourse changes, evolves, and is negotiated and renegotiated by individuals over time. If we follow Talal Asad in understanding Islam as a "tradition" that essentially consists of "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice […]" (Asad 1986:14), Islamic environmentalism, then, can be seen as a discourse within the wider Islamic discursive tradition.

"Islamic environmentalism" or "Muslim environmentalism"

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a steadily growing body of scholarly literature written about Islamic environmentalism by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Titles often address topics such as animal rights in Islam (Foltz 2006, Masri 1986), linkages between traditional Islamic values and environmentalist ethics (Ammar 2001, Izzi Dien 2000, Manzoor 1984, Saniotis 2011), Islamic solutions to environmental degradation (Murad 2011, Özdemir 2003), and examples of Islamic environmentalism in practice (De Hanas 2010, Foltz 2005b, Rice 2006). Much of this work is rich in analyses of primary theological sources, such as the Qur'an and hadith material, as well as the commentary of various Muslim religious scholars on both. However, as has been noticed by Vasi (2010), although many possible theological roots of Islamic environmentalism have been much discussed among scholars, and even across disciplines, far less has been written about the environmental behavior of Muslims, which can sometimes even be at odds with mainstream theology (Foltz 2003).

In overcoming the gap that may exist between scripture and practice, some scholars have suggested that it is useful to restrict the use of the term "Islamic environmentalism" to that which may demonstrably be derived from the textual sources of Islam, rather than from the behavior and beliefs of Muslims (Foltz 2003:252, El Deen Hamed 1993:146). This restriction may pose a problem, however, as not all Muslims agree on what precisely the theological bases for environmentalism are, nor do they necessarily agree on what environmentalism or environmentalist behavior constitutes.

Indeed, identifying a distinction between "Muslim" and "Islamic" may be useful in some contexts, whether it be in scholarship concerning environmentalism or not. However, it is worth noting that creating such a distinction potentially opens an unanswerable question of who is qualified to give "correct" interpretations of scripture or religious traditions. Islamic environmentalism can sometimes appear to be a fairly unitary discourse, soundly based on the Qur'an and hadith, which enjoins environmental responsibility upon Muslims as being a religious obligation, but as any other discourse

among the various global Muslim communities, Islamic ecotheology is far from it (Ouis 2003:2, Foltz 2005a).

Reaching out online: engaging humanity in environmentalism within and beyond Islam

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Internet plays an important role in popularizing Islamic environmentalism by providing an easy means of networking and communication among people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, whom are interested in environmentalism from an Islamic perspective. Usage of the Internet among Muslims as a research, networking, interpretation and dialogue tool in religious matters have been much studied,[12] and some scholars, such as Gary Bunt, have written at length about how the Internet has, in his own words, "reshaped the boundaries of Muslim networks, created new dialogues, and presented new transaction routes within the Islamic knowledge economy" (Bunt 2009:276). No longer constrained by the circulation of print media, one might expect that these "new dialogues" would spread far and wide, opening up opportunities for Muslims of varying ideological and religious stances to come to a better understanding of one another. Although this does happen, and as we will see shortly, this expectation to reach people is the motivation behind many Islamic environmentalist endeavors online, the exchange of ideas over the Internet is sometimes limited as individuals are frequently drawn to online material that validates their own religious and ideological beliefs rather than challenges them (cf. El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009).

Unlike Project ME that, being founded as an "online network," most actively operates through its Facebook page, WIN has always been first and foremost a community activism group whose main activities are by definition very much "offline." In order to understand the nature and context of its Internet presence, then, it is important to mention its history and activities. This section will provide some brief background information before exploring the relationship between the Internet, interfaith engagement, environmentalism and Islam according to WIN and Project ME.

