

Muslim American Environmentalism: An Emerging Environmental Movement in  
America and Its Implications for Environmentalism and Muslims in America

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## Abstract

This paper is an examination of the development of a Muslim American Environmental Ethic and its implications for the social and political life for contemporary Muslims in the United States. As such, the focus is on the contemporary Muslim understanding of environmentalism, their practices of environmentalism, and what this means for their political and social status here in the United States. Through semi-structured interviews, seminar lectures, and visiting an area community center, I was able to question contemporary Muslim Americans on these aforementioned topics. The findings indicate that there is a distinct Muslim understanding of environmentalism related to Islam that has motivated Muslim influential community leaders, community centers, and grassroots organizations to begin and continue environmental activism. Furthermore, this has helped regional and local political and social inclusion, but has had less impact in the national political arena.

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## **Muslim American Environmentalism: An Emerging Environmental Movement in America and Its Implications for Environmentalism and Muslims in America**

### **Introduction**

Environmentalism has often been characterized by its “doom and gloom” prognosis for the future of the earth and its entire species, including humans. It is that orientation that has maintained a polarization between those focused on humanity and those focused on the health of the so-called natural world. Although, it seems that in many cases this paradigm is shifting as environmentalists lay at an important crossroads. Many environmentalists now understand that this previous obsession with protecting the “natural” world from human involvement is ultimately misguided and failing. Humans have systematically reached every corner of the earth and extended their influence in every niche, crevice, and habitat (Wapner 2010, 9). Basically we cannot just remove ourselves and hope that the earth will regenerate. We have crossed too many environmental thresholds. It is clear now that the earth needs us to survive, just as much as we need it to survive.

If we accept this reality that there is no human-nature divide and that humans are a necessary part of saving our environment, rather than letting be on its own, then the question remains: how does one orient their life to satisfy this demand? One possible answer could be religion. Although religion can be defined in many different ways, at the core is the fundamental notion of how to behave here on earth. Religion is often characterized as a “way of life” and for the purpose of this paper that conception works well. Islam is one of the three major Abrahamic religions and arguable the fastest growing religion in America and possibly worldwide. As such, this is a large amount of

people, roughly 1.57 billion, with a distinct interpretation of man's role in the world. The Koran says, "This world is a green and pleasant thing. Allah has left you in charge of it and looks at how you behave." Many Muslim scholars have indicated that this is a Koranic vision of "stewardship", in Arabic known as khalifa, which could suggest the demand for a necessary environmentally friendly orientation in the religion of Islam (Naseef 1998, 13).

Now, the aim of this paper is not to discover or explain "Islamic environmentalism" as delineated in the Koran, the Hadith, or the Sunnah. This paper is focused distinctly on "Muslim Environmentalism." This means that I aim to examine how Muslims in their everyday lives in the United States experience and participate in the Environmental Movement. The Islamic notions of environmentalism are an important foundation, but I am focused on the contemporary Muslim understanding of environmentalism, their practices of environmentalism, and what this means for their political and social status here in the United States.

Based on initial research, I hypothesize that there is a distinct Islamic understanding of the natural environment, which facilitates different levels of activism among the members of this community here in the United States. In addition, I think that engaging in this kind of faith based activism, specifically for the environment in the case of this study, provides American Muslims with a method of achieving significantly more political and social inclusion in American society, especially since 9/11. Furthermore, I believe that is can helpful in facilitating an end to this man-nature divide common within the environmental movement.

The foundation of my research will be based on semi-structured interviews with Muslim environmentalists here in the United States. The first issue I will address is the contemporary Muslim understanding of environmental stewardship here in the United States. Interviews are the perfect method of obtaining different American Muslims perspectives of environmentalism from within the movement itself.

The second issue I will address is the actual Muslim Americans' role in the environmental movement thus far by way of their actual practices and activities. I intend to discover their different roles and actions regarding the environment. Once again, I intend to test the validity of my hypothesis by conducting interviews within the Muslim Environmental community. This will allow me to ask questions about their specific actions as environmental activists and members of the American Muslim community. Furthermore, I intend to try and observe some of these practices and interact with the various activists regarding these issues. This is the appropriate approach for this study because it allows me to see what the American Muslim community is actually doing about environmental degradation.

The final issue I will address is the impact of this activism on American Muslim political and social life here in the United States. I will test this portion by focusing on their own feelings of inclusion and their activities in the broader environmental movement in general. I will explore whether or not Muslim Environmental Activism has provided these Muslims with a means of achieving higher levels of political and social inclusion in American society. I will also look at whether or not there has been coordination between the Muslim specific environmental groups and the broader movement itself and their reactions to this religion-based coalition acting as part of the

environmental movement. The media will also provide a way to discover if participation in this kind of activism leads to a certain kind of national image for Muslims.

First, I think it is important to understand the role of ecology and the environment in Islam. There are roots of environmental awareness in the Koran that facilitates Muslim Environmental activism today both here and abroad. Similarly, the United States has a unique history of environmentalism that must be understood in its historical context. After following the ecological roots of Islam dating back to the Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, and the United States' history in this movement, I will then profile and provide background information on the American Muslim community and how both of these histories impact their daily lives. In this portion, I will also look into the American Muslim experience in civic activism and advocacy, both before and after September 11, 2001 and finally how the environment fits into those processes.

The next section of the paper will include my own interviews within the American Muslim community. It is from these interviews and surveys that I hope to gauge the American Muslim sense of eco-awareness and their experiences in environmental advocacy here in the United States. I also hope to understand the impact of Islam on their involvement in the movement, what it means in their daily lives, and how it affects their political and social inclusion here in the United States.

The next section of the paper will be my analysis of my interviews with the Muslim American Environmentalists. In this section, I will address the answer to my original research question, analyze the implications of its answer or answers, and hopefully provide any suggestions that I can on how to improve environmental activism policies, coordination, and outreach in the United States. Then I will conclude, hopefully,

with a future prediction and direction for this subject matter and its importance given the future impact of global climate change.

### **Why is this important?**

This topic is important for many reasons. First and foremost, it is widely acknowledged that the international community, including the United States, must deal with the incoming challenges and existing consequences of global climate change. There is a significant Muslim population in the United States and in the rest of the world, which is important when trying to develop policy and solutions to such a global issue. Secondly, as more Muslims immigrate to this country, on top of an already significant population in the West, the process of Americanization still remains a vital area of research. This study offers a new dynamic as it focuses on the American Muslim experience as an activist in a relatively “Americanized” or “Westernized” environmental movement. Finally, this paper will also address topics that are still in their infancy such as: elements of Muslim activism in this country, the role of the environment in Islam, both historically and in practice, and the commingling of religion and environmentalism.

Some scholars have also indicated that there is a distinct weakness within the environmental movement itself. And this weakness is a lack of widespread diversity within the community. Yes, it has grown in size, geographic location, and has become part of a mainstream culture to a certain extent. But at the end of the day, “study results presented in *Toward a New Ecological Majority* indicate that, of the nation’s Ecological Base (10 percent of the population and 15 percent of the electorate), 89 percent of members are white, 82 percent are older than 35, 78 percent have attended at least some college and 26 percent earn more than \$80,000 year. According to United States Census



Bureau, in 2000 more than 31 percent of people in the U.S. were not white (Enderle 2007). This illustrates a real need to tap into the diverse communities of this country, which includes those who identify as Muslim-American.

