
Are British Muslims 'Green'? An Overview of Environmental Activism among Muslims in Britain

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Abstract

An eight-month research project conducted between 2009 and 2010 examined whether and how the building of gardens reflecting Islamic traditions could promote environmental awareness and the appreciation of Islamic gardening heritage among both Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain. The study found that British Muslims are engaged in a range of projects involving the promotion of environmental conservation and sustainable horticulture. By documenting the formation and activities of Islamic environmental action groups in Britain, as well as a range of initiatives centred on mosques and community centres, it is possible to demonstrate some of the ways in which British Muslims have been engaged in grassroots pro-environmental activity. Such efforts are indicative of an important new sense of agency, belonging, and ownership of local spaces among Muslims in Britain, and they provide a marker for evaluating the growing institutionalisation of Islam in Britain.

Keywords

Islam, Muslims, Britain, gardening, conservation, environmentalism.

Introduction

In 2009, Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) commissioned the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University to undertake a study to ascertain the need, value, and viability of establishing Islamic gardens in the United Kingdom. BGCI was interested to know whether the creation of gardens reflecting Islamic design principles (Clark 2004) might provide social benefits—such as encouraging the greater integration of Muslim women into society—as well as ecological benefits, for example, the promotion of environmental conservation.

Many British Muslims live in communities characterised by urban density and socio-economic deprivation. Streetscapes are marred by depositions of litter (reflecting the absence of recycling habits), and there is rarely evidence of gardening activity; many front gardens have been paved with concrete. This suggests a rather passive engagement with conservation and environmental issues, and limited investment in the creation of more environmentally sustainable localities. Despite this evidence, however, the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen the formation of a number of organisations and initiatives, founded by British Muslims, which are centrally concerned with the promotion of environmental issues from an Islamic perspective. Though relatively small in number, their emergence during this period (and especially in the years 2005–2010) provides a valuable opportunity to consider how, and to what extent, British Muslims might be expressing a new sense of ownership in local spaces and an investment in a long-term future in Britain. Our research describes some of these efforts and thereby makes a unique contribution to our understanding of how British Muslims are engaging in projects concerned with conservation and environmental sustainability.

As part of this research, we located and evaluated existing and proposed Islamic gardens in the UK, in order to ascertain the degree to which they were already meeting (or could potentially develop) some of the objectives of BGCI. Alongside this, we sought to establish the extent to which British Muslims were already engaged in projects that involved horticulture and environmental awareness. What scope was there for extending their work in the direction of gardening and potentially the development of 'Islamic' gardens either within or outside botanic garden sites? Through our research we sought to evaluate the feasibility of bringing together Islamic gardening traditions and faith-based environmental activism.

We defined 'Islamic gardens' broadly in order to encompass both formal private Islamic gardens (such as the 'Carpet Garden' at Highgrove House, owned by HRH the Prince of Wales), as well as public urban parklands that have incorporated traditional Islamic garden design (such as the 'Moghul Garden' in Bradford). Likewise, our efforts to map the broad contours of Islamic environmental action in Britain included a wide range of institutions, including mosques, local community projects, as well as formal and informal associations and networks. This article largely reflects the data we gathered from this broad range of British Muslim environmental organisations.

Data for our study were collected from a range of Muslim and non-Muslim perspectives, based on mixed-methods research carried out between October 2009 and May 2010. To lend greater ethnographic depth to our initial desktop research, in January 2010 we conducted semi-structured interviews with two international experts in Islamic garden design and Islamic environmentalism. We also made further contact with members of six regional British Muslim environmental organisations who offered insights derived from the experience of 'grassroots' local activism. Data from these individuals were collected via one focus group (4 April 2010), four telephone interviews (between February and May 2010), and extensive email correspondence. In these interviews, we sought to record participants' views and experiences of British Muslim engagement in environmental initiatives, and their perceptions of those factors or circumstances that enabled or constrained participation. To broaden our perspective, during the spring of 2010 we also gathered information via telephone interviews and fieldwork visits to six of the eleven existing (and proposed) garden and urban parkland sites that have incorporated (or planned to incorporate) Islamic design and/or planting principles. We focused primarily on their knowledge of visitor feedback and planning discussions. Finally, directors of three botanic gardens in cities with large local Muslim communities were interviewed by telephone in May 2010. Interviews explored their responses (as non-Muslims) to the idea of 'Islamic gardens' within their sites.

Muslims in Britain: A Brief Overview

Muslims have been living and working in the UK for centuries (Ansari 2004; Matar 1997). The arrival of substantial numbers of predominantly South Asian Muslims following the Second World War, however, changed both the quantitative and qualitative nature of Muslim settlement. As a consequence of this migration, and particularly the transition

from temporary male residence to permanent family settlement, more established 'communities' began to evolve, especially as mosques, schools, and other institutions were formed (Gilliat-Ray 2010). The main areas of Muslim settlement in Britain today are London, Birmingham, Manchester, and other northern towns and cities, such as Leeds and Bradford. These were centres of vibrant manufacturing industry in the post-War period, and provided ample employment for unskilled and semi-skilled workers at the time.

