


A cultural analysis of eco-Islam: How young German Muslims live religion through environmental activism

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Eco-Islam is often discussed from a theological perspective, but there are hardly any studies on the activist's practices, their experiences and reasoning. In order to fill this gap and to emphasise the importance of studying lived religion, this article presents three interviews with young Eco-Islam activists in Germany. By using the method of cultural analysis, the author compares, summarises and abstracts their statements and activities, so that a comprehensive configuration is revealed. Cultural analysis focuses on cultural constellations and tries to think historical, social and biographical components together. To understand the Eco-Islam activist's perspectives at a deeper cultural level, the author firstly represents a thick description of the statements and activities of her three respondents. Afterwards, she scrutinises the actors' practices and processes by applying the dimensions of belief, practice and community on their everyday life and performative action. At last she filters three related themes on a cultural constellational level.

Contribution: In this article, the author simultaneously highlights the implicit connections of eco-Islamic Activism to aspects of Othering and empowerment, aspects of (re-) interpretation of religious norms and aspects of transgressing environmental activism and the idea of an Islamic community.

Keywords: eco-Islam; cultural analysis; empowerment; Islamic reform; social movement theory.

Introduction

The Canadian blog 'Khaleafa' spreads ideas on how to celebrate a Green Ramadan. The Indonesian Sufi influenced project 'Bumi Langit' pursues permaculture on their small farm. The enormous 'Masdar' project in the United Arab Emirates follows the aim of building an ecological and carbon dioxide-free city.¹ These different projects are influenced by the same ideas of an Islamic way of dealing with nature and humankind, which are known as Eco-Islam (sometimes also called Green Islam or Eco Jihad).² As a religious drift, it developed in the 1970s and evolved simultaneously to the global general ecological movement. As Schwencke (2012:9) pointed out in her survey on 'Globalized Eco-Islam', the first phase that dated from the 1970s to the beginning of the 2000s was shaped by a theoretical debate on Islam and nature, while in the 21st century, practical questions and activism got central.

The ideas and activism of the Ecological Islamic movement could be considered as a global phenomenon with local manifestations.³ As the three examples indicated earlier, the individual projects and local forms of the phenomena differ because of the diversity of the efforts, aims and reach of the activists. But they are nevertheless deeply connected by their main ideas and concepts. What unites them is their understanding and reading of the Qur'an. Firstly, there is their epistemological understanding of the text, and secondly, the sharing of basic concepts, derived from the Qur'an. Reformed Muslims aim to interpret the normative texts by themselves, as Islamic studies scholar Badry (2011:140) illustrated by the phenomenon of Muslim feminism. Through the perpetuation of its main concepts, they try to sustain the Islamic tradition and fit it into particular circumstances and conditions. Likewise, as the philosopher Ramadan (2009:2) emphasised:

1. khaleafa.com; bumilangit.org; masdar.ae, websites last accessed on 2020/12/03.

2. Sometimes referred to as 'Eco Jihad' by the actors themselves, which follows two ideas: Changing the unambiguous definition and understanding of the word 'Jihad' in non-Arab speaking societies and nevertheless underlining the seriousness of the efforts.

3. Similar to other Islamic reform movements, like Muslim Feminism.

Note: Special Collection: Youth, Faith, Climate Change and Environmental Consciousness: A Case for Sustainable Development, sub-edited by Jacques Beukes (University of Pretoria), Juliane Stork (Humboldt University, Berlin) and Ignatius Swart (University of the Western Cape).

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'[A]bove all, turning the reform (*islâh*) movement into a process of continuous adaptation to the order of things'.⁴

The main concepts of Eco-Islam were already formulated by Abdullah Omar Naseef, the Secretary General of the Muslim World League, in the 'Muslim declaration on nature' issued in 1986 and following an interreligious meeting in Assisi. He postulated the three main principles of Muslim Eco Ethics: 'So unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is, tawhid, khalifah and akhira, the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam'.⁵ Consequently, Eco-Islam – based on the groundwork of the Iranian Islamic Studies scientist Nasr (1968) – derived as a multifaceted field of ethical and theological reasoning, in almost the same manner as for campaigners and scientists (Khaled 2002). Then, it could be discussed from an interfaith point of view (Chaplin 2016) or as a paradigm for an ontological alliance between Islamic tradition and modern environmentalism (Islam 2012). The Islamic studies furthermore provide learning on basic ideas and on the positioning of Islam regarding nature (Özdemir 2003). However, there is a lack of thinking and discussion on the question of implementing the Islamic principles in action and how to behave ecologically *as* Muslims. Such a reasoning is quite new (Abdelzاهر, Kotb & Helfaya 2019).⁶ Investigating Eco-Islam adherents, their backgrounds, settings and grounds are hardly represented in research and literature.⁷ Aiming to enlarge the theoretical and theological debates on Eco-Islam by empirical case studies, I will try to decrypt the 'network of relations' (Lindner 2003) by representing and analysing respondent's self-descriptions. Herewith, I try to pursue an insider perspective into the 'imagined worlds', in which the activists are living; imaginations, which are 'able to contest and sometimes even subvert the "imagined worlds" of the official mind' (Appadurai 1990:297).