### **The Birth of Environmentalism**

Although this has been named the “Energy-Climate Era,” one could argue that the roots of environmentalism to a certain extent are ancient paradigms dating back to the beginning of the human race. When I say this, I am defining environmentalism as an underlying concern for condition of the more-than-human world. Of course, the level of concern and the extent to which the more-than-human world extends is debatable and subjective due to cultural and social conceptions, but the fundamental concern is both timeless and universal on some level. Of course, like any social movement or philosophy, environmentalism has changed over the years and formed in different societies across the globe, so one persons’ rainforest to save is another persons’ source of livelihood. And this is where this broad, social, and philosophical movement becomes about economics and politics in contemporary society.

Although one can trace the sentiments of this movement back to the medieval period, I want this to remain focused on our contemporary and unique environmental situation. I think acknowledging the tradition of environmental concern throughout human civilization is enough to illustrate its importance and its evolution. Therefore, we understand that the American Environmental Movement, which is the focus of this paper, is not self-originating. Most find the beginning of the environmental movement meshed in with the rise of industrialization. It was in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that societies utilized oil, gas, and coal in large quantities, developed manufacturing

enterprises, mechanized labor, which allowed for expanding markets, the rise of consumerism, the accumulation of capital, and a growing network of international trade. Although industrialization also produced many benefits by raising the standard of living and providing alternatives to harsh agricultural labor, it also garnished critique immediately by various strands of society.

There were the literary figures such as Charles Dickens and Mary Shelley who both commented on the dangers of the machine world. There were the great romantic poets like Wordsworth who criticized how the factories were ruining rural life and the beautiful landscapes of the countryside. Social philosophers like Thoreau and Emerson contemplated the unraveling of the human spirit in the wake of industrialized lifestyles. Later, it was naturalists like John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and Aldo Leopold who wanted to preserve the natural world thereby influencing the formation of the National Wildlife Federation, the National Audubon Society, etc (Wapner 2010, 39). However, these sentiments were not just shared by artistic and cultural figures, but also political figures such as Mahatma Gandhi who believed that industrialization enabled the exploitation of colonies for various natural resources. These early voices influenced the development of environmental activism like the Common Preservation Society, the Lake District Defense Society, and the National Trust in Britain. In India, Gandhi helped with influencing organizations like All India Spinners' Association and the All India Village Industries Association. Finally, in the United States these early voices helped influence groups like the Sierra Club (Wapner 2010, 42).

The early years of environmentalism were also marked with concerns over the more empirical, scientific, and sustainability aspects of the natural world. Rather than

being simply concerned over certain social factors associated with the degradation of the environment, these voices were concerned with the biophysical limits of the earth. For instance, Thomas Malthus in his *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1826 raised concerns over the increase in human life span and population, which he believed would surpass the increase in food production leading to a world where humans fight over natural resources (Wapner 2010, 43). Furthermore, he maintained the earth has a certain limit, so once that point is reached humans would face serious consequences. It is in this mentality that other scientists began to worry about other resources such as water, wood, forests, wildlife, etc. It is this wing of the environmental movement that inspired Gifford Pinchot, the first secretary of the U.S. Forest Service and Harold Ickes under Franklin Roosevelt who focused on the sustainability of the earth. This inspired groups like Clearwater Project, Zero Population Growth, Natural Resources Defense Council, which are aimed at protecting the earth from unrestrained exploitation (Wapner 2010, 45).

It is both the aesthetic, spiritual connection and biological, scientific importance of the environment that has emerged as the fundamental threads in American Environmentalism, which really arrived in the 1960s and 1970s. Many find the true birth of the movement with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which describes the ecological ramifications of pesticide and herbicide use. It connects the Industrial Revolution to the chemical revolution of the 1950s, which ultimately resulted in contamination of the earth's resources. This was an alarming account of destroying the environment, but also endangering human welfare as well as other forms of life in the process. Carson did not outright object to practical use of these chemicals, but she realized that there was a certain boundary that we should not cross. There was a point

where the earth could no longer neutralize these chemicals, which would disrupt entire ecosystems (Wapner 2010, 46). This book influenced a growing movement of similar concerns about human intervention in natural processes. Paul Ehrlich followed with *The Population Bomb* where he realized the true material limits of the earth to carry the weight of the needs of the entire human population. Similarly, the Club of Rome issued a report called *The Limits of Growth*, which reaffirmed that there is a distinct clash between the finite nature of the natural world and human growth and consumption patterns (Wapner 2010, 47).

Following these early writers of the 1960s and 1970s, there were multiple publications and artistic expressions aimed at exposing the fragility of the planet and its resources. This was coupled with Americans experiencing and witnessing for the first the ramifications of limits imposed by nature. It was in the 1970s, in response to the United States' support for Israel that OPEC restricted the production of petroleum thereby raising the price of gas forcing Americans to feel, many for the first time, a true "energy shock." In addition, there were endless experiences in the dangers of pollution including an oil spill near Santa Barbara, the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island, and the reports of contamination of Love Canal, which emphasized the amounts of heavy waste and effects of industrial society. It was during this period groups like Greenpeace, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and Friends of the Earth formed in the United States giving environmental concerns a truly powerful voice. And this powerful voice began to reach beyond waste and resource concerns. The movement would eventually give voice to causes such as: animal rights, wilderness protection, biodiversity, climate change, social justice aspects of environmentalism, and so on (Wapner 2010, 49).

The environmental movement has made tremendous progress since the 1960s and 1970s. It has grown in size, geographic reach, and enlarged its agenda to include all avenues related to the natural environment (Wapner, 49). This ultimately means that the movement has progressed from being “a lone voice crying out to a deaf public” to a mainstream consciousness and a “central expression of American society” (Wapner, 50). And that expression takes on several forms in terms of activities because the environmental movement seems to incorporate so many different dynamic elements such as climate change, animals, social justice, and so on and so forth. This makes it particularly hard to evaluate the actual progress of the “environmental movement” as a whole on the national scale in achieving substantial practical change for this cause.

### **Muslims in the United States**

Now that we have a brief understanding of the birth and progress of environmentalism here in the United States, we must now focus on how American Muslims are a part of that history and development. First, I think it is important to discuss the Muslim community in general here in the United States and provide some background on their community during the rise of environmentalism in the United States especially (time period since the late 1950s). This is important because during this time the Muslim community here in the United States was not particularly focused on environmental issues, even though many argue now that Islam has a distinct point of view on the environment. Rather, the Muslims here at that time were focused on other issues more directly linked to their community’s quest for institutions and freedoms here in the United States. Yet as the community has developed here through time, its members have incorporated new issues into their agenda in addition to being more active in

political life. Thus, we will look at how this development happened over the last half a century leading up to present day activism, especially for environmental issues.