Many of those Muslims arriving in Britain in the post-War years were from rural villages and towns in the Indian sub-continent. These origins have shaped attitudes and perceptions to the environment and horticulture. According to one of our informants,

the vast majority of these people came from rural areas where they struggled to survive as subsistence farmers. When arriving in the UK many turned their backs on anything to do with agriculture or horticulture. Land was considered the cause of their deprivation and misery and they wanted nothing else to do with it (interviewee, Crosshill Tennis Club Gardening Project, Blackburn, 4 March 2010).

Thus, in areas of predominant Muslim settlement in Britain, it is common to see former 'front gardens' covered in paving stones or concrete.

Migration history accounts for the current socio-demographic and economic situation of British Muslims. About half of all Britain's 2.5 million Muslims are under the age of twenty-five, and, compared to all other faith groups, Muslims are more likely to be living in overcrowded and substandard housing and to suffer from lower rates of economic activity, educational achievement, and good health (S. Hussain 2008). The general picture that emerged from the 2001 Census data revealed that British Muslims experience a greater number of cumulatively disadvantageous socio-economic circumstances than all other faith groups in the UK (Beckford et al. 2006).

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, scholarly research and public debate has centred on the linguistic, ethnic, racial, and religious diversity among British Muslims. As a result, contemporary discourse has adopted a vocabulary that speaks of Muslim communities (plural), rather than a Muslim 'community' (singular), to reflect the varied backgrounds, as well as the religious diversity, among Muslim communities. British Muslims of South Asian, Arab, African, East Asian, non-British European, and indigenous white/British backgrounds reflect many different religious schools of thought and interpretative traditions. The composition of the British Muslim environmental groups surveyed in our research reflected some of this diversity.

Environmental Ethics in the Qur'an and Hadith: A Brief Overview

As the environmental crisis worsens, environmentally concerned Muslims around the world have increasingly looked to Islamic sources for answers (Al-Damkhi 2008; Hamed 1993; Izzi Dien 1997; Khalid 2002; Kula 2001; Mohamed 2007). Even prominent non-Muslims have recognised the potential of Islamic sources and traditions for tackling environmental issues, as evidenced by a lecture on 'Islam and the Environment' that the Prince of Wales gave at Oxford University in June 2010 (www.princeofwales.gov.uk). For Muslims, the ultimate source of guidance on all ethical questions is the Qur'an. Among those Muslims concerned with environmental issues, the Qur'an contains the basis for understanding ecological issues, the role of science, the principles for engaging with the environment, and the responsible use of the earth's resources. At the heart of the emerging Islamic environmental narrative are two central tenets. The first of these is *tawhid*, which is the principle of absolute monotheism—the oneness and uniqueness of God as creator and sustainer of the universe. *Tawhid* expresses the unity of an uncreated God with what he has created. Therefore, Muslims who are alert to environmental issues claim that nature should ideally be respected as part of God's creation and as a sign of his greatness, and indeed, existence. According to the Muslim philosopher Seyyed Hossain Nasr, 'the cosmos itself is in fact God's first revelation, and upon the leaves of trees, the faces of mountains, and features of animals, as well as in the sounds of the winds and the gently flowing brooks, are all to be found signs of God' (Nasr 2003: 95).

The second principle that underpins Islamic environmentalism is humanity's role as *khalifah* (stewards). In addition to respecting nature as part of creation, many Muslims regard themselves as having been entrusted with the task of acting as *khalifah*, or vice-regents on earth. A translation of the Qur'an notes: 'Later We made you their successors in the land, to see how you would behave' (Surah 10.14).¹ This responsibility has been interpreted as having two aspects: first, humans have been entrusted to act as guardians of nature; second, people will be held accountable for the degree to which they have fulfilled their duties on earth.

Related to the Islamic concept of *tawhid* is the notion of balance. In the view of many environmentally concerned Muslims, God designed the natural world to exist in a state of balance and harmony. According to the Qur'an,

1. Translations of the Qur'an are taken from Haleem 2004. The Introduction explains the use of the first person plural 'We' (2004: xx).

The sun and the moon follow their calculated courses; the plants and the trees submit to His designs; He has raised up the sky. He has set the balance so that you may not exceed in the balance: weigh with justice and do not fall short in the balance (Surah 55.5-9).

This passage has increasingly been interpreted to mean that the *khalifah's* responsibility is to maintain nature's balance. Many Muslim environmentalists see the current environmental malaise as an imbalance in the natural order resulting from a dependence on the prevailing Western scientific model that, to them, secularises nature (Özdemir 2003). In contrast to Western scientific principles, the motivation for Islamic scientific enquiry is to explore the seemingly endless signs of God found in nature in order to better understand the greatest of its Creator (Islam 2004; Nasr 2003). Whereas the modern world largely looks to scientific and technological solutions for the current environmental crisis, Islamic environmentalists argue that science separated humans from God, and detached humankind from nature (Al-Damkhi 2008; Ammar 2001; Hamed 1993; Kula 2001; Nasr 1996; Wersel 1995). For them, the solution requires a rejection of the modern Western-based scientific paradigm, and a return to an awareness of the sacred dimensions of nature. These kinds of ideas and principles about Islam and the environment have underpinned the formation of a number of Islamic environmental groups in Britain.

