

## REVISITING ISLAMIC THEOLOGY: LIVED ECO-THEOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

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### Abstract

The environmental crisis demands a transformative response that draws from the richness of religious values. This research aims to re-elaborate the discourse on Islamic eco-theology as a profound response to modernity and environmental issues, while simultaneously critiquing the dominant tendency towards instrumentalism. Instrumentalism in the discourse on Islam and environment is considered problematic because it has narrowed the concept of religion to functional justifications. This approach triggers a human-nature dualism and encourages resource exploitation. Through conceptual analysis and a literature review, this research examines how the discourse on eco-theology is critiqued, operated, and developed. This research then constructs a new framework, namely lived eco-theology, as an effort to see the embodiment of religion in the practice of fluid environmental activism, inspired by the theory of lived religion. The lived eco-theology framework refers to a theology of environmental engagement that is manifested in three forms of integrated action: articulated, performative, and symbolic. This formulation considers ecological values as the result of a hybridization between religious values and intersecting values. This model is a conceptual contribution that shifts the perspective of Islamic ecological theology from merely instrumental ethics to a theology that is truly relevant and practiced. This framework is expected to be the basis for a religious-environmental movement that brings real and sustainable change and values nature equally.

**Keywords:** Lived Eco-Theology, Environmental Activism, Ecological Crisis, Islamic Theology

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### 1. Introduction

Religion is widely understood as an integral part of human life, serving a vital role in guiding people to apply religious teachings for a more harmonious daily existence, encompassing education, interpersonal relationships, and their connection with the environment (Muid & Mustofa, 2023; Rahman, 2025; Wasil & Muizudin, 2023). This significance is strongly supported by data from the Pew Research Center (Miner et al., 2023),

which found that almost all Indonesian respondents (98%) consider religion important in their lives. However, this integral role is challenged by an ecological paradox: findings from the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) UIN Jakarta (2024) indicate that anthropocentric views (38.86%) are more dominant in environmental issues than theocentric views (27.97%). This finding suggests the prominence of a paradigm that places humans at the center of their relationship with nature, signaling that religious values are not the primary basis for interacting with the environment.

Simultaneously, in the modern world, economic orientation and scientific progress have become the primary tools for addressing human needs and challenges, inextricably linked to the exploitation of nature as the greatest resource. A report from Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI) highlights the severity of this crisis, noting that deforestation in Indonesia between 2017 and 2021 occurred at a rate equivalent to six football fields per minute (Forest Watch Indonesia, 2024). This macro-scale crisis is rooted in the dualistic worldview that separates humans as active subjects and nature as objects of exploitation. Modern human actions toward nature often diverge sharply from religious values, creating a kind of amnesia regarding humanity's position amidst changing times (Wasil & Muizudin, 2023, p. 197). Thus, religious values, which should serve as moral guides for understanding human existence and responsibility for nature, are forgotten and replaced by a stance that positions modern, 'rational' humans as superior and nature as a subordinate entity. This, in turn, fuels a view of nature solely as a commodity-economic resource, neglecting its intrinsic value.

Given the increasingly widespread damage and the resulting threat to human existence, discussions on the relationship between religion and the environment have become a major concern. Based on Lynn White's paper, "*The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*" (1967), often initiates this discourse. White critiqued the anthropocentric attitude in interpreting sacred texts, which seemed to license humans to freely exploit nature without considering its sustainability (p. 1205). This issue is further intertwined with the loss of land's intrinsic value, as criticized by Leopold (1989), who observed that humans view land as a commodity rather than an integral part of the community, thereby losing love and respect for it. Leopold saw humans as an image of God intended to bring peace; however, they lost control when faced with science and technology, which, driven by market changes, justified nature's exploitation (p. viii). This indirectly emphasizes a pragmatic profit orientation and an anthropocentric worldview (Tucker & Grim, 2016, p. 5). This criticism targets narrow theological interpretations that are reduced to functional justifications centered on anthropocentric interests, thus promoting the exploitation and dualism paradigm.