On account of this, the aim of the analysis at hand is to become familiar with the reasoning and actions of young Eco-Islam activists by means of a scientific cultural perspective. I will constantly refer them as 'young' activists, but I do not use this term in the classical sense of describing the phase between childhood and adulthood, rather in the sense of indicating an extended adolescent phase. This phase could also include people in their middle age, as long as they share a juvenile attitude and a therewith associated 'mental

4. Ramadan is (or better was, before his reputation got problematised by the accusation of rape and abuse of power in 2017) a central expert for Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries on the question of 'Radical Reform'. He places the self-interpretation of texts in the Islamic tradition under the concept of 'ijtihād' (see Ramadan 2009).

5. Quoted from the website of the 'Alliance of Religions and Conservation' (Omar Naseef 1986).

6. The question, how to live as a good Muslim plays an important role for the interviewees. The further principles of the Islamic Environmental Ethics, which were reconstructed by Abdelzاهر et al. (2017:16) in the texts of Qur'an and Sunna, could be assumed as proposed application principles to: '(1) seek balance; maintain equilibrium, (2) avoid overconsumption; apply moderation, (3) practice self-accountability; preserve justice, and (4) acknowledge interdependence; observe modesty'.

7. Kowinda-Yassin (2018) did this in her book 'Öko-Dschihad'. She collected a lot of Muslim initiatives worldwide, arranged them under topics and consulted some activists. She was interested in understanding the phenomena by a combination of Qur'an exegeses and getting an image of the different transfers of idea into action. She also identifies Eco-Islam as mostly carried by women.

disposition', as the sociologist Hitzler (2006:89) stated.⁸ These middle-aged people take centre stage in this article. Concomitant to my current research on 'Religious Anti-Capitalism', I would like to discuss three interviews, which were carried out with religious anti-capitalists in the years 2019/20.⁹ The three young German Muslims, who we will become acquainted with, are currently engaged in the Eco-Islam Movement and could be identified as speakers and organisers, who represent their micro scene.¹⁰

The article is divided into two main parts, the first one presents the activist's portraits, and the second part introduces the main themes of our respondents. Thereafter, I conclude with a cultural analysis instructed relational approach (Egger 2014). Hence, in the first stance, I interpret the presentations and statements of the young Muslims and Eco activists: I would like to retrace who they are, what they are precisely doing (concerning ecological matters) and why they are engaged in the field of religiously motivated activism. The portraits illustrate the similarities as well as the varieties of the Eco-Islamic movement. In the second part, I will contextualise their statements in the fields of belief, practice and community. As a conclusion, I suggest some answers to the question of why becoming an Eco-Islam adherent and how the young Muslims thereby are able to connect activism with ongoing theological reflections.

Culture as an analytic concept

Why do I take, beyond faith-based statements, practices and biographical hints, emotional and embodied components into account? Living religion expert and sociologist Ammerman (2020) emphasised the practical dimension of religion. In her opinion, religious acts are like any other social actions: They reveal and should be studied in their dimensions of morality, narration, aesthetics, embodiment, materiality and emotion (Ammerman 2020:19). Also, the distinct dimension of spirituality should be observed with respect to its manifold varieties in intensity and form (Ammerman 2020:31–33). This perspective rescales the understanding of religiosity and religious actions as processual, contextualised and ever-shifting. And, it is worth to prevent a scripturalist view on religion, as some of the actors (or scientists) would like to do, by predetermining the understanding of religion through a simple focus on convictions, texts and ideas. The distinct enunciation of lived religion that the interviewees in this survey embody in their everyday life is an implicit opposition to that kind of ideological grasp.

8. Thus, juvenileness is not a question of age, rather a question of a specific approach to the world' (Hitzler 2006:89). Elsewhere Niederbacher and Hitzler wrote that also grown-ups are increasingly sharing the juvenile mode of self-understanding: A cultural pattern of interpretation that is connected with creativity, spontaneity and communicative interactivity (Hitzler & Niederbacher 2010:21).

9. The interviews were conducted in the project 'Religious anti-capitalism? Comparing Jewish, Christian and Muslim positioning'. This article appears in connection to 'Religious positioning: Modalities and constellations in Jewish, Christian and Islamic contexts', a programme of Landes-Offensive zur Entwicklung wissenschaftlich-ökonomischer Exzellenz (LOEWE), funded by the Hessian ministry of science and art. During my parental leave, the interviews with Kerem and Amal were conducted by my colleague Christian Sperneac-Wolfer, whom I kindly thank for this work.

10. They often give speeches, are invited to events, get interviewed for a radio programme, organise courses at the university or their names could be found in books and reportages on that theme, also in popular media.