In an effort to raise environmental awareness among Muslim communities in the South East of England, Dr. Muzammal Hussain established the (now defunct) Ecobites environmental e-newsletter in 2002, and then later in 2004, the group then named London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE), of which he remains the Chairperson. Although LINE began with just three members whom held their first meeting in Muzammal's parents' home in January 2004, with Muzammal's careful nurturing, together with the dedication of the growing group of members, LINE soon thrived despite a low level of activism experience among new members and the low priority that environmentalism was often given among British Muslims at that time (Hussein n.d.). The fledgling group established a regular forum, which was soon held on the premises of the Muslim World League in London, and later established their website in 2007 (Muzammal Hussain, email to author, September 10, 2012), allowing WIN to reach out further afield.

Topics covered in the forums, from their initiation in 2004 until today, are varied and cover issues such as Ramadan and consumerism, green economics, and climate change as well as environmental poetry, nuclear power, and biofuels.[13] Forums are, in a way, the main meeting-space of the group and discussions focus on shared values among the participants in order to foster a feeling of community among members and visitors. In addition to the forums, and in order to reach out beyond those who may already have an interest in environmentalism, WIN holds information and skills workshops[14] and frequently supports other groups in activism.[15] Unfortunately beyond the scope of this article, LINE's other activities are frequent and varied, including organized trips to organic farms, organic food-share picnics and events such as the 2005 "Snorkel Muslims" climate change awareness demonstration in Brick Lane (pictured below). This demonstration, held in a primarily Bangladeshi neighborhood, was intended to raise awareness of the impact of climate change in Bangladesh and was noticed by The Guardian newspaper (Vidal 2005).

LINE's philosophy was, and still is, very holistic in nature and is built upon four values of earth and community, deep democracy, whole economics and

climate justice – all of which are embraced through what WIN has termed "engaged surrender," which the group defines as "a nonviolent, process-oriented activism, expressed through a contemplative dimension within the framework of Islam (Surrender to the Divine)" (Wisdom in Nature n.d.).

Fig. 1. Courtesy of Wisdom In Nature, 2005. Used with permission.

Although LINE initially set out to engage a primarily Muslim audience, as it was the Muslim community whom were perceived to be particularly disinterested (cf. Timberlake 1984), the intention to include non-Muslims together with a reflection upon the holistic nature of the aims brought members to consider changing the group's name. As group founder Muzammal Hussain writes,

> Whilst LINE was successful in its aims, we were aware that our emphasis on process, our holistic approach that was wider than the environment and included the social and spiritual, and our inclusion of those who were not Muslim meant that our name was not quite congruent with our focus and means even though these had not changed. We were also finding that in describing our work, we began

to use the term 'ecological' (which implies interconnectedness and gives value to relationship) more, and the term 'environmental' less. In November 2009, after discussions that included a consensus-decision-making process, we unanimously agreed on a change of name and became Wisdom In Nature. We continue as an Islamic group and hope that our new name captures more of the essence of our work (Hussein n.d.).

Although it has always been open to collaboration with non-Muslim individuals and groups, LINE's change of name to Wisdom in Nature further facilitates that openness.

Despite being a group that is heavily involved community-based activism, WIN uses the Internet to reach out in five different ways: the group's official website,[16] which hosts information about the group, including its aims, ethos and activities; the associated group blog,[17] which contains details about upcoming events and reflections by members; the relatively recent WIN Facebook page,[18] which has been active since January 2011 and shares relevant articles and web links; the WINnotices e-list, which details upcoming group events as well as those of a few select other groups and organisations; and finally, the WINnotices Yahoo Group,[19] which posts messages spread through the e-list. While there is an emphasis on promoting participation in offline activities (without necessarily being a "member"), the online presence of WIN is the first point of information for many people unfamiliar with the group, or Islamic environmentalism as a topic, and this is reflected in the group's presentation on its website and social media. However, that said, it is unlikely that a person entirely unaware of Islamic environmentalism, or uninterested in environmental activism, would come to know of WIN's online activities without being first introduced somehow. Indeed, upon examination of their Facebook page, many appear to have discovered WIN through searching for Islamic environmentalist groups out of a prior interest, participating in an event that featured WIN or hearing about it from others.