This dualistic perspective underscores the urgency of sustainable ecological issues. Islam, in this context, emphasizes the need to internalize ecological values for environmental preservation (Abdelzaher et al., 2019; Fatoni, 2024; Wasil & Muizudin, 2023). Aligning with the need for reformulation, this study begins by critiquing the instrumentalist and functionalist tendencies in Islamic and environmental discourse that minimize Islam's role in

the ecological crisis or use environmental messages merely to justify environmental program efforts (Gade, 2019, p. 41). However, the gap between normative teachings and the actual practices of religious communities is clearly non-linear. This realization necessitates a reformulation of eco-theology adequate to bridge theological discourse into the realm of action.

Starting from the lived religion as a framework, this study is relevant in revisiting the eco-theology context because it overcomes the methodological limitations that confine religion to the realm of doctrine and text. The study of lived religion rejects the view of religion as a static set of beliefs, instead viewing it as a dynamic, embodied practice in the real world, interacting with lived identities, politics, and the environment (Ammerman, 2021; Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; McGuire, 2008). Methodologically, this approach shifts attention from what Muslims should believe to how Muslims live and reflect their religious values through environmental activism, rituals, and negotiations with local traditions amidst hybrid landscapes. Therefore, lived eco-theology does not simply ask what Islam says about the environment, but how environmental actions and activism become eschatological manifestations of their beliefs, making religion suitable for activism amidst the contemporary ecological crisis.

Thus, the role of religion can reverse the current ecological crisis. However, the religious dimension in everyday environmental practices that support sustainability is often overlooked due to a focus on global mainstream traditions (Jenkins & Chapple, 2011, p. 444). In line with this argument, this study will analyze literary sources on religious practices in local communities, recorded in previous studies, to validate the lived eco-theology framework. This framework refers to the theology of community involvement in environmental activism realized through three integrated forms of action—articulation, performative, and symbolic—emphasizing that this activism is vital for avoiding the gap between Islamic and essentialist religious discourses.

## **2. Positioning Narrative in Islam and Environmentalism**

Environmental activism at the grassroots level, which embodies the manifestation of Islamic traditions in society, requires deeper empirical investigation into existing community practices, as current studies, although present, lack wide acceptance and have not sufficiently identified the challenges associated with practices labeled "Islamic" (Bagir & Martiam, 2016, p. 86). The existence of these traditions represents a form of human moral responsibility toward the environment, where responsible actions are intrinsically linked to elements of trust, responsibility, and reciprocal relationships among nature, humans, and God (Whyte, 2018, p. 140). Reviewing these traditions allows for an examination of how the discourse of local community activism has laid the groundwork for the articulatory, performative, and symbolic dimensions required by the lived eco-theology framework.

Meanwhile, the growing body of research on Islamic ecology consistently highlights the role of Islamic theology as a rich ethical framework for addressing the contemporary environmental crisis, stemming from a theological foundation that seeks to harmoniously bridge the relationship between humans and nature. Theologically, the position of humans is understood through the central concept of *khalifah* (God's representative on earth), which is often misinterpreted as legitimizing human supremacy, despite being inherently theocentric and rooted in ethical responsibility; an intertextual analysis confirms that *khalifah* implies responsibility that fundamentally refutes the view of natural exploitation (Rakhmat, 2022, p. 23). This aligns with Haq (2001), who argues that human superiority (*ashraf al-makhlūqāt*) is a demeaning quality, as absolute power belongs only to God, positioning humans as *'abd* (servants) who bear a high moral accountability (*al-amāna*) to be the guardians of nature, which is itself seen as a sign (*āyāt*) of God that is metaphysically equivalent to the verses of the Qur'an (p. 146, 151), thereby articulating that Islamic ecotheology is fundamentally anti-anthropocentric.

To ensure coherence between religion and environmental activism, Malik (2023) proposes a theology-centered paradigm that views the universe as a contingent entity (*imkān al-wūjūd*) entirely subject to God's will and power, establishing absolute boundaries of belief. Furthermore, Gade (2025) offers the ontological proposition that ecology is the grounds of being, and environmental protection is a mandatory prerequisite for maintaining the *maqāsid al-sharī'a* (the goals of Islamic law), representing a non-anthropocentric intervention into secular environmental humanism. Gade also emphasizes the consequential relationship of justice, a system of accountability (*hiṣāb*) extending to eschatology (p. 34), which strongly affirms the *muhasaba* (Self-Accountability) element proposed by Abdelzaher et al. (2019) and the pursuit of Environmental Justice as a path to divine grace.