The estimated number of Muslims in the United States remains a controversial figure. However, Dr. Mehtab Karim of the Pew Research Center, after an immense study on Muslim Demography as the senior researcher on religion and public life, concluded that there were roughly 2.5 million Muslims in the United States in 2007. This population continues to grow with the immigration of many Muslims from around the world the United States, but it is mostly indigenous Africans (20%) and South Asians (50%) (Karim 2010). The immigration of Muslims to America began even before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the 1400s. It was the Muslim Moors, slaves to the Spanish explorers who worked as crewmembers that ultimately came to the United States and often times joined Native American tribes. There are some estimates that indicate 8% of Western African slavers were in fact Muslim (Turner 2000, 12). In many cases these Muslims were “converted” to Christianity, but there are many documents and reports that suggest small numbers were able to maintain their Islamic beliefs and practices. However, with the constraints of slavery it was hard to pass down these traditions to the future generations. Yet, when new slaves arrived from Africa they could pass on their religious knowledge to the newer generations.

In 1865 slavery was abolished, so there was no new Muslims to basically revive these connections to a Muslim and African heritage. Nevertheless, Muslim African Americans still maintained a few isolated communities and continued their presence in various tribes. In the early 1900s some African American groups established organizations based on a blend of Islam and racial equality and in some cases racial

supremacy. In 1913 Timothy Drew (Drew Ali) formed the Moorish Science Temple of America. During the 1930s and 1940s the Ahmadiyya movement was “one of the oldest and most important organization among Black Americans” (Turner 2000, 134). It offered a multi-racial Muslim identity with aspects of a Pan-Africanist identity. However, in 1930 Wallace Fard Muhammad formed the largest organization called The Nation of Islam (NOI). It was in 1934 that Elijah Mujammad (Malcom X) became the leader of NOI, but after a prison experience he made the pilgrimage to Mecca and actually influenced many African Americans to convert to Sunni Islam, which had a dramatic influence on many other Muslims. It is important to note here that there were African American mosques also concerned with their global Muslim identity rather than a more Pan-African agenda. This includes the Islamic Mission of American and the First Mosque of Pittsburgh. These groups were more influential when new waves of immigrants started to arrive in the United States. Yet, it is the African American Muslims during this time who were the dominant political and social force in the fight for racial, economic, and religious equality here in the United States.

At the turn of the century there was a definite “second wave of immigration.” Most of these immigrants were from Eastern Europe, Italy Poland, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon (Khan, 2010). Most of these immigrants were voluntary agrarian farmers or laborers and mostly uneducated. In addition, because they were Arab and in some cases Christian they were able to blend in somewhat easily in the United States. Still these groups did establish the very first mosques. The Mother Mosque of America is the longest standing mosque in North America, which was built in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1934. This mosque was a mix of Christians (40%) and Muslims (60%) that had a

distinctly Lebanese cultural identity. In Ross, North Dakota Syrians built the first known mosque in 1929, but it was torn down in the 1970s and then later rebuilt in 2005 (Khan, 2010).

In the 1960s we see the real “third wave” of immigration that is still occurring today. It was in 1964 and 1965 that the Civil Rights Act and the Immigration and Nationality Act were passed, which allowed for a true shift in immigration from being mostly European countries to other parts of the world (Khan, 2010). This means a larger number of Muslims from across the globe immigrated to the United States for various reasons. First, many immigrants came here for economic reasons as small business owners. Secondly, many also immigrated for educational reasons for themselves and their future children. It is because of these two reasons that many of these immigrants were well educated becoming prominent members of the middle to upper class as doctors, engineers, scientists, etc. Finally, many also came here as refugees from Palestine, Ethiopia, Bosnia, Vietnam, etc. There were also “active and open” Muslims who came to the United States to obtain religious freedom (Khan, 2010).

From this history one can see a real influx of Muslims arriving in this country in the 1960s and 1970s, which also correlates with the time period in the rise in environmentalism in this country as well. This may provide some explanation as to the perceived lack of a Muslim Environmental Ethic in comparison to other traditions. It was during this time that the Muslim community was focused on other seemingly more important endeavors such as institution building in the form of mosques, schools, community centers, and organizations (Syed, 2010). It was very common for Muslims to purchase abandoned churches and begin to establish their own centers to worship, learn,



and gather in the name of Islam. Then it was in 1964 that the very Muslim Student Association at the University of Illinois was formed. This movement began to reach more and more college campuses around the nation. As the initial members graduated and began to have more adult needs as professional Muslim Americans, they formed new and broader organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (Syeed, 2010). During this time it was extremely important to begin to establish these organizations that could serve the community's needs more directly as these immigrants realized that America would be their permanent home (Syeed, 2010).

After the initial phase of focusing on institution building, realizing that they were here to stay, and some internal debate about whether or not to get involved in American politics, in the 1980s Muslim leaders began advocating more civic activism and more involvement in public arenas (Syeed, 2010). Here is where this issue becomes challenging as Muslims become more involve in political and civic life. The tendency is to group American Muslims into a monolithic bloc advocating for the same issues. But this simplistic measure often overlooks issues in culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, geographic location, education level, social status, etc. Muslims are diverse a group as any having different sects, ethnic groups, cultures, beliefs, language, generational issues, etc. The United States holds the most diverse group of Muslims in the entire world. This is important in understanding how when we try to classify something as Muslim Environmentalism that there are many other factors that can impact such an identity such as growing up in the United States and having more exposure to this kind of movement as well the freedom and time (post institution building) to explore and reflect on other important issues like the environment (Barzinji, 2010).

## **Islamic Environmentalism**

While the Muslim community here in the United States was really starting to form and develop its own space, the environmental movement here really was forming its own voice with the help mostly from “freelance spiritual types, anticommunist Western Marxists, secular philosophers, or nature lovers” (Gottlieb 2006, 3-21). It would not seem natural that these two components would somehow mesh in the future. However, it was in 1970 that the ecological crisis became an issue for world religions. In 1966 Lynn White Jr. gave a lecture to the American Association for the Advancement of Science called “The Historical Origins of the Ecologic Crisis.” This influential lecture essentially blamed the Judeo-Christian tradition for the mistreatment of nature. He highlighted the anthropocentrism of these traditions, which places humans at the center of the universe and masters of nature as the divine plan, as the culprit behind environmental degradation. Following that devastating publication, Christianity and Judaism really attempted to defend their tradition as being “eco friendly.”

Now, Islam was not directly included in this publication, but with the increase of Muslim participation in the political realm during this time and following this period, Muslim organizations began to collaborate more with Christian and Jewish groups emphasizing the similarities in the three Abrahamic faiths (Leonard 2003, 18). It seems that as Islam and Muslims became more involved in society, there developed this curiosity in the American public and demand for the “Islamic” voice on seemingly any issue of political, social, or economic importance in the United States. And since September 11, 2001 this phenomenon has been particularly prominent as Muslims and Islam have been major focuses of the Western world, especially in the United States.