I would like to characterise the societal conditions and structures, as the expressions and livings of religion have to be understood in 'the legal and cultural contexts in which they occur' (Ammerman 2020:33). In reading the following passages, we must be aware of the fact that the self-narrations are presentations of young Muslims, who conduct within the conditions of an Islamic diaspora.¹¹ They live in a non-Muslim (actually a secular Christian) majority country: The British Sociologist Grace Davie described Germany as signified by its 'bi-confessionality' and simultaneously by the 'growing presence' of people 'with no confessional allegiance' on the one hand, and 'a sizeable Muslim community' on the other (Davie 2000:18–19). The Islamic religion is not institutionalised as a public corporation, rather it is institutionalised as local associations, which are often parented by umbrella organisations (Heine 2009:134–138). This causes high dynamics in the Muslim communities in Germany (Schiffauer 1997) and also some organisational problems (Krausen 2012). Our respondents are part of the 'second generation' (in the genealogy of a migrant family), namely, they are at home in the lands, where their parents migrated to. Furthermore, they are all well-educated and part of the intellectual milieu in Germany. According to that, they could be characterised as dealing with the rules of their religion 'more flexibly and with greater authority', than their parents did (Schiffauer 2006:33).

Thus, we can't understand Eco-Islam activism isolated and without considering correlating cultural systems and ideas. In the academic field of social anthropology, 'culture' could be used as an analytic concept (May 2020). The method of cultural analysis aims to decrypt the imaginary structures of a specific group of people. This could be completed through three methodical steps: To search for an emic approach (presenting a so-called 'thick description' [Geertz 1973]), to scrutinise practices, processes and products in everyday contexts (to understand the organisation of values and models of thoughts) and to decode them as related to other cultural systems (to think in constellations). This methodological approach, as the cultural anthropologist Sarah May highlighted, tries to combine historical, social and biographical aspects and has its focus on cultural constellations (May 2002:252).

In the forthcoming cultural analysis, I will set a highlight on the sociocultural phenomenon of Eco-Islam. It shouldn't be representative, certainly because of its small amount of data, but primarily by its different methodological idea and procedure. Rather the focus lies in the deep highlighting of some cases: to show patterns and constellations, which are poorly visible through quantitative studies. By using the method of a cultural analysis, I try to develop an empirically grounded perspective, which is moving beyond the (theological, scientific or political) expert debates controlled by outsiders of the phenomenon. Hence, I became attentive to the aspects of self-guided ethnic belongingness,

11. For example, Schiffauer (2004:348) describes the recent Islam in Germany as a 'diasporic Islam', insofar as 'this generation is native in Europe, but having the intense feeling of transnational togetherness'.

independent construction processes in regard to Islamic ethics and new ways of passionate faith- and global-oriented thinking, which I will discuss subsequent to the presentation of the interviews.

Kerem: An industrial engineer with planting hands¹²

'Germany is my homeland', the base of operations for Kerem, who was born in a German mid-sized city and raised in a Muslim family. His parents, who migrated from rural Turkey, weren't 'orthodox', rather, he pointed out, religion was 'a firm element of the family life'. Later, when he graduated from school, he 'newly discovered' his 'own', self-adopted, Islam. In his case, this was also connected with a typically adolescent attitude of social criticism following the idea of 'what could be improved' in society?

After finishing his industrial engineering degree, he wondered how to share his expertise and knowledge with others. He describes himself as someone who is grateful for having the opportunity to 'enjoy' this kind of education. That is why he founded, together with other Muslim campaigners, an association dealing with alternative energy sources, to share his knowledge with others and to give something back to society. They give lectures, advice social institutions and provide technical development aid. By installing photovoltaic panels on mosques or by promoting plastic-free Ramadan, the volunteers of this non-profit association would like to be proactive.

'The nature is God's revelation for the humanity, in order that one realize Him'.¹³ Nature in his understanding has also a spiritual dimension. His own spirituality and responsibility are grounded on a sura, which stated that everything, 'even the stones', is preaching God – so the human should handle his surroundings carefully. He tries to reduce his and the society's exorbitance by strengthening the spiritual and substantial values. A good example for this effort is the project 'solidarity garden', where he is planting and growing vegetables on his own, together with his wife. This, as he underlines, really means 'gnosis' for him¹⁴:

'Here to find worms, which are doing an important job for the hummus. The plant drawing out its nutrients there and so we finally could ingest them into our bodies. It's a never-ending circulation.' (Interview with Kerem, 16 October 2019, length 1:41:36 h)

In Kerem's reading of the Qur'an, a human being has two duties in this world: Firstly to 'identify' God, and secondly to cultivate the world. He refers to the five main principles of

12. Interview with Kerem, 16.10.2019. The names of all respondents are anonymised. The interviews are originally in German and have been translated to English by the author.

13. Originally: 'Die Natur ist eine Offenbarung Gottes der Menschheit, damit man Ihn erkennt'. Kerem is by the way changing between the denotation 'God' and 'Allah'. He uses more often the term 'God' (only, when he quotes contents out of the Qur'an – like 'We came from Allah and we go back to Allah' – he uses the term 'Allah'). Amal describes God as something 'Major', while Laila uses exclusively and profusely the term 'God'.

14. Originally: 'Gotteseerkenntnis'

Islam, which is the protection of religion, human mind, life, property and the descendants.¹⁵ The consumption should be 'subordinated' to these principles. For example, driving an ill person to the hospital by car is 'valuable' – but driving to the next bakery is not 'modest'. Because of the principle values, each decision is a question of context.