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WIN's values, such as their four core values mentioned above together with their commitment to openness and dialogue, are very clearly presented on their website and social media. Together with a selection of self-published essays and pamphlets, WIN's website features a number of external resources that discuss Islamic environmentalism, such as reading lists, web links, articles and audiovisual material, all of which are labelled with a disclaimer in the heading of the page that states in clear terms that the material provided reflects the opinions and interpretations of the respective authors alone, and not necessarily those of the group. Despite possessing clear aims, values and objectives as a group, WIN makes no claims to possess an authoritative understanding on what "Islamic environmentalism" should mean, or look like in practice, and invites participation in dialogue and activities from people of all faiths and none (WIN 2010). As A.R., a 30-year-old, male Muslim of Pakistani heritage and long standing WIN member, once wrote to me, "all humanity was trusted [by God] with care of the earth, so we [Muslims] should remind all humanity of our responsibilities" (email to author, October 22, 2009). This sentiment parallels the welcome page on WIN's website which immediately asserts that the group "is open to people of all faiths and beliefs [...]," as well as the nationwide call for volunteers on their "Volunteer and Teamwork" page, [20] which reads,

> Seeking Volunteers: Islamic Ecology: Become a 'Wisdom In Nature'
>
> Community Activist!
>
> Start date: Within three months of applying (with some flexibility).
>
> Applications ongoing.
>
> Want to be part of an action network based on Islamic principles?
>
> Applications are welcome from people of all faiths and beliefs who have an interest in Islam, contemplative action and grassroots organising.

Clearly, it is not expected that non-Muslims remain passive observers within the group as they are actively encouraged to engage in community activism,

which in this case entails representing the WIN group in their respective local communities. Volunteering, as opposed to "membership" which is not defined, is a formal responsibility and the same page further instructs potential volunteers, "You will be working remotely (internet access is essential), and attending occasional meetings and events [...] where geographically practical." Although WIN is based in London, the establishment of their webpage and social media presence has allowed for volunteers to offer their time and skills from all over the UK, provided that they undergo the interview and induction. WIN's work, as a group, focuses on the community within which it operates and so this nationwide call for volunteers, made widely accessible through the Internet, extends the potential of the group to geographically reach out beyond London and the South East of England. In parallel, WIN's inclusive ethos allows the group to extend beyond Muslim communities and reach people of all beliefs while maintaining its Islamic identity.

In Singapore, Project ME works in a very different way to WIN despite sharing many similar values and aims. Instead of being a community activism group, Project ME was intended to be, and primarily exists as, an online network where people share information and ideas, and where current opportunities for members to meet each other in person are limited to occasional informal gatherings or, more frequently, at the organized events of other local environmentalist groups, such as the popular Thursday night meetings of the Singaporean chapter of Green Drinks.[21] This has implications in terms of outreach capacity, and indeed, most of those whom I met associated with Project ME found out about the group through online searches for Islamic environment groups or through being introduced by friends with an interest in environmentalism.

Prior to founding Project ME in 2009, Sofiah Jamil, a committed environmentalist for many years, had maintained a blog titled "The Green Bush" (Jamil n.d.), where she shared her reflections on environmentalism and Islam together with articles and web links relevant to the topic. Since Project ME's establishment, this blog has been partially dedicated to furthering

the aims of the new online network and advertising Project ME events as and when they occur.

Project ME is very loosely organized when compared to WIN: all decisions about the direction and aims of the group are taken by the founder and formal volunteering or organizational roles do not exist in the same way as they do for WIN. Despite that members can and do meet in Singapore, Project ME membership is essentially an online membership, consisting of following the Green Bush blog and/or the Project ME Facebook community page, where the boundaries between "membership" and "subscription" are blurry and ultimately open the group to full participation from anyone with an Internet connection. This fluid online membership is an advantage, however, as it encourages participation from people who may otherwise shy away from a more formal commitment (or from commitment with a Muslim group), which may be a turnoff for potentially interested non-Muslims. As Project ME aims to engage people and create a forum for discussion about "how individuals or communities can take action to protect the environment,"[22] formalized membership is neither necessary nor desirable.