While academic criticism underscores the need to bridge the gap between ethics and action, Abdelzaher et al. (2019) criticize that most studies of Islam and ecology have been limited to basic principles like *tawheed* (Unity), *khalifa* (God's representative on earth), and *maslahah* (benefit), and their environmental components, failing to suggest specific, referable actions or behaviors (p. 631, 633-634). To rectify this, they proposed principles of behavioral application (The Hows), including maintaining balance (*qadr*), avoiding excessive consumption (*israf*), practicing self-accountability (*muhasaba*), and observing humility (*tawadu*) (p. 634). This is supported by Haq's (2001) theological concept of balance (*mīzān*), where disrupting the balance of nature is seen as self-abuse (*ẓulm al-nafs*) because humans are an integral part of the cosmos (p. 157). These principles suggest that effective environmental protection requires a paradigm shift from belief to behavior (p. 639), strongly demonstrating lived eco-theology's focus on the performative dimension where everyday practices become paramount.

Simultaneously, the examination of religious practices necessitates engagement with the landscape of hybridity (the intersection of religion and local values) and symbolic

initiatives. Mangunjaya (2023) highlights the potential of Islamic traditions in Indonesia, where the fusion of Islamic teachings and local traditions has generated effective initiatives, such as green sukuk, waqf forests, eco-pesantren, and especially the Lubuk Larangan in Minangkabau, which is founded on the local value "*adat basandi sara, sara basandi kitabullah*." This refers to how customs in Minangkabau must be in accordance with Islamic law, and Islamic law itself is guided by the Qur'an. This forbidden pool is seen as an effective conservation practice that traditionally represents a profound performative and symbolic manifestation through ritual obedience to customary and Sharia law (p. 263), illustrating that lived eco-theology is not abstract but embodied in sociocultural practices.

In sum, the existing literature has successfully established a strong theological articulation, acknowledged the necessity of the performative, and identified symbolic manifestations. However, a conceptual framework that explicitly integrates these three dimensions of action is still needed to transform Islamic ecological theology from merely instrumental ethics into a theology that is truly felt and practiced. Therefore, lived eco-theology aims to provide a conceptual framework that systematically unifies ontological foundations, ethical deconstruction, and behavioral applications within the context of new environmental activism.

### **3. Lived Ecotheology: Theology of Everyday Practice in Environmental Activism**

The theoretical construction of lived eco-theology is fundamentally rooted in a rejection of narrow, normative understandings of religion, aligning with the efforts in the discourse of lived religion to shift the focus from traditional, institutionalized practical theology to the realm of everyday action and experience (Ammerman, 2021, p. 5; Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014, p. 91). This concept is also designed to explore the religious practices of groups that are often overlooked (Ammerman, 2021, p. 6) and trapped in Western normative conceptions (McGuire, 2008, p. 118), making it particularly relevant for analyzing neglected ecological-religious practices. To capture the full complexity of this praxis, Ammerman integrates a multidimensional analysis based on practice theory, encompassing seven categories: spiritual, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, morality, and narrative (Ammerman, 2021, p. 27), thereby establishing practice as the primary landscape to bring overlooked local environmental activism to the surface.

In line with this, within traditional societies, sustainable living practices and perspectives that emphasize relational and reciprocal relationships with nature are rarely understood as part of the operation of religious values. Simultaneously, the hegemony of the world religion paradigm, which simplifies complex religious practices, often targets traditional practices steeped in animism, leading to a view of activism in traditional communities as primitive and in need of modernization (Maarif, 2018, p. 107; M. McGuire, 2007, p. 189; Tuhri et al., 2020, p. 174) (McGuire, 2007, p. 189; Tuhri et al., 2020, p. 174; Maarif, 2019, p. 107). This paradigm, in turn, creates a dichotomy of "true religion" versus

"false religion" or "true Islam" versus "false Islam," failing to accommodate the belief systems directly embraced by these communities. However, it is crucial to recognize that the deeply rooted practice patterns in traditional societies are based on pragmatic reasons and strategies for maintaining and continuing their lives (Bagir & Martiam, 2016, p. 44).

