

External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Jakub Koláček

"Islam and Ecological Crisis: Modern Islamic Environmental Discourse"

Submitted in 2024 at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Asian and African History and Culture.

I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation is an analysis of the discourse of/on 'Islam and the environment' from the last 50 years – roughly since the emergence of the contemporary environmental movement in the 1960s. It uses the methods of historical sociology and environmental history to analyse the discourse and characterises it as an assemblage: it is made up of a plurality, is deterritorialised, and emerges from process of exchange and encounter with exterior (to Islam) relationships.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation evidences mastery over an extensive and complex body of literature, and covers an impressive discursive and historical scope. The overall argument of the dissertation regarding the nature of the discourse is clear and compelling, and well evidenced. Some sections of the dissertation make an original contribution to the study of Islam and the environment/Islamic environmentalism – in particular, the general aim (which is sufficiently realised) to trace the outline of the overall discourse since the 1960s; and also the analysis of Arabic language texts on Islam and the environment, an awareness of which has been sorely lacking in the Western academy. There is, however, room for improvement: the introductory chapters outlining the scope of the thesis are not as clear or well defined as they could be, the 'environmental history' aspect of the thesis as defined in the method is not well realised overall, the method (in particular, the sampling method, overall sample itself, and method of analysis) requires further detail and justification, and there is a surprising lack of theoretical sophistication in some aspects of the analysis as detailed further in the report.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

1. Structure of the argument

The dissertation overall makes a compelling argument about the nature of the 'Islam and the environment' discourse. The main claims are that (a) it emerged 'under the influence of the epistemic shift brought by modern environmentalism and out of the conviction that religion cannot remain indifferent to it' (p. 16). The discourse itself is characterised as 'plural' (p. 482) or 'heterogenous' (p. 301) and 'globally dispersed' (abstract), 'decentralised' (p. 301) or 'deterritorialised' (p. 73). I find that the evidence and analysis presented in the thesis amply supports these claims. The argument is sustained throughout the thesis chapters.

The conclusion makes a further claim that is very interesting and could certainly be *implied* by much of the material throughout the thesis – but the claim itself does not appear until the

conclusion (unlike the claims mentioned above, which are systematically argued throughout the thesis): this is that the discourse emerges 'from the *exterior* relationships of exchange and encounter' (p. 483). I wish this had been more systematically addressed throughout the thesis, rather than simply raised in the conclusion, and better theorised (more on this below).

The thesis structure is clear enough, although there is – to my mind – some repetition. In particular, the decision to include a standard literature review situating the thesis in extant scholarship on Islam and the environment (which, I would add, is a very good literature review) is somewhat repetitious with the content of Chapter 6 which analyses at least *some* of this academic literature again, but as an example of the discourse.

The objectives of the thesis are clearly laid out in the introductory chapter (p. 16). Of the four aims, I think the thesis does indeed adequately achieve two: to document 'the emergence and evolution of the discourse'; and to 'come to terms with the ideas, concepts, and arguments that animate it'. It also partially achieves the aims to 'map its multiple iterations and modalities across different social contexts' and to 'show how it has become part of contemporary Islamic religiosity and culture, and to what consequences'. In regard to these latter two, partially achieved aims:

- The thesis covers the US/UK, Middle Eastern/Persian, and Indonesian context very well and situates the discourse within the particular social and political contexts of those regions. In the introductory chapters, the author critiques the existing academic discourse for its limited geographical coverage and sets up a goal of the dissertation to widen the scope. As already said – the inclusion of analysis of Arabic language texts from the Middle East is a real contribution to the (English) scholarly literature on Islam and environment. However, overall, the thesis does not (and probably could not) truly 'map' all its iterations around the world. There is, for example, extremely limited analysis or coverage given to South Saharan Africa (aside from a short account of a NGO sponsored initiative) or the Indian subcontinent, and none to China, or the Balkans, etc. Indeed, the dissertation prevaricates on this aim of coverage – saying that it *isn't* possible to truly cover everything (p.17). I find this objective has only been partially met – but perhaps more accurately the objective was poorly defined in relation to what was *possible*.
- In terms of 'showing how [the discourse] has become part of contemporary Islamic religiosity and culture, and to what consequence' this object too is poorly defined and only partially achieved. What exactly does the author mean by 'Islamic religiosity and culture' – *whose* religiosity and *which* culture. I would dispute there is only *one* Islamic culture. The thesis itself suggests at multiple points (which my own research corroborates) that Islamic environmentalism was (for most of the period covered by this dissertation) very marginal, and I see no evidence to suggest it has become more mainstream. Because of the lack of definition in this objective, I find it very difficult to assess whether it has been met. The thesis does adequately show, I think, that the discourse is more 'successful' in some contexts than others (i.e., Indonesia in particular) but I'm not sure it makes a case for how it is related to religiosity (taken as

‘being religious’ or ‘piety’ or the like).

2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The thesis is well presented in appropriate academic language. It requires a thorough proof-read for spelling, and there are some inconsistencies on the format of quotation marks (i.e. „Islam and the environment” (p. 20) vs. “Islam and the environment” (also p. 20). In the bibliography, the sources under the letter “C” are in the wrong place (should come after B and before D).

3. *Use of sources and/or material*

Use of Literature

The literature contained in chapter 1 is excellent – the author divides the literature on “Islam and the Environment” into three sections. The first he calls ‘primordialist’ which is Muslims writing (probably for other Muslims, although not always) about the environmental concepts/theology that (they claim) have always been inherent to Muslim scriptures (but just not always realised or practiced). I find the description of the category ‘primordialist’ to be well done, including identifying the three features of literature in this category, and amply identifies the problems with this kind of literature from an academic/critical perspective. The second section is on empirical work (including my own) which cites all the sources I’d expect (and a few more) and does a very good job at defining the limits of research to-date (limited to Anglo-Saxon and Indonesia, for the most part). The author identifies that there has not been recent, systematic and critical work on ‘global’ Islamic environmentalism (or discourse on Islam and the environment). This gap is where he locates his research/thesis. He has a final section of ‘miscellaneous’ literature, which is where he places Gade’s work. Overall (and including the more in-depth analysis of Gade’s work in Chapter 6) I agree with his critiques of her work (overly polemical, some of her apparently original/radical claims are found in the literature she critiques, and written in a style too dense to be approachable for most people).

As I outline below, I think there are some gaps in terms of secondary literature – this is, the work of other scholars using similar theoretical frameworks or examining similar phenomenon (perhaps with *different* theoretical frameworks) – as a way to deepen the analysis of the thesis and put its findings into conversation with a range of other relevant texts. The dissertation is not only in relationship with the “Islam and the environment” discourse/literature – but also relevant conversations in religious studies, Islamic studies, sociology of religion etc. For example, other scholars who apply assemblage theory to religion; or indeed other ways in which the relationship between Islam and the environmental movement has been theorised. In regards to this latter case – I refer specifically to the discussion of the synthesis of the ‘Islamic’ and ‘environmental’ code in the conclusion in particular (pp. 486-8) but also elsewhere in the dissertation. This made no reference to theory that would assist in this kind of argument (knowledge mobility and translation). Most strangely of all, I have published an article on exactly this¹ – the way in which knowledge is exchanged between environmental

¹ Hancock, Rosemary, 2020. “Environmental Conversions and Muslim Activists: Producing Knowledge at the Intersection of Religion and Politics.” *Social Movement Studies* 19 (3): 287-302.

and Islamic knowledge systems, theorised through the use of Eyerman and Jamison's theory of cognitive praxis² and Rouchon's theory of epistemic/critical communities³ – this is directly relevant to the arguments being made at various points throughout the thesis but there is no reference to it or effort to engage with theory regarding knowledge mobility.