So how do we begin to understand the “Islamic” voice on environmentalism? A number of Muslim writers living in the West (for the most part) have worked to emphasize that Islam is an ecologically oriented religion (Foltz 2003, 249-279). Therefore, these Muslim environmentalists have attempted to derive an environmental ethic strictly based on Islam’s divine sources.

The basic sources of the religion of Islam are found in the Koran, the hadith, and the sunnah. The Koran is the holy book containing the revelations from Allah to the prophet Mohammad through the archangel Gabriel. The hadith are narrations, which concern the actions and behaviors of the prophet. Lastly, the sunnah is the habits and practices of the Prophet which are exemplified in the hadith and serve as an example of a certain way of life to Muslims. Therefore, to label something as “Islamic,” it must derive its validity from one of these sources.

In “The Muslim Declaration on Nature,” Dr. Abdullah Omar Naseef describes that the three central concepts of Islam “tawhid, khalifah, and akhirah” form the basis of environmental ethics within the Islamic framework (Naseef 1998, 13). First, Dr. Abdullah describes tawhid as the “Unity of Allah,” which is “reflected in the unity of mankind, and the unity of man and nature.” Therefore, this unity must be maintained here on Earth by respecting its integrity and its natural and wildlife components. Here there is a large emphasis on balance, harmony, and moderation so that the integrity of the unity of Allah’s creation can live on. The responsibility of maintaining this unity or tawhid is the second central concept important in Islamic Environmental Ethics, which is khalifah. In Islam, mankind’s role here on Earth is that of a khalifah, which means “vicegerent or trustee of Allah.” This means that the humans are not masters of the Earth, but in fact

been entrusted by Allah to keep it safe. Of course, our stewardship of the planet is monitored and according to Islam, we will be held accountable for our actions. This is the third component known as *akhirah* or accountability. Islam teaches that Muslims will have to face Allah on the Day of Judgement and be held accountable for both deeds and omissions. It is on the Day of Reckoning when Muslims will have to actually give an account of how they behaved as *khalifa* here on Earth as entrusted by Allah. Thus, this is why Islam is seen as a guiding path so that one can face the *akhirah* or “hereafter.”

From these teachings in the Koran, many of Muslim writers on the environment have focused on “environmental degradation as a symptom of social justice” (Foltz, 2003, 255). Fazlun Khalid, Yasin Dutton, Hashim Ismail Dockrat and Nawal Ammar all have presented on the “Environment and Social Justice.” Most of these arguments maintain that certain humans are taking “more than their fair share,” which is disrupting the balance of nature. In many cases this is associated with the international banking system of “interest-taking.” Therefore, if this kind of system were eliminated then there would be adequate resources for all to enjoy (Foltz, Denny, and Baharuddin, 2003).

Seyyed Hossain Nasr takes this a step further, as the most prolific and earliest Muslim speaker on environmentalism within the Islamic framework. Nasr is an “American-trained Iranian Shi’ite philosopher” who started his “environmentalist critique of Western modernity with a series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1966” (Foltz 2003, xxxviii). Nasr states “the governing classes in the Islamic world have their eyes only on emulating the West when it comes to the question of science and technology...they therefore remain constantly on the receiving end in a situation in which it is difficult, although not impossible to apply Islamic principles to the economic and

environmental fields” (Nasr 2003, 88). Nasr believes that the Muslim world must enact two programs in order to practically address the environmental crisis. The first is “formulating and making clearly known in a contemporary language the perennial wisdom of Islam concerning the natural order, its religious significance and intimate relation to every phase of man’s life in this world.” He concludes that the second program is to expand awareness of Shari’ite teachings concerning ethical treatment of the natural environment and apply them whenever necessary according to the principle of the Shari’ah itself.” Underneath these teachings, it is clear that Nasr advocates a religious and spiritual revival or rebirth in the human species in order to adequately address our global environmental problems.

Following this understanding of Islam’s comprehensive system of environmental ethics, many scholars have focused on the possibility of creating sustainable communities in developing Muslim nations around the world. However, this has numerous political complications. Even if the average Muslims are living according to the interpretation of Islam that emphasizes environmentally friendly behavior, many countries in the Muslim world lack a strong civil society and democratic institutions. In many cases this means that governments are focused on development and economic growth, which in many cases override Islamic guidelines for environmental preservation (Foltz 2006, 214). This becomes even more complicated because if a government does try to promote a proenvironment policy, it is often viewed as a foreign ideology or just something to oppose because the regime is considered illegitimate. Safei-Eldin A. Hamed suggests that “political conditions are the heart of ecological destruction and resource depletion in the Muslim world” (Hamed 2003, 417). Therefore, it seems that without democracy or shura,

sustainable development will in fact have to wait because it ultimately hinges on “public involvement” in addition to organizations and institutions, human resources, and an information base (Hamed 2003, 417).

From the discussion above it seems that there is a distinct Islamic environmental ethic that could be utilized to mobilize people towards pro environment behaviors, but in practice in Muslim nations around the world these Islamic traditions are suppressed or not highlighted based on the contemporary political situation in these nations. This is why it is important to make the distinction between Islamic environmentalism and Muslim Environmentalism. The way that Muslims behave is not necessarily Islamic as they are affected by other cultural, political, social, and economic factors. Now for this research paper we will look at how those factors in addition to Islam influence Muslims here in the United States in their environmental activism.

### **Examining the Current Status of the Research Question**

The above literature and background review was to provide important religious, social, historical, and political context for the study of American Muslims in the Environmental Movement. I wanted to establish the necessary foundation for how American Muslims and Environmentalism may converge together including, the role of the American Environmental Movement, the beginning and rise of Muslims in America, and the development of Islamic Environmentalism in recent history. Now, the aim of this research paper is to discover how Muslims in their everyday lives in the United States experience and participate in the current Environmental Movement. This paper is focused on the contemporary American Muslim understanding of environmentalism, their

practices of environmentalism, and what this means for their political and social status here in the United States.

Currently there seems to be different levels or categories of environmental activism in the American Muslim community. Essentially, there are different methods of mobilizing Muslims in environmental activities here in the United States. It seems that three distinct categories of Muslim environmental activism in the United States presently. First, there are influential individuals within the American Muslim Environmental Community, particularly imams in the case of my own research. Second, there is the community level, which includes “green” Muslim institutions such as mosques and community centers respectively. Finally, there are political and civic organizations and associations associated with Muslim American Environmental activists.

### **Influential Individual Activism**

Imams are a vital component of Muslim communities acting as the leader of worship services. It is in this capacity that they have the distinct power and privilege to engage Muslims on a continuous basis regarding faith, values, Islam, and other potential issues of importance to the community or the individual. Esposito comments that here in the United States “imams have been transformed by the American experience” (Esposito 1998, 217). “Mosques in America serve not only as places of worship but also as community centers...Imams in America are not only responsible for the upkeep of mosques and leading of prayers, but often take on activities of their fellow clergy of other faiths, ranging from counseling to hospital visits” (Esposito 1998, 217). This is why I believe it is extremely important to include the contributions of imams as sources of

environmental awareness within Islam and convey that message to their congregations as well as other members of society who seek their advice or counseling.