This is evident in Maarif's (2015) research on the Ammatoa indigenous community, which conservative Muslims have claimed to be a heretical sect (p. 151). Meanwhile, Bagir et al., (2015) observe that Islam prioritizes "ways of life" (p. 43) in its teachings, suggesting there is ample room for traditions in indigenous communities to be realized, changed, and varied locally according to conditions, thereby indicating the necessity to build community perceptions to recognize their relationship with nature (Roothaan, 2019, p. 16). Therefore, this study utilizes McGuire's (2007) argument that practices carried out by indigenous communities are a form of expression of internalized meaning and spirituality conducted through rituals (p. 188), and it should be remembered that what is called religion is found not only in religious institutions but also in everyday practices (M. McGuire, 2007, p. 198).

The effort required when viewing practice is to accommodate the landscape of necessity, referring to Latour (2012), who emphasizes hybridity by seeing the need to pay attention to what emerges from the framework of the environmental movement, thus requiring a non-dichotomous view between nature and culture or society. Latour calls for abandoning the rigid dichotomy that has dominated modern thought, arguing that all societies live in a hybrid "nature-culture," where humans and non-humans together shape reality; therefore, the most fundamental step is to view both as human expressions in building their way of life (p. 106). Understanding these fundamental principles of the hybrid landscape is essential to ensure that the activism realized is inclusive and contextual.

Simultaneously, the analysis of this practice cannot be separated from its context, making it important to also use the environmental network framework as a more inclusive lens. This framework is relevant for accommodating the fluidity of informal and formally organized components of activism, such as grassroots circles, allowing for an analysis of the shift from the Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) movement to the Not in Anyone's Backyard (NIABY) campaign (Saunders, 2013, p. 28). Thus, Lived Eco-Theology offers a conceptual framework that shifts the study of ecological theology from instrumental ethics to a lived, practical, and mobilized theology oriented towards activism.

Therefore, the relevance of lived eco-theology in contemporary discourse lies in its ability to bridge the gap between theological idealism and the pressing climate crisis. In a context where formal religious institutions are often slow to respond to ecological challenges, this framework pays methodological attention to people's agency and grassroots practices as theological resources. Lived Eco-Theology offers a richer, action-oriented understanding of how religious beliefs can be transformed into concrete ecological solidarity. This approach critically challenges Western biases in the study of religion and the environment by prioritizing voices and practices from the Global South or indigenous communities that

inherently operate in hybrid landscapes, thereby strengthening the study of the connection between faith and the environment with a more inclusive and transformative lens.

Thus, lived eco-theology serves as a relevant conceptual-methodological intervention. Its relevance is rooted in the recognition that the ecological crisis is an ontological and eschatological struggle, not merely a pragmatic one. By positioning lived eco-theology as a conceptual framework, it decisively delegitimizes anthropocentric views and challenges the hegemony of dominant world religious paradigms. Essentially, lived eco-theology offers an integrated framework that views articulation, performance, and symbolism as dynamic feedback mechanisms necessary to transform beliefs—including validation of Islamic hybridity and local wisdom—into measurable ecological solidarity amidst modernity.

#### **4. Local Environmental Activism: How is Theology Manifested in Practice?**

The manifestation of lived eco-theology at the local level is clearly seen in how theological discourse is effectively translated into collective action and practice. Lived eco-theology, in this context, functions as an articulated framework that responds to specific environmental realities based on the hybrid values found within its activism. This process of articulation is more than a simple synthesis; it involves creating a cohesive relationship between disparate religious and local elements to produce unique conservation practices and identities amidst the pressures of modernity. This relationship is exemplified by the accommodative, dialogical, and compromising religious patterns of the Dukuh Village community in Garut (Effendi & Setiadi, 2018), with this articulation serving as the foundational discourse that justifies and guides all environmental practices.