British Muslim Environmental Groups

The decades 1970–2010 witnessed British Muslims energetically engaged in the development of community organisations and institutions. There was a particular investment in the establishment of mosques, Islamic supplementary schools, retail outlets for the purchase of halal meat and 'Islamic' merchandise, and charities (Gilliat-Ray 2010). In the overall landscape of British Muslim institution-building, projects concerned with environmental conservation and awareness have been small-scale (DeHanas 2010). This indicates a lower priority given to environmental issues, especially relative to other community-development activities (such as developing Muslim schools).

There is no available data regarding how many British Muslims have been actively engaged with, or are members of, national organisations concerned with conservation, environmental awareness, or indeed gardening and horticulture, such as 'Friends of the Earth', 'The Woodland Trust', or the 'Royal Horticultural Society'. These organisations do not record the religious identity of their members. But the limited extent to which British Muslims have established religiously inspired conservation

organisations, and the fragile membership-base of these groups, does seem to suggest that Muslims are under-represented in national conservation and plant-orientated bodies, both at membership and leadership levels. Indeed, 'people from ethnic minority backgrounds [in Britain] are very rarely represented in professional fields concerned with the design or management of the environment' (Rishbeth 2001). The lack of a strong tradition of volunteering in British Muslim communities is another probable explanation for their reduced participation.² Additionally, many organisations in the charitable and voluntary sector, environmental groups included, often struggle for resources, not least because of the lack of staffing or volunteers who can maintain regular fund raising (Gilliat-Ray 2010).

Despite such barriers, it is worth noting that new global communication technologies have enabled the growing involvement of British Muslims in international networks devoted to ecology and conservation. The Internet, Islamic radio stations, and British-based Islamic satellite channels provide a vehicle for Muslim environmentalists to share the messages of conservation further afield, and this has been occurring to some extent (Ball 2008). The London-based 'Islam Channel', for example, undertook a pilot project in 2007 called, 'How Green is your Deen?' (Ball 2008).³ *Din* means 'religion' in Arabic, and Muslims will often talk about their faith as 'the *din*'.⁴ Similarly, the 'Clean Medina' project in Birmingham has used powerful audio-visual means (alongside other efforts) to stimulate and encourage the Muslims of the city to improve their urban landscape, mainly through the organisation of rubbish-collection working groups. A Muslim community radio station in East London made the theme of environmental responsibility the focus of its broadcasting during Ramadan in 2007, especially through a slot produced primarily by and for women. A detailed study conducted on this project found that 'sacralising' environmental activity through the invocation of Islamic traditions and Qur'anic verses was a powerful means of engaging local Muslims, and especially women (DeHanas 2010). By promoting the idea

2. As the founder of Wisdom in Nature notes, there is a 'low level of experience in local activism' among many British Muslims. See online: http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/About%20Us/About_Us_docs/history.htm.

3. The word 'green' in relation to environmentalism is surrounded by multiple interpretations, and there is no single way to define what it means to 'be green'. This paper does not engage with these debates, and uses the term 'green' to refer to proactive 'concern with care of the environment' (*Chambers English Dictionary* 1998), inspired by Islamic sources.

4. There are different conventions and styles for the transliteration of Arabic words, but in this case *din* is the most widely used in academic discourse.

that 'positive environmental activities are deeply Islamic' (DeHanas 2010: 148), the project was, among other things, successful in tackling the problem of litter in the Tower Hamlets area.⁵ The spirit of self-discipline that is cultivated through fasting practices appeared to make listeners especially responsive to the messages being conveyed. Furthermore, the radio programme encouraged women to take action collectively, and in a way that 'matched with local Islamic social structures' (DeHanas 2010: 152). This meant gender-segregated projects, including a gardening project, and the promotion of events related to the well-being of children. The study concluded that

Muslim mothers are typically the predominant influence in the socialisation and values education of their next generation. Based on the high profile environmentalism in Women's Hour programming and the apparent enthusiastic response among listeners, there is room for a healthy optimism that an Islamic environmentalism can take root, if it is not already underway (DeHanas 2010: 153).

By 2010 there were six regional Islamic environmental groups in Britain (WIN, RITE, SHiNE, Earth Guardians, MINE, and WELCOME) and one international body (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, IFEES). We identified these groups for our study through desktop research, consultation of the *Muslim Directory 08/09*,⁶ and via our early interviews (especially with our project consultants). Many of the activists associated with these associations were well known to one another; at the conclusion of our study we were confident that we had identified most, if not all, active (and less active) British Muslim environmental networks. These groups have been primarily organised by and for Muslims, and are inspired by what the founders regard as the principles of conservation and environmental awareness embedded in Islamic sources. We found that these groups do not necessarily meet regularly. They are often headed by enthusiastic individuals struggling with the apathy of Muslims who do not share their environmental concerns as well as with less committed members who, while sympathetic in spirit, are less inclined towards direct action and regular

5. Leaving rubbish in the streets reflected habits and practices typical in some Bangladeshi villages where there is no rubbish collection. The neglectful environmental behaviour of Bangladeshis in Britain was understood as a result of 'lifestyles from an impoverished nation being transplanted to London' (DeHanas 2010).