Imam Johari Abdul-Malik is the director of Community Outreach at the Dar Al-Hijrah Islamic Center in Falls Church, Virginia. He serves as an Imam, a counselor, a fundraiser, a doctoral candidate at Georgetown University, and a motivational speaker for groups such as the Muslim Advocacy Commission and Muslims Men Against Domestic Violence. As a native of Brooklyn, New York Imam Johari found Islam as a graduate student. It is also around this time that he began practicing Transcendental Meditation, became a vegetarian, and started the Chakula Co-op.

Imam Johari started the discussion on Islam and the Environment by highlighting the core concepts within Islam that relate to the environment: *adil* (justice), *amana* (trust), and *rahma* (mercy towards the planet). And it is ultimately up to man as the *khalifa* or steward here on Earth to uphold these fundamental principles in order to protect the Earth. The question is: how does one protect the Earth? Imam Johari named 4 important sources of knowledge that dictate how one should adequately care for the Earth. These sources include: the Koran (holy book), the *Haith* (traditions of the Prophet), *Ijima* (consensus of the scholars, their *ijtihad* and framework in a given time period), and paradigm based reason/*ijtihad* (this often means the struggle of implementing these ideas in a certain context) (Johari, 2010).

According to Imam Johari, because of these fundamental sources of knowledge, Islam ultimately provides a codified code of conduct that can evolve to address new problems and circumstances, especially those that have to do with environmental problems of our contemporary time period. He gave an example from the Prophetic



tradition whereby during times of war there were injunctions against cutting down trees, burning crops, destroying infrastructure, etc. He concludes that this mean during times of peace trustee of the environment should be even higher. However, the problem is that the environment often is damaged as a function of issues between humans. The question is: how to go about fixing that problem? Imam Johari maintains that we need a “codified code” for being Green.

This means that the way to reach people is through tapping into their core values through a codified code of conduct. And this is exactly what he tries to do when he addresses his congregations. He told our class a story about a time when he delivered a sermon about “Environmental Stewardship as a Muslim.” He describes how the people in the crowd “looked at him funny” as he delivered a sermon on the environment. But as he began to talk about how Allah hates those who waste and how the Prophet indicated that one should never waste water even when water is plenty (conservation), people began to pay more attention. He told them about the Day of Judgment and how ultimately humans will be judged based on their actions toward the environment. Because humans are heirs to the planet, they are ultimately responsible for its succession into the future. Imam Johari said, “Once you hit them with reminders in the Koran, they start thinking about it like that” (Johari, 2010). This means that is essentially our core values can and have to underpin social change.

There are several challenges here and Imam Johari laments the fact in today’s society we do not spend enough time on self-development and the establishment of strong core values or how to live one’s life. If we did we would need less prisons in this country. The second challenge is even once you begin to establish these core values in a

group of people how do you go about moving forward with those values in appropriate way? This is where Imam Johari's activism and advocacy comes into the picture and also where religion or simply core values in American society meets politics and government. Imam Johari told Islam Online, "It is not possible to have real change if all we're doing is working with the level of individuals and faith based institutions. That's not enough. We have to move to the level of public policy, where our voices are heard along with a chorus of others who are not part of faith based movements to ask for changes in the system" (Qidwae, 2010). This indicates the realization that there is still the strong need for Muslim activists to integrate more into the national or governmental dimension of influence, rather than just at the community and local levels.

So to approach the public policy side, for one example, on Monday May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Imam Johari spoke to the Environmental Protection Agency in support of the EPA Public Hearing to regulate green house gases as a pollutant. He told the EPA, "I want to remind you laws and regulation won't be enough. There has to be personal accountability from those of us who believe in these values." This statement indicates that on some level everyone in society needs some sort of moral code or core set of values when it comes to helping the environment or the future looks pretty grim for planet Earth.

### **Mosques and Community Centers**

At the institution level, mosques are the center of community life for Muslims here in the United States. They provide, not only a place to worship, but also they are also a place to socialize, gain education, and participate in different activities and events. According to Esposito, "Mosques and Islamic centers may now be found not only in major cities but also in small cities, towns, and villages (Esposito 1998, 208). I believe it

is fair to say that mosques around the United States have their own dynamic and unique culture worthy of study and understanding.

The All Dulles Muslim Society (ADAMS) is one of the largest communities and or mosques in the DC Metro area. It serves over 5000 families and has 7 branches which include: Sterling/Herndon, Tyson's Corner, Fairfax, Reston, Leesburg, Ashburn, and South Riding. It is a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation that was established in 1983. The ADAMS Mission is "to serve Allah (swt) through service to the Muslim community by providing religious education and social services in the best professional manner as embodied in the Quran and Sunnah. Further, ADAMS is dedicated to representing the eternal truths of Islam to the broader community through positive contributions to the society at large" ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org), 2010).

The ADAMS Center has many programs that includes funeral services, health programs, social services, charity services, playgroups, Muslim support groups, community service sectors, interfaith programs, Koran training, summer camp, Sunday school, computer training, youth education, sports leagues, martial arts, youth committees, scouts programs, art classes, as well as education on Islam and various programs dedicated specifically to the religion itself ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org) , 2010). In addition to all of these wonderful programs a relatively new project for the ADAMS began in April of 2008 and it is known as the "Green Masjid (mosque)."

The Green Masjid Project started when a young girl approached ADAMS Center Deputy Director Khalid Iqbal about getting involved with the earth. It was in this light that he delivered a sermon highlighting the Muslim obligation to care for the environment, which took place at George Washington University. Shortly after that

sermon he joined the staff of the ADAMS Center and looked for ways to conserve energy and instill more green operations. So on April 4, 2008 The Green Masjid launched with the goal of “reducing carbon footprint one family at a time” to “create an environment that is safe and healthy for God’s creation” ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org) , 2010). The launch included a tree-planting project mostly for the junior youth while the older children made posters encouraging greener habits that everyone can follow. In the 2009 Annual Report of the ADAMS it indicates all of the environmental efforts that the center made in addition to those events on the first day ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org), 2010). The ADAMS Center planted 50 new trees, planted a vegetable garden that yielded plenty, initiated a recycling program, reduced ADAMS energy consumption by 12%, and printed ADAMS Green Environment Guide booklets and distributed them to the families in the community. It also listed future goals for 2010 to continue with the existing programs, initiate a car-pooling program, and to expand the vegetable garden by 50% ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org), 2010). The garden produced healthy items that were used for the community’s own consumption and various events and activities.