He also reflects on the impact of his work on the socio-cultural context. 'We are understanding our projects as proactive, self-determined, which offers a Muslim view on themes and not reacting on questions like "the Islamic (head) scarf" and so on'. The members of a non-profit association are 'experts' in their field, and they care about the critical aspects of society, which will 'prearrange the future'. Besides, the theme would affect 'connections beyond faith, race and culture': you learn to be sensitive about the 'mutuality' (instead of differences) and to value 'the Other'. Climate crisis, he sums up, could only be solved collaboratively.

His words and acts characterise Kerem as a spiritual, passionate and pious person, who cares about nature in personal and social respect. He identifies himself with his profession and he feels a liability by choice for sharing this knowledge, that's why he became an activist. But how could we interpret this liability? Is it deriving from his religiousness or should we understand it as a symbolic debt as a well-educated intellectual?

Amal: An academic blogger fighting for balanced fairness¹⁶

The second interviewee is a blogger interested in animal rights and minimalism. She is also an academic and is currently writing her doctoral thesis in Islamic Studies. She shares her self-conscious, faith-based thoughts on mind, spirituality and nature with her German followers and tries to be a good example by sharing her (and her husband's) green lifestyle. She has a long list of activism hitherto and the question of how to be a good Muslim and eco activist is an uncontested part of her everyday life.

Like Kerem, but a lot more differentiated in this respect, Amal is reflecting on the circumstances of becoming a Muslim in a German surrounding. This identity claiming was related to cultural and religious prejudices and as it was instructed by external pressure:

'The 11th September 2001 insofar played a special role, as if suddenly my 'Being-a-Muslim'¹⁷ was focused. (...) I remember the one-minute silence that happened, and afterward the teacher's question, how we *as Muslims* are dealing with this. (...) That really irritated me, that my teacher asked me such a question because I never perceived myself as a representative of the Islam community/religion. Generally, I bared no actual relation to it. I wasn't a big mosque-attender or the like.' (Interview with Amal, 02 May 2019, length 1:58:51 h)

15. Türkisch Islamische Union der Anstalt für Religion e.V. (DITIB), cited from https://www.ditib.de/detail_predigt1.php?id=240&lang=de, viewed 24 March 2021.

16. Interview with Amal, 02.05.2019.

17. Originally: 'Muslim sein'

This formative moment during her socialisation forced Amal, to get in touch with 'the questions of *my* Being-a-Muslim'. She realised that she was understood as someone 'different' in the German society because of her, by this time not reflected, just traditionally transferred, being-a-'Muslim'.¹⁸ She realises that it wasn't just a question of her race,¹⁹ but also connected with her 'identity (.), or my belonging to a religious group'.

In the following, she felt as if she had to be the 'advertising pillar' of her religion and had to be a perfect figurehead²⁰ for the outer world: she internalised the behaviour of being 'decent', being 'friendly', being 'obliging'. She is convinced, this was also the reason, why she would like to be an especially highly engaged person in all fields of society: she performed 'over-honorary-posting', as she tagged it, in sports, acting and singing groups. So, she finally entered the Fair-Trade Shop in her town and asked for becoming a volunteer, even if she did not fit in with the typical staff of the Fair-Trade Shop volunteers, because of her headscarf and her youth.

To challenge the images and prejudices on Muslims still constitutes her motivation to be an Eco-Islam activist. Amal criticises the irrational consumption of products. She shares ideas on sustainable travelling, using glass bottles and buying eggs without the male chicks getting shredded – sometimes interspersing a Hadith. During the interview, she appeals to the unjust situation in the world market by reminding of the sewing women in the Global South and uncovers the economic interrelation. That is the basis of her ethics, but she admits, like Kerem, that the context is determining ethical behaviour.

Religiosity and interreligious cooperation, in her understanding, could be a good starting point for environmental protection – local and worldwide. So, religion could maintain a motivation to be a 'good' person. But everybody, religious or non-religious, should work together regarding sustainability. And all religions would say the same 'that the creator (.), something tall, something major has created something' and wants that 'one should handle this creation well'.

Comprehending the statements, acts and reflection upon this case, Amal could be characterised as a young Muslim, who wants to signalise that Muslims belong to the civil society and should be a visible part of the German culture. She represents an individual, self-determined and liberating religiosity. Religious ethics is a native source for her, she does not want to be limited by rules, but presents alternatives. Her blog could be classified more as pop-cultural than religiously elaborated. For her Eco-Islam means building a connection between local and global, between political and individual ethics, and between academics and religion.

18. Here she uses the German female expression 'Muslima' for the first time, which indicates that this process of becoming a Muslim was also connected and not dividable of her being a woman. Being and becoming a Muslim and a woman, ergo: a Muslim women, appears as an intersectional process.

19. Before that moment, she thought that her being categorised as the different Other where referring just to her skin colour.

20. Originally: 'Litfaßsäule' and 'Aushängeschild'.

Amal's case also clarifies the intertwined construction process of the self and the other. It helps to reconstruct the connection between external perceptions and self-guided individuation processes: How classifications like race, gender and class on the one hand and more protean self-classifying concepts as being a good scholar, a representative of a minority religion and a scarfed, visible young Muslim in different non-religious activity groups are competing and changing.