Despite being a very recent endeavor, Project ME has attracted significant attention both locally and abroad. The network has become both well-known and well accepted within the local environmental activism community, and on June 28, 2012, the Singaporean Malay language television channel Suria ran a segment about environmentalism that featured Project ME on its news program, Berita-on-Suria.[23] Word of Project ME has also spread online (cf. Hafifah and Osman 2011; Muzlimbuzz 2011), with Sofiah Jamil's efforts being acknowledged abroad by widely known and respected Muslim environmentalists, such as U.S. author Ibrahim Abdul-Matin, who mentioned Project ME as being an "excellent Facebook resource" on his blog, Green Deen, in August 2011 (Abdul-Matin 2011). Project ME has also been noticed by freelance journalist Arwa Aburawa, a UK based contributor to the green news website Green Prophet,[24] whom interviewed Sofiah about environmentalism and environmental threats in Southeast Asia in December, 2011 (Aburawa 2011). The Project ME Facebook com-

munity page is also well connected with other Muslim environmentalist groups with a Facebook presence, and has interacted online with WIN and IFEES[25] in the UK, DC Green Muslims[26] in the US, Groene Moslims[27] in the Netherlands, Pakistan Sustainability Network[28] in Pakistan among many others, giving Project ME visibility that extends far beyond Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Similarly to WIN, Project ME also welcomes non-Muslim members and both the Facebook community page and the Green Bush blog introduce Project ME by stating, "While the primary focus of this project is on Muslims in Singapore, it is open to all who are interested and not exclusively Muslims. The more the merrier!"[29] This inclusiveness is the result of founder Sofiah Jamil's commitment to interfaith collaboration as a part of ecology. As she once explained to me, "Everyone has to do their bit [for the environment]. Project ME might be aimed more at Muslims, because there is a need to reach out there in particular, but anyone who wants to help, discuss, or participate in anything we do is not only welcome, but encouraged. It doesn't matter who does what – we all need to act, and preferably together" (interview with author, Singapore, March 23, 2010).

The environmental activism scene in Singapore is fairly interconnected, with members of various groups and interested individuals often knowing each other and attending events together. Project ME is no exception to this and members will often meet each other at various environmental or ecology-themed events within the city state. Since its inception, Project ME has held only two organized gatherings of its own and interfaith engagement was a significant theme running through Project ME's most recent get together, a vegetarian Ramadan dinner, or iftar, held on August 9, 2012. Despite the religious nature of hosting an iftar during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, invitations were sent out via social media to men and women of varying faiths who were known to the group (although only women attended). The decision for the meal to be vegetarian not only reflects the perceived environmental benefits of reducing meat consumption but also facilitates participation from those who may not feel comfortable

eating meat for ethical or religious reasons. Reflecting on this recent event, Sofiah writes,[30]

What I found to be the best aspect of the green iftar, was the ability to use an environmental initiative for the benefit of other social and cultural exchanges. While my initial thoughts of invitees were to be Muslims, I chose to extend the invitation to non-Muslims as well. No man is an island, and the environmental movement is clearly a reflection of that. In addition to non-Muslim guests gaining greater insight to Islam and the diversity amongst Muslims, the green chit-chat was certainly enhanced with a discussion on the cultural aspects and values associated with the environment based on our own ethnic backgrounds. Common threads such as food and water have played significant roles in bringing communities together as well as a means of understanding and appreciating how nature works.

Fig. 2. Founder Sofiah Jamil (second from right) together with some partici-pants at the August 2012 Project ME iftar dinner and discussion. Courtesy of Zafirah Mohamed, 2012. Used with permission.

The event was a success and Sofia mentioned the possibility of holding a similar event in future, with Diwali or Navaratri[31] as possible Hindu festi-

vals to celebrate within multicultural Singapore (email to author, September 6, 2012), thus continuing Project ME's commitment to reaching out to people of other faiths while maintaining a Muslim identity.