The ADAMS Center was able to achieve the above programs in various ways. For instance, to decrease energy consumption and reduce their carbon footprint they installed solar-powered lights in the parking lots and put energy efficient lighting inside the building. They were also able to begin the carpooling program by encouraging this practice and also reserving spaces in the parking lot for those who consider this option. In addition, they have also focused on limited water consumption. Because Muslims are required to complete ablutions prior to prayer five times a day per person this requires an extraordinary amount of water. This is exacerbated by the fact that there also enormous

amounts of water use for other reasons in just maintaining a large building and serving so many families. In order to address this issues ADAMS has installed a system within the faucets in order to decrease the amount of water that comes out. All of these programs are reinforced with literature and a family packet produced by the ADAMS that introduces families to all these measures and explains the importance of environmental stewardship ([www.adamscenter.org](http://www.adamscenter.org), 2010). The packets also address how to lead more environmentally friendly lives outside of the community center by engaging in recycling, and water and electricity conservation in the home, in addition to gardening and farming practices or waste reduction techniques. It is through the sermons on the environment and the educational programs that Iqbal noticed real changes in the congregation, even in himself. He commented that the programs taking place at ADAMS inspired him and others to do similar things around their homes (Iqbal, 2010).

As mentioned above the ADAMS Center has pursued an educational program to accompany the changes in their behaviors and institution, but this education is not strictly for the adults. This year, 2010, the theme for the students is also “The Green Masjid.” According to the program outline on the website, “Students will learn the value of civic duty by beautifying and enhancing our mosque through the respectful and natural approach Allah (swt) and his beloved Prophet Muhammad (saw) have taught us. Classes will focus on living in harmony with their surroundings – including people, animals, the earth, and our place of worship. Projects are designed to foster a simple and natural Muslim lifestyle through healthy living, civic duty, and honest commerce” (Green Masjid 2010 Program Booklet).

In this program the classes discussed the importance of nature and community

from an Islamic perspective. Following these discussions was parent-children combined meeting to enjoy and make craft displays as well make and consume nutritious food items. Each class had a craft activity: building pinecone feeders, sun catchers, bookmarks, birdfeeders, baskets, mosaics, and making tote bags. They also made a salad and fruit bar stand, lemonade, and also took turns in gardening for their fruits and vegetables.

Khalid Iqbal stressed the continuance of this program into the future and that they hope to continue to innovate new ways to be more eco-friendly. They are looking into the future by completing energy audits to continue to reduce their ecological footprint and even looking to heat the water that they do use for ablutions with solar energy, which would reduce their energy consumption even more. Furthermore, their broad goal is to inspire other Muslim community centers including those linked to ADAMS to embrace these kinds of changes and implement similar programs (Iqbal, 2010).

### **Grassroots Organizations**

The Muslim Green Team prides itself on being the first American grassroots environmental movement. Its website states that their goal is “to educate and equip the Muslim community to live greener lives, and to demonstrate to the general public the Islamic environmental message.” The Muslim Green Team is part of the Service Corps or volunteering department of the Muslim American Society (MAS). I had the opportunity to interview Bhawana Kamil who is the President of the MAS Bay Area, which is where the Green Team developed in 2008.

First, MAS is a national organization with chapters all over the country. It was established in 1993 as a non-profit organization that focuses on education, interfaith

outreach, youth engagement, and civic advocacy. Bhawana said “recently so many organizations are trying to find and redefine what it does and can offer to the community.” This means that the core message has often been reform and to encourage members to be active and involved in many different ways. This is why the Service Corps portion of MAS plays an important and special role in promoting activism in various ways. Bhawana noted that because the Bay Area environmental issues are incredibly important in the minds of local that the Green Team developed very naturally out of those concerns (Kamil, 2010).

Of course, there were several challenges including “having enough voices in institutions, people to make changes in these institutions and maintaining activism in these areas” (Kamil, 2010). This was particularly challenging in the beginning without a distinct clear message on the environment coming from MAS, especially with the Green Movement just starting to pick up and start making waves in the community. Nonetheless, the Bay Area became a Pilot project and there is hope that it will extend throughout the United States in other chapters.

The Muslim Green Team Pilot Project describes themselves as a “comprehensive, grassroots, and environmental campaign” with the following objectives: To fulfill our duty to Allah (swt) in adopting environmentally friendly practices, to contribute to the increasingly global effort to reverse the effects of environmentally-irresponsible practices, to raise awareness about environmental issues within the Muslim community, to demonstrate the environmental message of Islam, and to contribute the unique, Islamic perspective of the environment to the national and global environmental conversation” (<http://www.muslimgreenteam.org>, 2010).

The main projects coming from the Muslim Green Team are the Annual Eco-Fair and the Cloth Bag Project. The Annual Eco-Fair is described as “a fun and informal venue at which community members can get the information and resources they need to adopt more environmentally responsible practices” (<http://www.muslimgreenteam.org>, 2010). There are lectures, children’s activities, exhibitions, volunteer opportunities, a recycling program, as well as art projects, contests, and more. The Cloth Bag Project is where the Muslim Green Team takes on the enormous challenge of “distributing 10,000 reusable bags to Bay Area Muslims to help them cut down or eliminate the use of disposable bags when shopping” (<http://www.muslimgreenteam.org>, 2010). Bhawana applauded the progress and success of these events noting how the community looks forward to these events every year and they are starting to maintain the same volunteers to keep the projects continuing in the future. The hope is to use this movement as a catalyst for mosques to start similar environmental programs in order to reach more Muslims on a regular basis (Kamil, 2010). There are also talks of “Green Ramadan” actions, which would highlight the holy month of Ramadan by also focusing on environmental issues, but this still remains a somewhat local effort to start this kind of movement (Kamil, 2010).

Lastly, another aspect of this group is that they are part of a California interfaith group that occasionally holds meetings and events together. Bhawana noted that this interfaith group is less focused on dialogue and sharing commonalities or differences but more focused on certain issues (in this case the environment) (Kamil, 2010). In this sense they are not focused on discussing issues of religion, they are focused on talking about the environment. This way they are simply concerned with working together for a



common cause that they can agree on unanimously. As Bhawana said, “the environment is one of those issues that shows communities that it is possible to benefit from working together” (Kamil, 2010).

Although the group has achieved such success in the Bay Area, Bhawana noted that making the environment an integral part of the typical Muslim image in America is particularly challenging. She stated, “In a sense what tends to happen in the Muslim community is that the public or public events sets the agenda” (Kamil, 2010). So, although in the Bay Area or in local areas Muslims can make a significant impact in their community as neighbors, friends, and community members and reach out to other communities, churches, or interfaith groups, but this is not part of the national dialogue or political scene. It is still simply too difficult to gain a positive message such as this one in the national media, so Islam and the environment are very rarely linked in this context.

Through Bhawana I was able to contact a similar grass roots group based in Washington, D.C. called “D.C. Green Muslims.” She was able to provide with the names and email addresses of some of the initial founders and some of the most active members. DC Green Muslims started as an organic vegetarian potluck of about 15 people in October 2007. They wanted to get together as a group to celebrate what they deemed a “Green Iftar,” which is an eco-friendly name for the meal where Muslims break the fast during the holy month of Ramadan. Following that dinner, there were six more potlucks just that year, which during some occasions actually attracted over 150 people. The goal was simple: to talk about where meat and produce actually comes from here in the United States. The group’s main focus is on the exchange of ideas between one another regarding the environment and how it relates to being a better Muslim. So their main

project is a blog at [www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com) and a yahoo group, which informs members about green issues and the upcoming events relating to the environment.