6. The *Muslim Directory* is a bi-annual publication produced by MDUK media. It lists most major British Muslim charities, schools, mosques, business providers (e.g. halal meat), bookshops, and cultural and social organisations. The *Directory* also has a website; see online: <http://www.muslimdirectory.co.uk>.

involvement. Some groups met only rarely, and were little more than electronic networks, while others were more active. We begin this overview by looking at the international organisation, based in the UK, prior to evaluating the regional groups. This will enable some evaluation of the formation and activities of the various organisations, and the ways in which they compare and contrast with one another.

The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES)

IFEES (www.ifees.org.uk) has become a well-established international organisation based in Birmingham. Committed to promoting a better understanding of environmental issues from an Islamic perspective, it publishes a newsletter (*Eco-Islam*), produces guidance and resources for Islamic organisations (including advice for developing 'green' mosques), and has undertaken many national and international campaigns. It is evident from the IFEES website and from our interview data that it has been a catalyst for the development of many British Muslim environmental initiatives. This includes the distribution (via a free download) of a handbook about the ways in which Muslims can limit the impact of climate change. This publication, known as the *Green Guide for Muslims*, has been jointly published by IFEES and Lifemakers UK, with funding provided by 'Muslim Hands', one of the largest Islamic charities in the UK (www.muslimhands.org).

When it comes to raising awareness about environmental issues among Muslims, our interview with Fazlun Khalid, the Founder and Director of IFEES, revealed optimism for the future, alongside an awareness of the challenges involved. He noted, for example, that most schools in Britain were now engaging with conservation and environmental issues as part of the curriculum. Consequently, Khalid hoped that many school-age British Muslims would become increasingly conscious of the issues, and that this might have positive implications for the future. At the time of our interview in January 2010, however, Khalid regarded British Muslims as only 'marginally involved' in environmental issues. For him, the lack of engagement was a direct consequence of the socio-economic situation facing many Muslim communities.

The younger Muslims who were educated in this country are in my view on parity with the rest of the population. But there is a qualification that needs to be put into this equation. There is high unemployment accompanied by under-achievement among this group and they show the same symptoms of mainstream under-achievers and show no interest in the wider issues of society (26 April 2010, subsequent email correspondence).

For Khalid and others, the role of Islamic scholars is crucial in trying reverse this situation (Sheikh 2006), and IFEES has tried to encourage

imams and religious scholars to become more aware of the *implications* of what Muslim environmentalists regard as key verses from the Qur'an and Hadith. According to Khalid, while imams and religious scholars may be knowledgeable about Islamic sources (and may know them by heart), they lack sufficient awareness of environmental issues, or climate change, to appreciate what they might need *to do* in order to educate their communities.

Once many years ago...I had to go and seek the advice of the scholarly classes and one of the scholars I spoke to said: 'Brother this is nature worship, it's nothing to do with Islam'. But I'm pleased to say I met this very same scholar many years later when he came and greeted me with great friendship and said 'you are thinking on right lines' and so he had changed his view (interview, 7 January 2010).

It is clear from the IFEES website that it has worked effectively in a number of different countries, often in collaboration with local religious scholars. For our research, the significance of IFEES became evident when it was cited as a point of reference for the emergence of many regional British Muslim environmental groups.

Wisdom in Nature (WIN)

Wisdom in Nature was established in November 2009, having evolved out of the London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE).⁷ LINE was initiated at a meeting involving just three participants in January 2004, who were drawn together through an Islamic environmental e-list called 'Ecobites'. The chair and founder of both LINE and WIN, Muzammal Hussain (at that time working for IFEES), has documented the history of the group/s, and the reason for the more recent change in name. According to him, the holistic approach, which went beyond the environment to include the spiritual and the social (and the inclusion of those who were not Muslim), 'meant that our name was not quite congruent with our focus' (M. Hussain 2009). So, in November 2009, the name was changed to 'Wisdom in Nature', in the hope that this might 'capture more of the essence of our work' (M. Hussain 2009). Looking back on two decades of activism, Hussain commented,

in the 1990s, there were very few people who were actively promoting awareness of environmental ethics amongst Muslim communities in the UK. There was the occasional public talk at which after a bit of listening, the nodding of heads, questions and answers and momentary inspiration, the audience would return home and re-immense themselves into their normal routine. Of course, whilst seeds would have been sown, the

7. See online: <http://www.wisdominnature.org.uk/>.

dispersed and rare nature of enthusiastic environmentalists in Muslim communities meant that any progress would confine itself to a small sphere of possibilities (M. Hussain 2009).

LINE appears to have been driven by the energy of a small group of individuals, committed to the principle of local group activism. Hussain regarded the imperative of local grassroots action as 'lacking within IFEEES' (M. Hussain 2009), which led to his decision to establish an independent, regionally-focused group. It is clear from the LINE/WIN website that the group was meeting regularly throughout the mid-2000s (one Sunday per month), and most of its work revolved around social events (picnics, with organic food to share), lobbying (e.g. at climate change events), and high-profile, media-friendly 'stunts' and demonstrations timed to coincide with wider national events, such as 'Islam Awareness Week'.⁸ LINE cooperated with IFEEES under the auspices of a 'London Sustainability Exchange' project in the mid-2000s, and this involved the distribution of low-energy light-bulbs and leaflets to mosques in the city (Ball 2008). WIN events since 2010 appear to have been irregular, and the well-established monthly open forum meetings seem to have ceased, for the time being.