Cultivating common values to transcend difference online and offline

The holistic world view of my informants, which as we have seen embraced not only environmentalism but also interfaith collaboration as an integral part of their own faith, appeared not to be widely held among the communities they were trying to reach.[32] Working in the UK and Singapore, where Internet access is widespread, both WIN and Project ME believe that the Internet is a useful tool in attempting to bridge this gap not only with the primary target audience of local Muslim communities, but also with Muslims in other countries and with non-Muslims as well. The online presence of WIN and Project ME as well as other Islamic environmentalist groups provides an accessible public information resource that can be easily located and used by individuals or even disseminated within the community (and so also reaching those who may not use the Internet), such as through mosque sermons.[33] In this respect, there is no doubt that such websites provide a valuable resource.

Those who are interested by the message of either group can drop in and participate (online or offline) without necessarily identifying themselves as "part of the group" or making any other commitment. As N.A., an active Hindu supporter (but not self-defined "member") of Project ME, told me during a discussion of Islamic environmental activism around the world, "As much as I support the message, I'd be embarrassed to act like they [IFEES and WIN] do in the UK: standing outside and holding signs with everyone looking at me. Maybe it's a Singaporean thing, but I just don't do protests" (N.A., female, 28 year-old Singaporean of Indian heritage, interview with author in Singapore, July 16, 2011). Another person present at the discussion, speaking about how other Muslim environmentalist groups present themselves, said, "Some appear very Sufi [in their approach to ecology],

almost New Age in fact. Although I don't have a problem with that, I know plenty who would find that a big turn off" (I.E., male, 24-year-old Singaporean Muslim of Indian heritage, interview with author in Singapore, July 16, 2011).

I was not able to obtain an accurate picture of the precise ethnic or religious composition of each group, although I did notice that both groups appeared attractive to men and women from tertiary-educated, professional backgrounds in particular. In Singapore, most Muslims affiliated with Project ME were of Malay heritage and this is most likely because an overwhelming majority of Muslims in Singapore are ethnically Malay. In the UK, Muslims affiliated with WIN came from more varied ethnic backgrounds, both British-born (including those of second generation origin as well as those whom had converted to Islam) and migrants, although many were of South Asian heritage. Those non-Muslims whom I came to know as associated with both groups, either as "members" or "supporters," were from numerous backgrounds that are yet more varied.

Members and supporters of both groups form a community despite coming from differing cultures, age groups, religious beliefs and world views. Indeed, this community is ever changing in composition, with people joining in and others drifting away, however those who remain actively involved are united by a common moral commitment to environmental awareness and responsibility. Being based on "affectual forms of sociation" (Hetherington 1998:52) and the expression of feelings and sentiments, Hetherington has followed Maffesoli in his description of "emotional communities" (1998:146) by arguing that new social movements are communities based on emotional processes rather than rational ones, particularly on empathy. According to Hetherington (1998:37), "Feeling and morality are not separate; caring for others, wanting to take responsibility for them is as much based on a sense of emotional solidarity as it is on abstract moral precepts." Project ME and WIN, then, may be described as emotional communities due to the moral and empathetic nature of the bond between members and supporters that ultimately transcends their differences. Being both "Islamic environmenta-

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list" groups that readily include people whom may not even be religious (in any religion), a concern for the environment and humanity's future is the only bond members and supporters share.