Laila: The Sufi path and the spirit of the law²¹

The third and last eco-Islam respondent in the survey brings me to the third portrait that deals with a Muslim woman, who became a supporter of a Muslim association concerned with environmental protection. Laila was born and raised in a German mid-sized city, her parents emigrated from Palestine to Germany. She studied History, German literature and cultural media analysis. For her, faith is 'everything'. She says that she couldn't imagine an existence in this world without God. She doesn't want to know, 'what kind of a human being she would be without her faith'. The 'depth' of her thinking is 'definitively encouraged and inspired' by her faith.

Like Kerem, she wonders how to 'enrich the society' as a Muslim. She was part of an empowerment network of Muslim intellectuals, and in accordance with this engagement, she stresses the significance of taking each other seriously as Muslims and not identifying themselves with a 'deficit orientated' perspective, which the media and the atmosphere in the society are often drawing.

When she reflects on Greta Thunberg, she agrees to her fight to remind the powerful people of their responsibility. She highlights the importance of political requesting and claims-making. Even if she emphasises the need for individual ethics of consumption, she describes it as 'the biggest coup of the elites' to shift the transformation question on the individual level. It needs both, individual and political change. But, what she emphasises is the following: The politicians are in a higher accountability, because responsibilities are growing with the position, influence and knowledge. Laila sticks to the ethic of 'mizan', which Kerem and Amal are also representing: A Muslim should decide depending of the context, what would be the right thing to do. This question of 'orthopraxis' is important for all three Eco-Islam activists. But Laila is adding a new aspect, namely the context-sensitive decision taking, which is increasing with the knowledge and power of the people.

With her engagement in a Muslim ecological group, Laila wants to address Muslims and remind them how 'Islam contributes to the ecological theme'. Her aim is to get others to reflect their deeds by remembering the role of the honeybee or leading walking-tours through nature. Directive for her is the 'spirit of the law' instead of the 'letter of the law'.²² She

21. Interview with Laila, 29.02.2020.

22. Originally uttered in English.

understands herself as a seeker for the spiritual and ethical meaning behind the original text. And because she knows that she cannot read the Qu'ran in original, she seeks for 'qualified people', who have the capacity of understanding and translating it.

She distinguishes between religious and non-religious people: So, for the religious ones, everything 'has a price' and 'everything is heavy with meaning' because at the end, you must 'render an account of your acting in this world' towards God. She describes the differences in the metaphor of 'planting a seedling', even if the world would perish the day after. Would the secular environmental activist 'just stop' their engagement, if there was no hope 'for further generations'? She underlines her different, her 'transcendental' stimulus of doing things. Whatever happens, this stays important for her. Everything should be done as a labour of love. It's 'the path of love' which would bring you nearer to God ('the chance of getting nearer to Him in their next live').

It was surprising to learn during the interview that Laila was part of a Sufi confraternity.²³ Because of my own ignorance – up to this moment – of this Islamic tradition and the feeling of a somehow cryptic meaning of this membership, I didn't ask too much about her engagement during the interview. But afterwards and by reflecting the idea of a 'mystical, charismatic, esoteric Islam' (Schiffauer 1997:197), I had the impression that it is quite astonishing, how Laila's perspective on society and commitment matches accurately in the Sufi model of fraternisation, first as a secret society, then as a hierarchical organisation (Schiffauer 1997:205).

One's impression of Laila is that she lives with her family in her native town, but she is having her mind far away and seems to be somehow beyond the material world. Maybe this could be understood in a 'quietist' manner, as Schiffauer indicated for Sufi fraternities (Schiffauer 1997:205), or in being concentrated on either low scale family questions or high scale global issues (like saving the planet). A sign for this could be her fundamental questioning of the school system – she indicates that the school 'institutionalises humans'²⁴ and destroys the competences and the natural inquisitiveness of the children. She decided not to send her children to school and to practise home-schooling instead.²⁵

Laila is very definitive in a lot of discussed questions concerning religiosity, individual responsibility, believing in God and where to stand in moral decisions and value questions. Her particular style of Being-a-Muslim, which is by her own words connected to the Sufi path, means to have an ethical position and a cosmology, to follow the path of love and to keep with the rules of Islam. It is striking that

23. Her 'Sheik' or rather Sufi teacher is a pioneer on permanent agriculture and animal rights. As an expert in Islamic Studies, he is a role model for Muslim sustainability activism around the world. As a Sufi teacher, he reaches young people worldwide, not just in the United States of America, where he is living.

24. The unfamiliar phrase expresses Laila's idea that the school conforms people.

25. For this reason, her family wants to emigrate to Norway or the United Kingdom, when the kids reach the age for schooling.

Laila seems sure about what she is doing and discussing, but at the same time, she often seems to be beyond the narrowed discourse of Eco-Islam.