The performative aspect of lived eco-theology is evident in everyday environmental management practices rooted in a strong theological awareness. In Kampung Dukuh, the deep connectedness to nature is articulated through the belief that nature is a sign of God's power, grace, and the beauty of the world (*kaendahan dunya*). This form of gratitude to Allah (*ngarumati*), or respect, is directly translated into ten ancestral mandates (*sepuluh pepeling karuhun*), which are highly practical and prescriptive, such as the recommendation to plant mountains with wood (*gunung-kaian*), caring for springs (*cinyusu-rumateun*), and managing forests (*leuweung-uruseun*) (Effendi & Setiadi, 2018, pp. 137–138). These specific rules of practice confirm that Islamic ethics in ecology does not stop at theological justification but rather manifests as a concrete series of behavioral rules that regulate land use, proving the integration of religious values with customary wisdom in sustainable conservation.

Furthermore, the symbolic realm reinforces local theology through narratives and sacred sites. In the Tidore community, local theology is articulated through the Borero Gosimo as *amanat datuk moyang* (ancestral mandate), a local wisdom that integrates the values of divinity, humanity, and nature into a unified, interconnected cosmic system that depends on God's power to maintain balance. Through Borero Gosimo's poems, the ultimate goal of conservation is the attainment of integrated theological and sociological piety for the

benefit of humanity and the universe (Nomay, 2019, pp. 30–31). Similarly, in Tengger, ancestral theology is articulated through the landscape of Puncak Songolikur, which is viewed as a sacred site (hila-hila) and an archive that stores cultural memory (Rohmah, 2018, p. 83). The landscape here functions as a symbolic medium that connects humans with the center of spirituality and ancestors, which in turn underpins their social order and cultural practices (Rohmah, 2018, pp. 79, 81).

Additionally, rituals serve as a mechanism for strengthening communal identity and collective ecological awareness. The Ngasa ritual of the Jalawastu community in Brebes, for instance, is understood as an expression of gratitude to God Almighty while also containing ancestral teachings (Wijanarto, 2018, p. 39). This ritual is a crucial cultural trace that strengthens communal identity, reflecting their cosmic understanding of nature, and serves as a periodic symbolic manifestation, repeatedly reaffirming articulated ecological discourses. These rituals ensure that local theology and the spiritual-ecological core are not eroded by modernization but act as a dynamic cultural defense mechanism.

The evidence from these diverse indigenous communities provides strong empirical support for the lived eco-theology model, effectively shifting the perspective of ecological theology from merely instrumental ethics to a theology that is truly felt and practiced in everyday life. Local environmental activism, demonstrated through the hybridity of lived religion and local values, consistently embodies all three dimensions of action: Articulation in forming a cohesive local-theological discourse, Performative in practical rules for land and nature management, and Symbolic in rituals and the meaning assigned to sacred sites.

## **5. Conclusion**

Normative theological discourse that rigidly separates "true" and "false" teachings, resulting in a dichotomy between legitimate and contested Islam, is often intertwined with how religious discourse ignores and simplifies the dimensions of experiencing Islam within complex local traditions. Through contemporary environmental activism, traditional communities creatively respond to ecological challenges by utilizing available resources and establishing their generational connection to the environment as the basis for activism. The urgent need to respond to the ecological crisis demands a shift in perspective from merely managing nature, which often reflects secular environmental humanism, to a theology that is genuinely embodied in everyday action.

The lived eco-theology framework serves as a relevant conceptual-methodological intervention for understanding and mobilizing environmental activism in areas often untouched by global religious traditions. This framework effectively delegitimizes the dominant instrumental view by revisiting the complexities on the ground. This approach reflectively validates the hybridity between Islamic and local values as a vital creative resource in responding to environmental challenges, while simultaneously challenging the hegemony of world religious paradigms that marginalize grassroots practices. In essence,

lived eco-theology offers an integrated framework that views articulation, performative, and symbolic dimensions as crucial to achieving sustainable ecological solidarity amidst the challenges of modernity.

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