The existence of a sense of community, however, does not imply that disagreement and discord do not exist. Indeed, vegetarianism was often recognized as a potential point of tension among my Muslim environmentalist respondents. In many Muslim communities, vegetarianism can be viewed as an unusual or, at worst, an un-Islamic choice as a result of being considered tantamount to forbidding what is permissible in Islam (Foltz 2006, 2001). Of the Project ME members and supporters I came to know, I found that some believed that halal meat, which was authentically halal as far as animal welfare standards are concerned,[34] was impossible to obtain in Singapore and so local Muslims, as an act of piety, should become vegetarian. Others, however, perceived this as an unnecessarily rigid position given the importance of meat at Eid Al-Adha (the feast of the sacrifice), or as being a kind of extremism, citing the tone of the controversial website "Islamic Concern" as well as "Vegetarian Muslim"[35] as online examples of why Muslims should avoid advocating vegetarianism. Although vegetarianism can be a divisive issue, and perhaps even more so within the Muslim community, Sofiah Jamil has avoided creating a point of potential conflict within the Project ME network by emphasizing impartial mindfulness[36] over promotion or condemnation of any dietary choice. Perhaps the most effective prevention of conflict in general, however, is the fact that within a fluid community like Project ME, or even WIN, there is no need to define anything – neither the criteria of a good environmentalist nor the criteria of a "good" Muslim.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore two instances of self-identified Muslim environmentalist groups that use the Internet to raise awareness of environmental concerns from a Muslim perspective. The environmentalist group Wisdom in Nature and the online network Project ME: Muslims and the Environment were chosen for analysis as examples whose members interpret Islam

in such a way that environmental responsibility is perceived as an integral part of faith that is no more or less important than any other moral virtue. Embracing such environmental responsibility, in this case, involves interfaith collaboration as all peoples are believed to be responsible before God for the care of the Earth and all creatures within it. The Internet, then, is used by both WIN as well as Project ME to engage Muslims as well as non-Muslims, despite in both cases the former being the primary target audience in practice. The members and supporters of both groups, regardless of their differences, become part of an emotional community with one another in which the primary bond between people is based on a shared moral concern for the environment. The fact that neither group makes an attempt to define what constitutes either a "good" environmentalist or a "good" Muslim leaves room for empathy and shared values to flourish among people from varied backgrounds and beliefs.

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Notes

[1] Islamic environmentalism and Islamic ecology are often used as interchangeable terms, although some groups, such as Wisdom in Nature, prefer the term Islamic ecology to describe their ethos and activities (Introductory Guiding Principles: Summer 2010). For the purposes of this article, the term Islamic environmentalism will be used unless otherwise specified.

[2] Wisdom in Nature's Facebook group page is available at http://www.facebook.com/wisdominnature, accessed September 28, 2012.

[3] Wisdom in Nature's homepage is available at http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/, accessed September 30, 2012.

[4] Wisdom in Nature's blog is available at http://wisdominnature.blogspot.com/, accessed September 30, 2012.

[5] 350.org is a global climate change movement that was founded in 2008 by author Bill McKibben and has collaborated in environmentalist events occurring in 181 countries. http://www.350.org/, accessed September 21, 2012.

[6] With the exception of Ms. Jamil, a Singaporean Muslim of Malay heritage who founded the Project ME network and maintains the closely associated blog, The Green Bush, and Dr. Muzammal Hussain, a British Muslim of Pakistani origin, who founded Wisdom in Nature, all names of respondents referred to in this article have been anonymized.

[7] These lectures were later published as The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man (see Nasr 1968).

[8] For example, see Abdel Zaher et al. (2011), Deuraseh (2009:524–25), Denny (1998:11), and Foltz (2010).

[9] See for example, Quran 2:30 and 6:165.

[10] Despite overwhelmingly wide circulation of this verse in Islamic environmentalist literature, the interpretation above is not the only one (Adebayo 2009:182). Many take for granted that this verse refers to humanity's custodianship over the

earth, however, some Islamic scholars, such as Muhammad Asad, have claimed that the very same "Trust," which many environmentalists understand to mean the earth, actually refers to humankind's ability to exercise free will (Asad and Moustafa 2003:732 n.88).

[11] The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) is a notable example.

[12] For some relevant examples, please see Brower 2004, Bunt 2003, Eickelman and Anderson 2003, Lawrence 2001, Mandaville 2001, and Sands 2010.

[13] There is a detailed list of past forums available on the WIN website at http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/open_forums.htm, accessed August 20, 2012.

[14] There is a detailed list of topics covered here http://wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/workshops.htm, accessed August 20, 2012.