In addition this case exhibits, how fine the distinctions between believers even in the same religious community could be (and in comparison with Amal), even between two well-educated Muslim women who are part of the same second-generation culture in Germany and who are engaged in Eco-Islam. It seems that the correlations between religious values, practices and individual interpretation are innumerable, and to be part of Eco-Islam is a tightrope walk between the individual choice (which ideas and practices should be performed) and staying in contact with the community (what part of tradition and knowledge should be 'reinvented'). How could we understand and methodise these performed differentiations and similarities?

Belief, practice and community

Religion could be empirically understood as a connection between belief, practice and community (Appiah 2018:36–37). Believing, practical and collective actions are in everyday life mingled, as Appiah (2018) demonstrates by some, also self-referential, examples. But in this analysis, the three fields should be heuristically separated, to get an impression of the particular meanings they (could) have for the interviewees.

Belief

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the similar faith-based principles of our three activists. They are all believing Muslims. This creed is not a handed over religiousness, not a believing by attribution or a heritage, as for the actors, it is central to interpret their religiousness as a subjective individuation process and as a reflexive act of becoming and being a Muslim. Their passion to stand up for nature, animals and fairness is passionate and driven by their belief.

They are sharing the main Islamic idea of the human being as a steward on earth. They refer to the concept of *khalifa* (stewardship), whereby the world belongs to Allah, who assigned the stewardship over the world to humans. They also discuss and include the concepts of *tawhid* (one God), *akhira* (the hereafter) or *amanah* (public good), which are connected to Eco-Islam by (Muslim) theorists (Abdelzaher et al. 2017; Kowinda-Yassin 2018:33–38). They criticise the anthropocentric worldview, the disequilibrium and the overconsumption.

But what underlies these different examinations is a specific style of communicating their religious belief as flexible, self-acquired and not instructed (even Laila, who has a Sufi master, who guides her path to religious fulfilment, finds a way to construct her belief as liberating).²⁶ The principles stay

26. Following her experiences, she understands her religion as liberating (because her God's demands are personalised and adapted to the particular circumstances, as she pointed out). In this context, it is worth to remind of Saba Mahmood, who highlighted the different, especially not necessarily subversive, forms of agency in her study of Muslim women in the Egyptian piety movement (Mahmood 2012). She demonstrated that the western ideas of liberality and freedom are also not free of ideological impact.

flexible and as we see in the profiles, the respondents applied them very differently through their selection and handling (one example is *akhira*, which means a lot for Laila). They point to Suras and Hadiths, just how they remember these narratives and freely retell stories of the prophet or religious authorities.

Consequently, they are strongly connected by their epistemological grasp on the Qu'ran, the tradition and customs. As Badry (2011) showed in the case of Muslim feminists, this is an important unifying factor, which by the way distinguishes from 'scriptural determinism' (Appiah 2018:75) and is therefore showing the greatest possible difference to fundamentalist intentions.²⁷

Practice

Believing got visible through the interview, but first, our respondents came into sight through their practical engagement for the environment. They do things: editing a blog, advising people, helping to install photovoltaic panels, organising 'fountain excursions' (considering the symbolic importance of water in Islamic traditions), giving lectures, sowing vegetables and avoiding animal suffering.

Their notion of practice is a bilateral strategy, which on one hand concerns their own social lives and decision-making and on the other, addresses others to change their behaviour or reminding them to live an honest life. But these 'recommendations' turn out to be a contested field because the respondents strongly emphasise the specific conditions of each person's social action, which depends on societal power settings. They explain repeatedly that everyone must decide on his or her own, and that the space of practicing and decision-taking is limited by classifications of class, gender, religion and race. Their reflections on these inequalities make them sensitive against worldly advices and norms. They deny the tendency of owning the truth or giving any ethical or practical directive for others. On the other side, they want to change these inequalities and the increasing suffering of the nature, but they tend to begin the transformation on an individual level and locally. Buying eggs from a small farm, avoiding waste and arranging walking-tours are examples of their privatised ethical practices.

Community

Our respondents would like to address other Muslims through their activities. They would like to set good examples, and they try to influence their community. They fight for a plastic-free Ramadan, they give lectures and courses for young Muslim women, they install low-carbon devices on mosques in Morocco and they write articles, quoting the Sunna.

The events they organise are dedicated to Muslims, but they are also available for non-Muslims. They are also qualified as

27. But nothing is impossible in a field of symbolic politics: It should be mentioned that Eco-Islamic positions are also existing, like Schwenke (2012:45–48) carved out in connection with the Islam and Ecology series.

'good Muslims' by the public: They get prizes, a lot of press requests and they cooperate with non-Muslim organisations. They highlight the need to work together with other religious communities to save the world.

Even when their work is located in Germany and their websites are also written in German, they ponder a lot about global problems and the Muslims in the world (in talking about the waste problems in Saudi Arabia during the Hajj or in doing volunteer work in Kabul). And they seem to have no direct connection to local mosques ('too ethnically', as Laila indicated), rather they are personally interconnected as Eco-Muslims.