Reading Islamic Trustees for the Environment (RITE)

Following a meeting in Reading in 2003 on 'Islam and the Environment', where Muzammal Hussain gave a talk about GM foods,⁹ there was initial interest in the formation of a Reading-based Islamic environmental action group. As Hussain noted,

whilst the potential and enthusiasm seemed strong, the effort within the group was not sustained long enough for the group to properly form at that time. However, several years later, in 2009, the seeds that were sown began to bear fruit as RITE (Reading Islamic Trustees for the Environment) was initiated (M. Hussain 2009).

Reading Islamic Trustees for the Environment was launched in June 2009, to coincide with World Environment Day. It is 'a community group whose vision...is to bring a wider appreciation of our environment (Allah's creation)'.¹⁰ RITE endeavours to work with mosques and Muslim community organisations to raise awareness of environmental

8. This included wearing goggles, flippers, and snorkels on Brick Lane in East London to raise awareness about climate change and rising sea-levels in Bangladesh (Vidal 2005).

9. M. Hussain's critical views about GM foods can be read online at <http://www.muzammal.clara.net/>.

10. See online: <http://www.rite.btik.com/Home>.

issues and to assist with the organisation of events that will promote its aims. Judging by the RITE website, the group is not meeting regularly and has no forthcoming events on its calendar at the time of writing. Despite this, meetings and events organised by other environmental organisations were promoted and members encouraged to attend.

Sheffield Islamic Network for the Environment (SHiNE)

Sheffield Islamic Network for the Environment resembles RITE in directing its energies towards local, grassroots environmental projects. It operates through a 'google group'.¹¹ As of April 2010, there seemed to be relatively little activity by its 48 members, and virtually no information about its history or organisation was available. According to Muzammal Hussain, who was instrumental in the formation of a number of Islamic environmental groups, SHiNE most probably came into existence sometime in 2005. SHiNE took part in a national 'Big Clean' campaign in April 2009 which, rather like the 'Clean Medina' project, involved collecting litter from the streets, although in this case the goal was to clean the area surrounding a mosque (Masjid Umar). Their efforts had a number of positive outcomes, including appreciative comments from local residents and offers of hospitality and help.

Although small-scale, what is striking about this particular project is the degree to which it reflects a sense of belonging to, and investment in, local spaces by a particular group of British Muslims. Whereas many post-Second World War Muslim migrants to Britain engaged relatively little in local community life (beyond their own networks), efforts such as this by ShiNE reflect a changing sense of place and a commitment to improving the appearance of inner-city environments. It is also a good example of British Muslims visibly and actively contributing to the betterment of the local community in a way that is beneficial for all. The SHiNE campaign, as well as the 'Clean Medina' project, indicate a growing sense of ownership of and responsibility for community space, and with it an important shift in worldview. As Fetzer and Soper have noted, until the 2000s, Muslims in Europe were typically focussed on 'bonding' activities that strengthened internal coherence and infrastructures within their own religious communities (Fetzer and Soper 2004: 154). But with these internal developments well established, there has been growing interest in 'bridging' activities that involve Muslims in projects to 'improve the communities in which they live' (Fetzer and Soper 2004: 154). The 'Clean Medina' project and the 'Big Clean' projects may be examples of this expanding sense of community.

11. See also online: <http://www.na65.com/shineonline/>.

Earth Guardians, Leicester

Earth Guardians was formed in 2008 with the aim of connecting 'Muslim and non-Muslim communities to Islamic environmentalism' (23 February 2010, email correspondence). As of this analysis, the group remains a small-scale venture with just nine volunteers, but despite its diminutive size, in 2009 it held a one-day conference in conjunction with Leicester City Council on 'Islam and Sustainability', and it has also been active with rubbish collection and re-planting of neglected public areas. The founder of Earth Guardians is committed to increasing urban greenery, urban gardening, and inner city food production, and via a Royal Horticultural Society course, intends to move into gardening as a career.

Midlands Islamic Network for the Environment (MINE)

During the initial years of the twenty-first century there were several efforts to establish an Islamic environmental group in the city of Birmingham, but these lacked enough members to ensure stability and continuity. When the IFEES director Fazlun Khalid returned to Birmingham in 2005 after a period of time abroad, however, inspired by his presence, MINE was formed with Rianne ten Veen as the primary point of contact. Rianne ten Veen, a Dutch convert to Islam, was interested in environmental issues prior to becoming a Muslim, and when learning about Islam, she recalled, 'I was impressed by what both the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad teach us about looking after God's creation... I consider the five pillars powerful reminders as to what our purpose in life is: submitting to God and doing our best to be God's steward (khalifa) or guardian to the earth' (*Emel* magazine, June 2010). She also asserted that environmental sustainability

is as much about caring for people as it is about the planet. The fact that many Muslims currently are not aware of the powerful environmental message of our beautiful faith only motivates me more to do my bit to change this, as we can do this, together, if we want to (Mohamed 2010).