In another example where bringing in secondary literature on related phenomena would enrich the dissertation and strengthen its claims – the discussion of the apologetic nature of the discourse in Chapter Five (5.2.3b) would be more convincing and strong by a critical discussion of how the broader social/political context of religion, and particularly Islam, has been theorised by other scholars. For example, there is significant work on the essentialisation of religion and its reduction (often for political expediency) into narratives of “good” vs. “bad” religion.⁴

Finally, there are two places where I think texts have been misrepresented or mischaracterised to a greater or lesser extent:

- Most significantly, I think White's thesis has been oversimplified. This is most evident on p. 404, but runs generally throughout the thesis. The author characterises White's argument as saying that 'religion' is the cause of climate crisis. But it is only one particular religion (occidental Christianity) and White is positive about the environmental nature of other religions (oriental Christianity or that of St Francis). This isn't a major problem that detracts from the overall arguments of the thesis but does require some reworking in the way he tries to position Nasr's work as somehow contrary to the position of White/more positive about the role of religion.
- The characterisation of Veldman's work at the end of chapter 3 (p. 235-6) is not quite right. The author uses Veldman's work to make claims about the role of *theology* in promoting beliefs about climate change – but Veldman's central argument is that theology played only a peripheral role in the attitudes about climate change in the evangelical groups she researched. Rather, the main argument of her book is that there are social/political factors (she focuses on the role of elites in politics and the media who spread climate change scepticism) that play a more important role. In that case, re: the discussion on p. 235-6, the question would be what social/political/cultural factors unrelated to or separate from theological belief might manifest in Muslim communities that would promote/encourage climate scepticism?

Translations

I have a query about the translations of Qur'an/Hadith and other Arabic sources – I presume these are translated by the author, but I didn't find any statement to that effect (perhaps it is

² Eyerman, Ron and Jamison, Andrew. *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.

³ Rouchon, Thomas. *Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

⁴ See, for example, Shakman Hurd, Elizabeth. *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton University Press, 2015, Chapter Two (Two Faces of Faith).

there but I missed it?).

Method and Theory

I also have a number of queries about the method and theory and their application in the thesis:

Selection of Texts and Extent of the Analysed Discourse

The selection of the particular texts from the discourse is not well articulated. One of the aims of the thesis is to ‘map’ the discourse – this requires a systematic methodology and clear articulation of the searching and sampling method. I did not find anywhere a suitable description of how the author went about compiling the selection of texts analysed in this discourse. He argues that, while it is not possible to capture the whole of the discourse, he intends the findings to be generalisable enough to represent/make claims about the discourse as a whole – but then does not specify (systematically) how he made the specific choices he did. I would expect this information to be clearly articulated as part of the discussion of the method.

I thus have questions about why particular texts were selected (as opposed to others) or included in some sections/not in others. For example:

- Why the selection of Nasr’s text and Mansoor’s chapter as representative of the early discourse in Chapter Three? What is it about these two works that makes them sufficient to characterise the discourse in this early period (i.e., what were the other chapters in Sardar’s book like? Would including one of the other chapters, in the place of Mansoor’s, have changed the findings?)
- Why in the chapter on ‘institutions’ is there no close examination of Indonesian institutional discourses? What principles guided the selection of the institutional documents/texts and why do these ones sufficiently represent the role of institutions in the discourse? I.e., the UNDP’s work in Indonesia on the ‘Eco-Waqf’ in 2022.⁵
- Why is academic literature ‘about’ Islam and the environment included (i.e., Gade et al in Chapter 6) but not media ‘about’ Islam and the environment (the coverage of the Islamic declaration on climate change is mentioned but not analysed, for example, and there is media coverage of XR Muslims and other Islamic environmental activism that is not mentioned at all)?
- Why is there almost no coverage of non-official, non-elite (i.e., grassroots) discourse? Almost every text (almost, although not quite) analysed is a *book* (or report/declaration produced by or through an institution)– this signifies a degree of authority and/or education and/or access, in order to have a book contract accepted and published etc. What of the, for example, videos of the ‘Green Khutbas’ delivered as part of Green Khaleafa’s annual initiative? What of the newsletters produced by