We are able to detect main themes in the narrations of the interviewed Eco-Islam activists: Because of the interdependencies of social, cultural and biographical factors, the actors are linking religiosity and environmental commitment distinctively. But flexible principles and a similar epistemological grasp on the holy texts provide a wide range of individual readings and interpretations, which find an important place in Eco-Islam. This variety could be tolerated because Eco-Islam is formed up not only by interpretations but also by practice and community-based activities. A specific habit of judging practice got evident: If the actors are valuing their own or the actions of others, they always set the priority on appropriateness. They avoid simple judging and express the need to contextualise each action. They dedicate their work to local and global Muslims because they consider Eco-Islam as a global and universalistic movement. They appreciate interreligious cooperation and give information openly to the media. The actors deny a scientifically narrow approach on religion through their own lives and practices. Ethics are part of their everyday life. They just understand religion as lived and don't even envisage, why or how to isolate their belief from the civil life.

Interrelated cultural themes

Religiously motivated activism could be understood through 'relational thinking' (Lindner 2003:181) on the basis and beyond Pierre Bourdieu's (1966) relational field concept. If 'the meaning of cultural phenomena merely could be decrypted through the study of its network of relations', we need to search for the 'cultural themes' of a phenomenon and 'think in constellations, in neighbourhoods, rivals and role models' (Lindner 2003:179–184). As Lindner showed in his historical study of the German 1920s and by his comparison of riotous youth cliques and the antagonised middle-class 'Wandervogel' movement, cultural analysis could examine the constellational interrelations between distinct phenomena. The two youth movements were, for instance, totally differentiated through their symbol politics ('nomenclature, signing, clothing'), but nevertheless, they were dealing and sparring with similar idioms (Linder 2003:180).

As Eco-Islam is just one aspect in my current research on religious anti-capitalism, I couldn't provide a whole cultural

analysis of the phenomenon.²⁸ I could merely present a preliminary and confined synopsis of the previously represented considerations, trying to find the first outline of Eco-Islam activism. Hence, by taking the self-narrations of the informants seriously and by studying the phenomenon's network of relations, I was able to filter three main themes in a cultural analysis' scope. I would conclude that the main topics of the three varying Eco-Islam adherents affect (1) their own *empowerment* strategies, (2) the (re-) *construction* of Islamic traditions, and (3) imagined group identities in *global dimensions*.

Empowerment: Eco-Islam as a suitable field to gain respect

Becoming and being a Muslim is dependent on circumstances, which could be more or less affected by the individuals. The high level of reasoning and arguing in all cases illustrates the sophisticated reflexive process of *Becoming-and-Being-a-Muslim*. In the case of Amal, we exemplarily comprehend the force of extrinsic categorisation: Her social affiliation as a Muslim wasn't initially self-driven. We could understand this foreign ascription as an act of Othering, which affects all Muslims in diasporic contexts. By considering them as the religious Other, they got differentiated – clearly through a forcible process – from the constructed and pretended 'superior' religion (the secular German Christianity).²⁹

Our respondents had a similar reaction strategy: By being especially engaged, friendly or developing the idea of becoming an enriching part of the society. This reaction isn't ready-made and should be understood as a negotiation process in and between different systems of classification. The reactions are placed between categorical (gender, race) and relational (groups, communities, organisations, belongings) and have to be understood as generally temporal and relational (Hirschauer 2017:30). Our respondents are all middle-class and well-educated young Muslims, which enables them to reflect their strategies to answer to alteration. Because of their capacities, they could decide to recapture their Being-a-Muslim and to configure it, in due consideration of their options, by their own significances.³⁰

Muslims in a diasporic context have to correspond to two conflicting appeals, their original religion or rather ethnic belonging and their (in our case German) homeland. It is a temporal and historically explainable event, and the actors as well as the researchers could observe how the national/ethnic aspect of the second-generation migrant's origin in the contemporary German context seems to transform into the question of religious belonging. As part of the Muslim minority group with a German education, the respondents internalised the duty of being a good

28. As exemplarily Rolf Lindner did in his historical analysis of the Chicago School (Lindner 1990).

29. The concept of Othering is used in the cultural anthropology and nearby academics to describe the processes of human differentiation as constructed. Edward Said's study on Orientalism is considered as the origin of this concept (Said 1978).

30. But, of course, such an experience of Othering could also lead to the pressure of over-performing or assimilating.

representative Muslim and German citizen simultaneously. By their high academic education, they know how to self-construct and how to use distinction practices instead of being placed by external forces. We could furthermore understand their interposition as a reconfiguration process of their options. They eke out spaces, where they could simultaneously gain tributes from others and experience themselves as their own enabling power designer.

The idea of Eco activism as 'jihad' also belongs to this theme. To accentuate their work as an endeavour for themselves as religious subjects, they react on Othering by queering and reclaiming this Arabic and ambivalent term and by calling for respect for their engagement and efforts.