It is through the blog and the yahoo group that this has become a “network of Muslims in the District of Columbia (and surrounding areas) working proactively to help our communities understand and implement sustainable eco-conscious ways of living while relating it to our faith and a holistic world-view.” In the D.C. area, in addition to their own Iftar dinners, they have participated in other various community projects. This includes service projects like City Year’s Service day on Martin Luther King Jr. day where they made-over schools, river clean up projects near Anacostia, No Impact Week, park and community based clean up projects, as well as encouraging things like the Ramadan Compact, which encourages Muslims to be more eco-conscious during the Holy Month of Ramadan where Muslims typically fast. It is evident from the range of these projects that D.C. Green Muslims are not just focused on what constitutes purely “environmental” issues, but also issues of social justice and community service within their own home of Washington, D.C. The forum allows each of the members to find out about different ways to participate in various events and choose when and where they can contribute to the activities.

In this particular D.C. based group I was able to personally contact Mohamad Chakaki, Nadia Jay, Sara Jawaid, and Ryan Strom. However, the blog was a tremendous resource as well, which contains postings for a variety of different members. It is also important to note that many of the original and most active members of D.C. Green

Muslims have since moved to new regions of the United States, but they still pursue environmental activism and still discuss their broad based work as “Green Muslims.”

In a blog post entitled, “Green Muslims Here and There,” Mohamad Chakaki writes about the formation of the group way back in 2006 ([www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com), 2008). He writes, “Shumaisa, a PhD student in environmental justice, and a group of friends at UMich organized a conference on Islam and social justice in the spring of 2006. That conference sparked a number of conversations amongst like-minded Muslim environmental students and professionals, from Ann Arbor to Chicago to Boston to DC.” However, this national conversation about Islam and the Environment did not really turn into “anything on the ground.” So, it was then that the project became more locally focused at a potluck dinner of like minded individuals with a mantra of: “start small, be local, stay relevant...and have fun!” Then it developed into trips to mosques and schools and community based “Green Dinners.” From there the group also connected with other local groups and interfaith communities in Washington, D.C. such as Greater Washington Interfaith Party and Light and Washington Parks and People.

Now the question is where do these activists see the impact of these activities? In a blog post entitled, “Ramadan Marks New Beginnings for Green Muslims,” Adam Sitte writes about what it means to be Muslim in the green community and what it means to be green in the Muslim community.

“Being Muslim in the green community requires more than simply doing good in a green manner, but shedding a different light on those acts and offering others a positive example of Muslims fulfilling the duties of their religion. By

maintaining our Muslim identity in the green community, we are able to show Muslims a broader side of their religion, and demonstrate that being green isn't exclusive to singular ethnic, religious, or socioeconomic groups"

([www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com), 2009).

While he comments that being green in the Muslim community means:

"focusing on our own community and ways in which we can inspire it to be aware of this important Islamic duty. Belief in our role as a caretaker of the world is an essential part of our religion, and we should aim to help other Muslims to embrace this responsibility with an enthusiastic spirit, whether that means instituting energy efficient measures at local mosques or educating Muslim youth about environmentalism" ([www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com), 2009).

Thus, it seems that the impact can be two-fold. On one hand, this kind of activism helps diversify the green community. On the other hand, it also encourages Muslims to explore other and new manifestations of their faith that they may not have originally thought of beforehand.

Yet, when it comes to evaluating these goals it appears that the challenge still remains to actually move from these concepts and translates these goals and awareness into widespread action. In an interview with Azizah magazine, Nadia Janjua notes:

"For how inherent it is in our faith to be conscious of and respectful to the environment, it seems we don't encourage understanding and pro-activeness enough in our Muslim communities. Sure, there's a lot going on in terms of discussion and awareness in Muslim communities across the states, in Canada, and particularly in England, but it has to move from concept to action"

(Aden, 2008).

This is where the challenge still remains in connecting core values derived from Islam into facilitating collective action on environmental issues, rather than in just select areas or small niches of people in certain geographic regions of the United States. And the D.C. Green Muslims have attempted to do this in reaching national convention held by the Islamic Society of North America in Columbus, Ohio in 2008 with the hope according to Mohamad Chakaki “to convene and connect Muslims in North America working on or interested in environment and social justice. There must be more of us out there, unaware that we’re not the only ones with interests in and, indeed, a passion for people and for nature” ([www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com), 2008). Yet, as Chakaki points out in a reflection piece about the event, he indicates that during the session he longed to go outside of the building noting “that it's hard to have a "green" convention when the facility isn't” ([www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com](http://www.dcgreenmuslims.blogspot.com), 2008). Therefore, it seems once again there is a distinct problem in connecting ones core values and concepts with practical solutions and activities.

## **Analysis**

The aim of this paper was to examine how Muslims in their everyday lives in the United States experience and participate in the Environmental Movement. The goal was to focus on the contemporary Muslim understanding of environmentalism, their practices of environmentalism, and what this means for their political and social status here in the United States. At the beginning of the research process, I hypothesized that I would find a distinct Islamic understanding of the natural environment, which facilitates different levels of activism among the members of this community here in the United States. In

addition, I also believed that engaging in this kind of faith based activism, specifically for the environment in the case of this study, would provide American Muslims with a method of achieving significantly more political and social inclusion in American society, especially since 9/11.

From the traditional literature sources as well as my interviewees' individual testimonies of their understanding of the natural environment, it is clear that there is a connection for many Muslims here between Islam and one's role in the natural environment, which becomes a foundation for their environmentalism. Thus, one can confirm a Muslim Environmental Ethic here in the United States and say that Islam facilitates different levels of environmental activism. It is also important to note that the American experience of environmentalism through certain industries and grass roots organizing in particular for many Muslims also plays a role in the dynamics of their own activism. For instance, there is the greening of places like ADAMS Center, mosques, and other community centers. Also, there are organizations like the Muslim Green Team and D.C. Green Muslims who promote environmental awareness within their own communities and try their best to expand outreach everyday to the broader Muslim community. But these organizations also seem to highlight their role in the community and how they can be a part of community service oriented activities, both in the Bay Area and in Washington, D.C. So, it seems that this activism is mostly rooted in Muslim institutions and organizations in very localized cases and regions.

It is that regard that environmentalism and Muslim activism in the United States actually have a lot in common historically and presently. From the history of the environmental movement mentioned above in the literature review, it is easy to see that

environmentalism has always been more about the formation of smaller grass roots organizations fighting to protect certain elements of the environment. American Muslims have also focused on the same thing: building institutions first to support their cause to live as religious Muslims here in the United States. And in many cases both environmentalists and Muslims have been pretty successful in their own local communities in building coalitions, gaining momentum, and making a difference in their own specific areas.