⁵ <https://climatepromise.undp.org/research-and-reports/green-waqf-framework>

grassroots Islamic environmental groups? What of the speeches delivered by Muslim environmental activists that can be found online? These are all also part of the discourse, are they not? Related to this, the choices in the 'activist' section (the work of a trust, and a sole-authored book) do not to my mind represent bottom-up or grassroots 'activism.' What does only (or mostly) analysing what I would consider the more formal/official/elite aspects of the discourse do to your characterisation of the 'Islam and the environment' assemblage overall? This relates to a somewhat thin theoretical conception of 'religion' evident in the thesis, as discussed in relation to theory below.

Method – Environmental History

The author asserts the dissertation is a work of both historical sociology *and* environmental history. However, while I think the dissertation does make a contribution to historical sociology and this disciplinary frame/method is appropriate, I find the intentions regarding environmental history have not been sufficiently met. The outline of environmental history, and in particular the complicating of the distinction between the so-called 'natural' and 'social' worlds in 1.2.2c are done well. On p. 87 the author states that environmental history as a 'framework' will be applied in the thesis in 'two ways': he will conduct an 'intellectual environmental history of Islam' which he stipulates will involve recording 'how nature and ecological relations have been represented in Islamic texts' produced in the research period, as well as situating this discourse 'in a broader historical landscape of the Islamic thinking about nature in preceding periods, starting with the Qur'an and Hadith'. Secondly, the author says the dissertation will include 'context of material environmental history in general, providing a necessary background of the interaction of human (not least Muslim) societies with the environment in the physical sense over time and its direct and indirect repercussions.' (p. 88).

I would first note that at this point, I began to have grave concerns about the scope of the thesis. For example, the 'material environmental history' and its interaction with human/Muslim societies over time is, in itself, a massive project well beyond the scope of a single dissertation – let alone one that *also* intends to map and analyse the 'Islam and the environment' discourse. Further, *which* material environment, *where*? Muslim societies exist in many, varied, material environments all of which have changed across history. While some aspects of the material environment can be recounted globally (i.e., atmospheric carbon levels) their impacts materially and socially vary in different geographic contexts. Thus the inclusion of the material in the sections of 3.1.1 on the physical changes to the environment are extraneous to the central argument/s of the thesis, and I find the justification in 3.1.1f while valid for the idea of conducting an environmental history – not sufficient, given what the dissertation actually (mainly) does.

It is more achievable to document the 'intellectual environmental history of Islam' since the 1960s – and more specifically, within the body of literature defined within this thesis as the 'Islam and the environment' discourse (as surely, there is also discussion of/reference to 'the environment' and 'nature' in texts written by Muslims/Islamic theologians and scholars that sits *outside* the main texts of the 'Islam and the environment' discourse). However, in relation

to this intent, while the dissertation does contain some analysis of how ‘the environment’ or ‘nature’ is represented in at least *some* of the texts consulted, it does not do this systematically (i.e., it is most obviously covered in the sections comprising 2.2.2 – most extensively with the Qur’an although related, without much reference to specific texts, to the discourse post-1960s - but is then not systematically developed or referred to again throughout the major discourse-analysis chapters in the dissertation). Thus – I would have expected to see a clear articulation of the various ways in which ‘the environment’ or ‘nature’ is conceptualised within the discourse (and the implications of the various conceptualisations for the discourse) as part of a key finding in the conclusions, and as a consistent thread of argument across the dissertation and analysis of texts but this was not the case. In fact, a close and careful analysis of how ‘the environment’ and ‘nature’ is conceptualised in all the texts covered in this thesis would be, alone, a sufficiently large project for a PhD – thus attempting to do this *and* the historical sociological work of mapping and tracing the evolution of the discourse as a whole across the defined period and around the world is, to my mind, too ambitious for a single PhD.

