CHAPTER 3

Shifting Notions of Nature and Environmentalism in Indonesian Islam

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Abstract

This article traces global ideas of nature in Islam and analyses local developments in environmentalism in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country. Based on theological considerations of cosmos, earth and humans, it investigates how religious scholars (ulama) of the Muslim world argue for environmentalism. Moreover, since Muslim actors in environmental debates have a tendency to differentiate from the West and resort to Islamic norms and values, this essay addresses the question of how Muslim authorities, from international as well as national Indonesian backgrounds, articulate cultural and religious identities. In this context, the issue addressed is how classical literary sources and traditional cultural elements are used in controversial debates on environmentalism. Furthermore, this paper analyses how the largest Indonesian Muslim welfare organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, and its affiliated Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), have been responding to environmental challenges.

1 Introduction

Across the globe, climate change has a variety of impacts on human life. The frequent occurrence of natural disasters like forest fires, droughts and floods has plunged the livelihoods of many people into crisis. Although often affected by these negative impacts, many countries with a predominantly Muslim population face economic and political problems, and as such climate change is not their first priority. This is exacerbated by the fact that the local population is often unaware of global warming so it cannot personally relate to it.1

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1 Nugteren (see her article in this volume) has also observed this for South Asia.
Foltz observed that Islam “has not figured prominently in emerging discussions on religion and the environment,” but environmental awareness of Muslim authorities has been increasing in the last few years. This is reflected, for instance, in measures taken by institutions, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Muslim actors and governments. Since the new millennium, especially the World Summit on Sustainable Development of 2002, the idea of Islamic sustainable development has taken hold in the Muslim world. From that time onwards, ulama (religious scholars) in Muslim countries have united efforts in addressing climate change, hoping that an appeal to the Islamic ummah (community) can impact positively on Muslims’ behaviour towards nature and thus mitigate the effects of the environmental crisis. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that predominantly Muslim countries have organised an increasing number of environmental workshops and conferences in the last few years. For instance, the Muslim Seven Year Action Plan (M7YAP) was drawn up at the 2008 conference in Kuwait city. The M7YAP proposed ideas on introducing new concepts for green mosques and green hajj (pilgrimages to Mecca), distributing books on Islamic environmentalism and training of local authorities on climate change issues and the re-introduction of Islamic rituals from an environmental perspective. Complementing this cross-border initiative, local Muslim leaders have brought in their own ideas on how to address climate change.

As far as international governments are concerned, they acknowledge that climate change is a serious issue, and many of them have taken concrete steps to mitigate the effects of global warming by introducing new regulations and establishing environmental institutions. The current Indonesian government, aware of its high emission rates, prides itself on ensuring sustainable development. At the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen,

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