Rianne ten Veen's work in establishing a blog, 'Green Creation' led to her being profiled on the international website IslamOnline.net and in a range of other media, including the British Muslim lifestyle magazine 'Emel' (June 2009, special issue on the theme, 'Eco-Jihad'), as well as *Sisters* (a magazine for Muslim women, reflecting a largely *salafi* worldview).¹²

12. The '*salafi*' school of thought draws religious guidance almost entirely from conservative interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and does not adhere to any single tradition of Islamic law. For more details about the *salafis* in Britain, see Gilliat-Ray 2010.

MINE appears to have been especially pro-active via its contribution to local inter-religious environmental initiatives. A good example is the support it provided for an event at Birmingham Botanical Gardens on Bank Holiday Monday, 26 May 2008. The city's 'Friends of the Earth' group and the Faith Leaders 'Faiths for the City' initiative organised a joint event, 'Believing in our Environment'. Family-friendly activities were combined with talks about environmental concerns. In the absence of formal visitor feedback, it is difficult to know what impact this event had upon those who spoke or attended, but at the very least it seems that ten Veen's contribution might have helped visitors from different faith communities to consider environmental ethics from an Islamic perspective.

Welsh Environmental Link Creating Opportunities for Muslim Engagement (WELCOME)

WELCOME originally started in 2009 as a project to share information and understanding about Islam by two committed activists and their relatives. Like other Muslim environmental groups, however, WELCOME has struggled to involve committed, regular members. Rather than pursuing its own initiatives, therefore, WELCOME has focused on supporting other voluntary groups as a means to spread information about Islamic environmentalism. Nevertheless, via social activities rather than formal regular meetings, the pioneers of WELCOME have sought to inculcate environmental awareness by organising day trips for local Muslims and their families, especially to places of significance for conservation. A day-trip to the Wetlands and Wildfowl Centre in Llanelli, for example, which included a halal barbecue and activities such as nature walks, pond dipping, and a children's treasure hunt, was described as 'successful in getting Muslims to engage with the environment' (4 February 2010, email correspondence with WELCOME coordinator). The extensive nature of the site gave a feeling of space and freedom, combined with plenty of child-friendly activities. During an interview, those involved in WELCOME noted that the staff at the Wetlands and Wildfowl Centre commented very positively upon the behaviour of the group (e.g. they were tidy and considerate of others), and they felt this had helped to create a positive impression. It might also have helped to reverse the widespread assumption that 'Islam is not found in the British countryside' (Jones 2010).

'Green Mosques'

If the emergence of Islamic environmental groups is one measure of the extent to which some British Muslims have become environmentally aware, other signs of change include the development of mosques committed to sustainability. The South Woodford Islamic Centre in London claims to be the first 'carbon-neutral' place of Islamic worship in Britain, citing as evidence that it installed energy-saving light bulbs, reduced the thermostat on the heating system, and installed solar-powered heating panels for hot water. Additionally, the ablution area in the mosque reminds worshippers of the Islamic injunction to use water sparingly. The imam also makes conspicuous use of a bicycle rather than a car within the local community, and Friday sermons encourage the congregation to walk rather than drive to the mosque. This is a challenging message in a context where British Muslims perhaps make disproportionate use of private vehicular transport, relative to their socio-economic position. This likely reflects larger family sizes (and the consequent challenges and expense of using public transport), and that many families rely on the income derived from sole-trader businesses that require a car, e.g. taxi driving or market trading (Kalra 2000).

Perhaps the most challenging initiative is the action being taken in relation to the carbon footprint of each individual, as well as the mosque itself. The imam and the mosque committee have asked members of the congregation to calculate the carbon emission of their household, and to offset their 'footprint' by donating money to tree-planting projects in other parts of the world, especially in the Amazon rainforest. This initiative has been extremely successful, and it was featured in a broadcast by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office media outlet 'British Satellite News'.¹³ In an interview with a local newspaper, the imam and Chair of the mosque noted:

we are the first mosque in the country to be carbon free and we are trying to be pioneers. We are going to ensure that we promote environmentally friendly things so people will start to recycle more and not be wasteful. And people at the mosque will have to start to think about how to be carbon free in their lives as well (Reynolds 2007).

A quotation from the mosque Chairman on a local social networking site, for further example, used the metaphor of trees and planting to convey the idea that Muslims who are environmentally conscious are benefitting their local community as well. He said, 'I want every Muslim

13. This can be viewed online: <http://revver.com/video/670349/london-mosque-goes-green-in-a-big-way/>.

to be like a tree, which provides fruit not for himself, but for other people to benefit from it'.¹⁴

Central to the project was its vision to educate children who attend the supplementary school at the mosque. Their classes stress the environmental responsibilities that God has placed upon them, and they are encouraged by their teachers to share messages about recycling and conservation with their parents. According to the deputy imam, the children are the most important educators of the older generations when it comes to climate change.