Theoretical Frameworks and Development

As mentioned in my summary, I found the thesis to be overall lacking a degree of theoretical sophistication. While the author has written a clear account of assemblage theory in chapter one, and repeats some claims regarding the way in which the discourse is an assemblage throughout the thesis (i.e., it is deterritorialised, heterogenous etc.) this is done usually as a statement with no discussion or reference is made back to either DeLanda or Deleuze and Guattari to extend and explain the application of assemblage theory in the case of these texts/the discourse. For example, in Chapter 1 the author defines four characteristics of assemblages using DeLanda (pp. 58-9): their ‘emergent properties’ that are ‘continuously produced by interactions’; they are ‘nested’ so an assemblage is made up of smaller, nested assemblages; are ‘historically individuated entities’ and they can differ in their structure and functioning. None of these characteristics are explicitly analysed in the thesis regarding the Islam and the environment discourse, with reference back to this theory/DeLanda’s work and a discussion of whether (or not – that is also interesting, and sometimes how theory is further developed) the theory helps us understand the discourse better.

Further, the dissertation assumes that the “Islam and the environment” discourse is an assemblage and, from what I can tell, one ‘nested’ into the broader global Islamic assemblage (although this is not explicitly developed in reference to assemblage theory) – but what is its relationship to the ‘environmental movement’ assemblage? The discussion of ‘the environment’ (1.2.1c) takes it to be a (ill defined, in the discourse) material/social fact (i.e., ‘Islam always existed and interacted with what we identify as class as the “natural environment” – which, however, is by itself only an assemblage of local and regional ecosystems.’ P. 73)

But the *environmental movement* which is discussed elsewhere (adequately, although not with as much sophistication and depth as Islam is discussed) is itself an ‘assemblage’ that can trace its own complex discursive and social genealogy, and the ‘Islam and the environment’ assemblage has always been in some way or another in a relationship of encounter and

exchange with the environmental movement. Indeed, some part of the 'Islamic and environment' assemblage *could* be argued to be 'nested' within the environmental assemblage *as well as* or possibly *instead of* the Islam and the environment assemblage (i.e., XR Muslims).

This has not been discussed much beyond some influence of early scientific and environmental discourse, and the later intervention of ENGOs. It appears that the author thinks the "Islam and the environment" discourse is *more* Islamic than environmental, or primarily Islamic rather than environmental – is this accurate? Generally – as outlined above – I find the 'environment' half/aspect of the discourse less well analysed and theorized than the 'Islamic' half and would like greater discussion and elaboration on the relationship of the discourse to the environmental movement (which I think can also be theorized as an assemblage).

Generally, I found there was little 'conversation' between the theoretical framework being used and the discourse – a straightforward application of some basic aspects of the theory. This makes the contributions and nature of the dissertation primarily empirical and descriptive, rather than theoretical. I note that assemblage theory has been used by scholars of religion in other literature (for example, Tremblett 2022) and no reference has been made to this work (in, for example, section 1.2.1b on Islam as an assemblage, or at other relevant points throughout the thesis). This isolates the discussion occurring in the dissertation from other work in the study of religion, and is a missed opportunity to both demonstrate greater theoretical sophistication and knowledge, and position the thesis amongst and in conversation with other contemporary work in the study of religion (not just the very small and narrow field of Islam and the environment).

Another example of this, mentioned above, is the 'thin' conception of religion evident in the thesis. While the use of assemblage theory gives one, possible articulation of what a religion 'is', reference to other conceptions of religion (or even simply more carefully considering the different assemblages nestled together within the Islam and the environment assemblage) might have been helpful in selecting (and justifying) the sample: for example, Shakman Hurd⁶ outlines what she calls 'expert', 'governed' and 'lived' religion. This dissertation draws on texts from within the 'expert' (i.e., academics and probably, NGO workers) and 'governed' (religious and political authority) but very little from the 'lived' (everyday/lay people) – so what does that mean for the findings?