[15] A recent example of this is the Occupy Faith: Pilgrimage for Justice, which ran from 7-21st of June and consisted of a walk from London to Canterbury, culminating in a conference on economic, environmental and social justice. This event was widely publicized on the WIN blog, Facebook page and mailing list. Details of the event can be found on the Occupy Faith website at http://occupyfaith.org.uk/?page_id=29, accessed August 15, 2012.

[16] The WIN homepage is located at http://www.wisdominnateure.org.uk/, accessed August 28, 2012.

[17] The WIN blog is located at http://wisdominnature.blogspot.com, accessed August 28, 2012.

[18] The WIN Facebook page is located at http://www.facebook.com/wisdominnature, accessed August 28, 2012.

[19] The WIN Notices Yahoo Group is located at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/WINnotices/, accessed August 28, 2012.

[20] This call for volunteers (emphasis in original) together with the details for participation can be found at http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/Action/volunteer.htm, accessed August 29, 2012.

[21] Green Drinks is a self-organized global network of environmental enthusiasts that has a presence in over 800 cities worldwide. Information about Green Drinks Singapore can be found at http://sggreendrinks.wordpress.com/about/, accessed September 2, 2012.

[22] Quoted text taken from Project ME group description, which is available at http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/project-muslims-and-the-environment/, accessed August 30, 2012.

[23] A clip of the program is publicly available on Berita-on-Suria's Facebook page, available (in Malay) at http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=378238715564854, accessed August 30, 2012.

[24] Green Prophet primarily provides green news from the Middle East region and is available at http://www.greenprophet.com/, accessed September 17, 2012.

[25] The IFEES Facebook page is available at http://www.facebook.com/pages/IFEES/228051667256036, accessed September 20, 2012.

[26] The Green Muslims Facebook page is available at http://www.facebook.com/greenmuslims/, accessed September 18, 2012.

[27] The Groene Moslims [Green Muslims] Facebook page is available at http://www.facebook.com/groenemoslims, accessed September 18, 2012.

[28] The Pakistan Sustainability Network Facebook page is available at http://www.facebook.com/sustainablepak, accessed September 18, 2012.

[29] The introductory message can be found at: About Project ME, Green Bush blog http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/project-muslims-and-the-environment/, accessed September 20, 2012. About Project ME, Facebook community page http://www.facebook.com/Muslims.and.Environment/info, accessed September 20, 2012.

[30] A Girly Green Iftar, Green Bush blog available at http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/2012/08/10/a-girly-green-iftar/, accessed September 2, 2012.

[31] For more information about these festivals, please see Sharma 2008.

[32] Unfortunately, a discussion of the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this article. However, interestingly, it has been noted that environmentalism is some-

times perceived among Muslim communities as an effort to address problems created by the West or as a "Western" pursuit in itself (Ammar 2001:206, Haq 2001, Kula 2001:6).

[33] Recent examples of mosque sermons on the topic of Islamic environmentalism include, among others, that of the East London Mosque, in the UK, which used purpose-designed sermon notes distributed by IFEES to deliver sermons on the environment (EcoIslam 2006:8), the most recent of which occurred on March 16, 2012 and is available at http://www.eastlondonmosque.org.uk/resources/sermons &paginate=1&ipp=All, accessed September 12, 2012; as well as Darul Makmur Mosque, in Singapore, which gave a sermon prepared by the Islamic religious council of Singapore (MUIS), on December 12, 2008 and is available at http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/uploadedFiles/MuisGovSG/Khutbah/E08Dec12.doc, accessed September 12, 2012.

[34] Animal welfare is one of a number of factors that determine whether meat can be classified as "halal" or permitted for consumption among Muslims. For more information, please see Bonne and Verbeke 2008.

[35] Islamic Concern (http://www.islamicconcern.com/, accessed September 21, 2012) is sponsored by PETA and calls on Muslims to embrace vegetarianism and reject religious slaughter. Vegetarian Muslim is available at www.vegetarianmuslim.org, accessed Sept 18, 2012.

[36] For example, please see "When was the last time you watched a Qurban taking place?", Green Bush Blog, November 4, 2011, available at http://thegreenbush.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/qurban/, accessed September 18, 2012.