Many of the activists associated with British Muslim environmental issues and organisations have noted the obstacles that apathy, ignorance, and socio-economic deprivation pose to raising awareness of conservation among Muslims. The informal, often fragile and dispersed membership structure of Islamic environmental groups in Britain reflects these challenges. In contrast, this mosque-based initiative is able to work through an existing and committed membership that meets regularly and frequently (some members participate as often as daily), embedding messages about the environmental responsibilities of Muslims within the religious life and social action of the congregation. While mosques continue to be at the heart of many Muslim communities in Britain, their religious personnel hold considerable potential for influencing and engaging the attention of their members in relation to conservation and environmental sustainability. It is the combination of these factors (membership, social structures, and religious leadership), revolving around self-directed grassroots initiatives, which make this project notable.

The idea of 'environmentally friendly' mosques is now beginning to develop into a commercial design concept that seeks to attract Muslims concerned about environmental issues. The EcoMosque (*al-Markaz al-Najami*, in Manchester) was designed to incorporate solar panels, and as far as possible, was built using wood from sustainable sources and recycled materials. This physical structure embodies a distinctive holistic outward-facing philosophy:

EcoMosque encompasses economic, environmental and social aspects, by fusing a desire to combat environmental damage with a passion for delivering key services and products to students and the local community. EcoMosque will be open to everyone, irrespective of faith and background and will nurture inclusivity and build community cohesion. It is hoped that the model will become an exemplar for community and faith centres everywhere.¹⁵

14. See online: <http://forums.redbridge.gov.uk/default.aspx?g=posts&t=407>.

15. See online: <http://www.ecomosque.org.uk/vision.html>.

Professor Ziauddin Sardar, a British Muslim public intellectual, praised the initiative in the *New Statesman* in June 2008 for providing a space not only for religious worship, but also for neighbourhood activities, social gatherings, counselling, life-long education, and perhaps more especially 'a sense of identity and moral responsibility' (Sardar 2008).

'Green Gardening'

An understanding of the ways in which British Muslims are using their tradition to shape urban spaces needs to take account not only of environmentally sustainable mosque-building initiatives, but also their engagement in activities that involve direct 'hands-on' manipulation of the earth itself. The Wapping Women's Centre in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in East London exemplifies the possibilities. Located in a borough distinctive for its large Bangladeshi community (36% of the population), in 2000 it established a 'community garden' within a quadrangle formed by blocks of flats on the Berner Estate. By 2010, the project had a membership of around thirty women, nearly all of Bangladeshi origin. According to Sufia Alam, Manager of the Women's Centre, large numbers of women were using planters on their balconies to grow 'beneficial' plants from their countries of origin (primarily for culinary and medicinal use). Alam saw an opportunity to encourage gardening as a means of fulfilling the desire to grow these plants, while addressing the need to encourage women from the Bangladeshi community to venture 'out of their flats and into the wider community' (Alam interview, 3 March 2010). As members became more engaged their sense of empowerment has grown. She explained:

We have been encouraging visitors to the garden and this has instilled a sense of pride by the members. As the women have gained in confidence outside visitors have increasingly been allowed into the gardens (interview, 19 April 2010).

From the outset the garden promoted recycling, composting, and organic horticulture. 'Islam teaches us to take care of the environment', Alam contended. She wanted to do something about the apparent apathy amongst local Muslims when it came to taking care of green spaces. She was determined to encourage people to take responsibility for, and invest agency in, their own environment, rather than seeing such matters as the concern of others (especially the local council). The garden occupies land that was previously a vermin-infested rubbish dump. At a project meeting with Tower Hamlets Council, a forty percent reduction in waste was attributed to the gardening and composting activities by the Wapping Women's Centre.

Widening Access to Green Spaces

Some British Muslim communities have also been involved with environmental projects related to green spaces, plants, and horticulture. Although the extent of such activities has not been studied in detail, a good example of one is a project initiated by Forestry Commission England (FCE). It offers insights about ways in which British Muslims have been engaged in inter-religious environmental action. The FCE is a publicly funded organisation that expanded its profile and outreach activities in the mid-2000s when the cost of wood pulp fell, thereby reducing the profitability of FCE-managed woodlands. Faced with falling income levels, the organisation was forced to find other means of increasing its relevance and significance to government and the general public if its continued funding was to be justified. It was partly against this political background that a project was initiated to develop 'Faith Woodlands'.

As a consequence of a 'Diversity Review' published by Natural England (2005), FCE staff began to recognise that in Luton, a city comprising diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, people were living in 'densely urban areas with little access to natural open space and greenery...[and] sometimes perceive themselves as excluded from woodland' (Hand 2007: 4). The Faith Woodlands project initiated by FCE sought, in response, to 'demonstrate how woodlands might be enjoyed by different faith groups working together...thereby learning about themselves, their environment and each other' (Hand 2007: 4). The idea was that nature, environment, and spirituality could provide a common ground for people of all beliefs, including those who did not belong to any faith tradition. While their assertion could be contested, those behind the project were convinced that 'all religions teach a respect for the earth and nature, and from this starting point the similarities between religions could be explored, rather than the differences' (Hand 2007: 4).