Finally, as already outlined I found 'the environment' half of the discourse somewhat narrowly conceptualised/theorised. For example, the author did not turn a critical eye towards the environmental discourse itself – the ecomodern discourse recounted on pp 243 ("a new imaginary of concrete, practical and realizable goals that ultimately promised to rectify the crisis [...] the conflict between development and environmental sustainability, which seemed at first unresolvable") was discussed without any indication that this is a highly controversial and disputable version of environmentalism (that sustainability and development are not

⁶ Hurd, 2015, p 8.

mutually exclusive).⁷

4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

As already outlined, the author makes an original and valuable contribution to scholarship: (1) by tracing the outline of the 'Islam and the environment' discourse across multiple contexts since the 1960s. Despite my comments re: the scope of the sample, and whether this can truly be taken to characterise the discourse as a whole, it is still the most extensive account of the discourse as a whole that I have read and makes a valuable contribution to academic literature; (2) the analysis of the Arabic language texts on Islam and the environment (specifically in Chapter 5) is also an original contribution to the literature, something that has been missing from the (Western) academic literature to-date.

IV. Questions for the author

Argument and Research Objectives

- Would the author revise the initial objective to 'map' the discourse (and how)? Or, given the inability to include examples of discourse from major locations (i.e., China, with between 15-20 million Muslims, which is not mentioned once), could the author provide further justification regarding why the sample that has been analysed is sufficient to generalise about the Islam and the environment discourse?
- In terms of the aim to show 'how [the discourse] has become part of contemporary Islamic religiosity and culture, and to what consequence'. What exactly does the author mean by 'Islamic religiosity and culture' – *whose* religiosity and *which* culture has the Islam and the environment discourse become part of?

Sampling and Method:

- What search terms and method was used to identify the overall possible sample?
- What factors and/or principles determined the selection of the particular texts analysed in this dissertation? What is the total number of texts, and what 'kinds' are they (i.e., how many books vs. internet sites vs. statements vs. reports, in which languages) – i.e., what is the total scope and shape of what ended up in this dissertation, and how has that particular selection shaped or limited the findings?
- Why was media *about* Islam and environment not included, but academic literature *about* Islam and the environment was? How has this shaped the findings?
- Can the author summarise the key findings regarding how 'the environment' and/or 'nature' is characterised in the post-1960s texts – is there important differences

⁷ For example, Hällmark, Kristin, 2023. "Politicization after the end of nature: The prospect of ecomodernism" *European Journal of Social Theory* 26(1): 48-66; Hultman, Martin, 2013. "The making of an environmental hero: A history of ecomodern masculinity, fuel cells and Arnold Schwarzenegger" *Environmental Humanities* 2(1): 79-99.

between, for example, texts produced by institutions vs those produced by Muslim scholar's vs those produced by secular academics? Is there regional/geographical variation – between texts produced authors based in the US/UK vs. Indonesia or the Middle East?

- Can the author identify how particular material environmental factors manifest within, or shape overall, the 'Islam and the environment' discourse post-1960s? Is there regional/geographic variation or variation dependent on the type of text produced (institutional vs scholar etc.)?

Theory

- I would like to hear more about the four properties of assemblages taken from DeLanda's work, applied to specific examples from within the 'Islam and the environment' discourse – and do any of the findings about the discourse teach us anything new about assemblages, or differ from how DeLanda (and through DeLanda, Deleuze and Guattari) conceptualise them?
- I would also like to hear more about the relationship between the Islam and the environment discourse/assemblage – and the environmental movement (taken also as an assemblage)? Is the discourse primarily 'nested' within a larger 'Islamic' assemblage? Or is it (all/some?) also nested within environmentalism? Or is it that there is an 'Islamic' assemblage, and an 'environmental' assemblage and through processes of 'exchange' and interaction a third, hybrid space that is neither fully Islamic nor fully environmental (or alternatively, is simultaneously both) emerges?

V. Conclusion

I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

16th August, 2021

Rosemary Hancock