However, when it comes to the national political picture, it still seems that environmentalism and Muslim political activism are still in their infancy. Yes, both have made significant progress in recent years. Environmentalism has developed wider in scope, but at the end of the day as a national issue it typically comes way after issues like national security, defense, the economy, and so on. It is also true that Muslims have made considerable progress on the political scene, especially since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 in political and civic activism. Muslims have made it into public office, local offices, and have become prominent members of civil and political society. There even has been some cross with the environment, considering Imam Johari spoke to the EPA. But it still remains true that both the environmental and Muslim activity need to develop from local, regional actors to strong, dominating concepts on the national scene. So, I have to echo Imam Johari's own analysis and say that it is not enough to change individual behaviors or even community behaviors, if you want to really make a large impact you have to move to broad based public advocacy, which ultimately comes in the form of laws and regulations, which comes from grassroots and community organizing techniques.

Therefore, as far as my hypothesis is concerned on the level of political and social inclusion, I think that environmentalism within the Muslim American community has developed into a social movement for Muslims to get together and discuss their faith in relation to other layers of activism. It is also much easier for Muslims to get together with other Muslims or other faith based groups regarding issues like the environment.

However, outside of their own communities and regional arenas, the integration has not been as strong. In addition, I think it is fair to say that Muslims are still struggling with translating their beliefs and faith and important issues into actual political activism on the national scene here in the United States and figuring out where they fit in the political landscape. Unfortunately, the same is true for environmental activism in general. There is a lot of little progress on individual or community levels or very specific issues, but very little at the national or even global level in terms of real active solutions. Both are still not monumental, national movements with a lot of sustainable activity.

## **Conclusion**

The intertwining of Islam and the American Environmental Ethic/Understanding/Movement is, I believe, still a relatively new concept. There are basically no existing comprehensive surveys of the Muslim American population and their environmental inclinations. There is also very little study or even coverage of their environmental awareness, knowledge, or activities. I think that this illustrates a distinct weakness within the environmental movement itself, but also a weakness in the understanding of human identity. There is this tendency to divide the world, things, people, etc into dualities or just approach something in an “all or nothing type way.” For instance, in regard to the environment it is although you are choosing “man” or “nature.”



Paul Wapner in his most recent book *Living Through the End of Nature* highlights that this is the problem in the environmental movement. The focus on the competing identities of man and nature has taken away from the fact that the two have to work together if we are to achieve a sustainable planet. In fact, he concludes, we are in a post nature world where there is really no distinction between the two any more. And I think one can apply this concept to our human communities as well. It is not man versus wild. Or America versus Islam. Or Muslims versus Christians. When it comes this issue we are in the same boat, quite literally.

Paul Wapner suggests that “ambiguity” is the saving grace for the environmental movement. “Ambivalence is not some horrid sensibility that makes us weak-kneed and ineffective. Rather, it is a source of wisdom, and I will assert, political strength. Life is full of mysteries. We may know that we evolved along with other creatures, and that our bodies operate according to physical and chemical laws, but we have no clue about what it all means, what is absolutely best for our lives, and how to pursue meaningful agendas in a world that is quickly changing, and in which we ourselves are shifting our affiliations as well as finding new passions and interests” (Wapner 2010, 27). This means not choosing between nature and man, but protecting and embracing that hybridity for which we are all a part.

Can this offer some clues to the American Muslim community on how to approach political activism? Muslims in America are definitely hybrids in terms of identity, so why not embrace that as part of their political activism? Maybe this calls for a decentered Muslim identity politics to help alleviate the problem of dualistic identity markers. It seems as identity markers, dualities, and cultural binaries only makes bigger

human boundaries making issues such as the environment, poverty, social justice, and education harder to tackle although they impact everyone. If we eliminated such boundaries maybe this would allow for American Muslims to speak to Muslims overseas to their foreign attachments about issues like the environment without the fear of political and social backlash associated with certain foreign relations. Furthermore, when it comes to making everyone an “environmentalist” in their own right, we have to learn to incorporate our other identities into that equation.

In a recent article about the notion of “responsible citizenship” entitled “The Muslim Brotherhood in America: Citizens with Foreign Attachments?” Dr. Nimer discusses the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood has not passed the American responsible citizenship test. He indicates that they have been unable to develop a clear vision of their goals and mission here in America. Furthermore, they have not been willing to engage their critics or dispel suspicions regarding their activities (Nimer, 2010). Thus, “ambiguity” here is not the best method here in terms of their political ethics or methodology in playing power politics as far as defining one’s mission and objectives. But, maybe for the time Muslim activists, especially those dedicated to the environment here in the United States, should follow the example of the Turkish Gulen Movement in its quasi identity ambiguity (Nimer, 2010). It is an Islamic group that focuses on social welfare activities around the world but chooses to remain a-political and does not focus so much on the “Islamic-ness” or even “Muslimness” of the group, but the goals of human social welfare programs like education, poverty reduction, and ignorance that affect all communities worldwide, which ultimately a manifestation of certain core values. This would definitely suit well for an issue like the environment, which definitely

affects us all. And this may help both Muslim activism and environmentalism enter in the national political landscape by being more inclusive and truly monumental movements without too strong political identifications that turn people away. The environment needs globally minded citizens.

As I mentioned in the “Why is this Important” section of this paper, I noted a study from Yale University by Enderle et al. that highlighted the lack of diversity within the American Environmental community. Paul Wapner also acknowledges this in the way he promotes this notion of openness and ambiguity for the future of the movement. This is why highlighting expressions of different layers of environmentalism is so important for the future. It is a necessary part of diversity that can contribute to a global environmental movement that we desperately need. Everyone truly needs to become an environmentalist in their own way hence the importance of recognizing religion as a source of core values that can facilitate environmental behaviors. The more people that are involved the better it will be in the future and the easier the mission will become. It is a diversity of ideas, connections, people, beliefs, and cultures that will truly help in contributing to the future of a sustainable planet.

### **Appendix: Methodology**

To test the validity of my hypothesis, I conducted semi-structured interviews within the Muslim Environmental community. This allowed the flexibility to ask questions about each individual’s specific experiences as environmental activists and members of the American Muslim community and their experience in the American Environmental Community in general. Obviously I chose the American Muslim community because I have the most direct access to this part of the Muslim community

and could more easily reach them for interviews and questions. Thus, naturally it was only appropriate for me to focus on the distinct American Environmental Movement as one social group that they may theoretically yearn and work to be a part of in their daily lives.

First, I identified some specific Muslim Environmental organizations and individuals that I hoped to interview throughout the process to understand their experiences as activists. Through my connections in the D.C. area I found a group called “DC Green Muslims.” Bhawana Kamil was my first contact as she has been associated with the D.C. area, but relocated to the Bay Area with Muslim American Society. It was through here that I was able to locate the other individuals to interview. It was through my Contemporary Islam seminar that I was given access to Imam Johari and Khalid Iqbal of the ADAMS Center. I also looked at various publications, blog entries, web sites, and data coming from either these specific individuals or organizations in which I conducted interviews with their members.

I also used traditional literature sources such as reference materials, scholarly articles, books, as well as the speakers and guest lecturers that our class sees throughout the semester (who provide relevant information for my subject). These sources provided me with adequate background information regarding the environmental movement in the United States, the Muslim populations in the United States, their political and social experience, and the emerging Islamic Environmentalism paradigm. This allowed me to have enough information to engage in substantial interviews with my contacts regarding the issue of American Muslims participating in the environmental movement.

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