FCE set about engaging with local stakeholders, especially through the Luton Council of Faiths (LCOF), a local inter-faith organisation. With initial support in place, a funding application was made to the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (Communities and Local Government) to employ a Faith Worker (who happened to be a Muslim) who could work with FCE to develop the project. The next task was choosing an appropriate existing woodland site, and listening to various ideas about how a 'special space' within the woodland could be created that might be meaningful to all and could provide a setting for activities such as ceremonies, story-telling, or poetry-reading. The outcome of these efforts was positive feedback from visitors 'who in some cases had

enjoyed no previous access to woodland and who now expressed enthusiasm and were more likely to use woodlands in future' (Forest Research 2009). Accessibility was essential, for example. The woodland that was chosen was just outside Luton, on a regular bus route, at a locale that had ample parking. Some of the paths in the woodland were all-weather surfaced so that wheelchair-users and families with buggies and young children could still enjoy the woodland. A mobile cafe at the entrance offered a 'human face' and a place for coach-drivers to congregate. There was an information board and leaflet dispenser in the car park, and a picnic area with tables and benches. All this gave those unfamiliar with wide open spaces a feeling of welcome and safety. Faith community leaders were invited to the woodland, with the hope that they would act as advocates for the project to their congregations. In this way, organisers aimed to encourage the feeling that the woodland was not 'owned' by any single faith group. Finally, a professional public relations company with experience working on conservation projects was employed to assist with public promotion. After completing the infrastructure development and tree-planting effort, the group began plans to engage a range of different audiences, especially school groups (Hand 2007: 11).

The FCE project demonstrates many well-established principles of 'good practice' for engaging with faith communities (Inter Faith Network 2000). Stakeholder consultation is essential (in this case with religious leaders), and working through existing organisations (such as inter-faith groups) provides access to, and good advice on, working with diverse faith communities effectively. The initial plans for the project were presented by the LCOF in Luton Central Mosque, and were also pitched to other organisations, such as women's groups. Zafar Khan, the LCOF Chair, promoted the project not only to local Muslims but also to those connected to the inter-faith movement in the area. As Khan noted:

there are more than 700 verses in the Quran that urge believers to reflect on nature. All faiths believe in the preservation of our earth, this is one of the many things we have in common, and this should encourage us to work together to break down barriers (in Hand 2007: 3).

The efforts of FCE in Luton are now being replicated in other Forestry Commission areas, most recently in Scotland.

Conclusion

So, are British Muslims 'green'? The answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Visit nearly any inner-city area in Britain with a large Muslim population and it is evident that the messages of conservation and environmental

stewardship that Muslim environmentalists derive from the Qur'an and Hadith are *not* reflected in the actual behaviour of many British Muslims. Unkempt urban areas often reflect socio-economic deprivation and a lack of engagement in activities that promote environmental conservation. On the other hand, the findings of our research also demonstrate the emergence of a new generation of British Muslim environmental activists who are using their energy and knowledge to argue that being a 'good Muslim' must involve environmental responsibility. Despite the challenging socio-economic circumstances faced by many British Muslims, these expressions of agency reflect a sense of belonging to, ownership of, and investment in British society. The establishment of voluntary organisations, such as those described above, are also indicative of the gradual institutionalisation and embedding of Islam in Britain, and a wish to bring Islamic perspectives to contemporary environmental issues. Future research that evaluates the trajectory of the organisations and initiatives described in this article will enable further conclusions to be drawn about the degree to which British Muslims are (or are not) engaging in environmental issues.

In documenting the emergence of British Muslim environmental initiatives, we have highlighted the difficulties community leaders have faced in their efforts to create self-sustaining organisations and networks. Yet despite these challenges, our research has uncovered several examples of successful, practical, grassroots, community-oriented, empowering, low-budget, 'bottom-up' gardening and conservation projects that reflected the composition and dynamics of local communities. Our findings concur with those of Rice regarding Muslims and environmentalism in Egypt, where

personal or informal channels of communication are usually much more effective than organisational or formal ways to achieve an objective. Government or non-governmental groups promoting pro-environmental behaviours should focus their efforts at the grassroots level and find ways to use faith-based messages (Rice 2006: 388).

What has been especially notable about the success of some of the projects we surveyed is the extent to which they have sought to 'sacralise' environmental activism by making reference to the Qur'an and Hadith (DeHanas 2010). These projects signal the potential for faith-based initiatives that go beyond merely informing or educating, and might lead to the possibility of real changes in behaviour.

The projects that we have surveyed have drawn upon a powerful combination of resources, both social and religious, and have been shaped by a regard for the internal dynamics of British Muslim communities and appropriate consultation with key stakeholders. Existing local

institutions, such as mosques, schools, women's networks, and inter-faith organisations, appear to provide the essential social capital to make conservation projects an increasingly important Muslim activity. When this is allied to the expertise and religious credibility of Islamically inspired environmental education organisations, such as IFEES, there is considerable scope for changes benefitting entire communities.

Acknowledgments

We would like to record our thanks to Julia Willison, Director of Education at BGCI, for commissioning the research upon which this article is based, and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for funding the project. Thanks are also due to interviewees who generously offered their time to answer our questions.

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