(Re-) construction: Eco-Islam as a renewed reading and understanding of Islamic tradition

We retraced the religious comprehension of our respondents in being an appropriate value system. The derivational principles guarantee individual and collective flexibility and cohesion. Being religious means both: to stay in contact with the past (the tradition, the ancient narrations, the customs) and to transform us and our picture of the face-to-face to the ever-changing conditions:

[T]he way people engage with such complex and multifaceted texts, translating their sense and relevance, is a complicated business involving disciplines and traditions of reading, personal habits, and temperament, as well as the perceived demands of particular social situations. (Asad 2003:10)

So, it seems to be right that Eco-Islam established a suitable field for second-generation Muslims in Germany, where they could 'maintain a positive relationship with both modernity and the structures of (...) Islamic law and traditional life' (Schiffauer 2006:33). For them, the everyday impact of ethics and the unexceptional understanding of religiousness are central. In the field of Eco-Islam, they could exhaust the 'right to difference' and simultaneously minimise this difference by their own practices of building connections to sciences, other communities of faith and explaining their reading of the normative texts. In this regard, it is also striking that they avoid naming their God 'Allah' during the interview.

The renewed or reformed Islamic understanding also concerns the relationship to the sciences. To take climate change into account as a scientific outcome is the base for Eco-Islam activism and could 'build bridges between modern science and Islamic science' (Faruqi 2007:461). Ramadan (2009) also fills this request, when he constantly distinguished between 'scholars of the text' and 'scholars of the context' and demands for their cooperation.

Global dimensions and imagined group identities: Eco-Islam as an opportunity to transgress national and religious boundaries

Eco-Islam activists thus are religious *and* environmental protectionists. Through their engagement, they want to take part at two world projects simultaneously, the environmental

movement and the 'Ummah' (= community of the faithful). They affiliate themselves at the same time with two imagined communities. Being an Eco-Islam activist means to take part at the environmental movement, but they do this deliberately as Muslims. This demonstrates – on the first sight – contradicting desires: The aim to be part of a universalistic project, while adding and accentuating a particular perspective. But I would like to analyse the superficial contradiction between universalistic and particularistic efforts as an unaffiliated, autonomous and powerful transgressing practice itself. Their imaginations and practices are more appreciative as the ideas of universalism and particularism theoretically authorise. Eco-Islam in this regard carries the possibility to overcome boundaries (especially religious and nationalistic ones) by avoiding, exceeding or even subverting the constructed segregations.³¹

The activists think about the (imagined) communities of ecologists and the faithful simultaneously, and accordingly feel responsible for the contribution that Muslims could (and should) make regarding the protection of the environment. The worldwide 1.8 billion Muslims could make a difference with a view to pollution, cruelty to animals and water wasting. As previously said, the respondents consequently address Muslims by their Eco-Islamic – theological, lifestyle and universalistic – arguments. Eco-Islam activists simultaneously articulate the need and wish for interfaith and non-religious collaboration. Adverse the project of 'saving the world' (during a situation of climate change), it seems as if religious differences become less contradicting, even if they remain crucial for the actors and their practices.

We became acquainted with three young German Muslims, who are committed to Eco-Islam, got to know aspects of their beliefs, practices and communities. We understood that texts and narratives, embodied practices, group identity aspects and ethics are mutually conditional and altogether structuring the everyday lives of the respondents. At least, I identified three cultural themes, which are related to the phenomenon of Eco-Islam: empowerment, practices of (re-) interpretation and imagined group identities. The two levels of the cultural analysis demonstrate firstly the interrelations inside the phenomenon, and secondly the further interconnections with currently widespread and general cultural themes.

These intertwined dimensions and levels require a sensible interpretation of the continually situated and embodied social and religious positioning practices of Eco-Islam activists.³² It should be clear by now that they could strongly differ on the (religious or ethnical) individual level, while they are searching for (religious or ethnical) sameness in contrast to the society, or

31. For example, the segregation between the religious and the secular, in which the religious is constructed as unscientific and unmodern, while the secular raises its claim for rationality and modernity (for the history and critique of this understanding of secularity, see primarily Asad 2003). Also, the division of Muslim-majority countries and Christian-majority countries get weakened by Eco-Islam practices (when, for instance, Kerem, a German engineer, is building photovoltaic panels on mosque roofs in a Muslim-majority country).

32. The manifestations of the phenomenon are varying depending on the legal, cultural, symbolic, spatial and temporal contexts (see Ammerman 2020:33–34). Ammerman proposed to distinguish between entangled, established and institutionalised structural contexts for religion practice (Ammerman 2020:35–38).

the other way around. Hence, Eco-Islam activists could differentiate through their practice and actions significantly. Even if they are connected by their religion, their diasporic positions and experiences, their aims and convictions on nature, they may – simultaneously – differentiate through their styles of interpreting the Qu’ran, their references and visions, their actions and politics, as our three examples illustrated. In this wide scope of praxis, nevertheless, Eco-Islam seems to offer them an attractive way of being a modern, appropriate, individualised, pro-interfaith and pro-science Muslim, who alongside cares about continuing the Islamic tradition, actualise theological ideas and apply them to current social challenges.³³ Eco-Islam functions both, as an answer and as a potentiality for its adherents: An expression of their lives and a strategy of mobilisation.³⁴

Conclusion

Eco-Islam has a contingent quality, which is shaped by the actors’ everyday practices, their reasoning and the respective power constellations. The aim of this article was not to present a universal explanation of the phenomenon, rather to give an insight to the activities, experiences and reasoning inside the delimited field of German Eco-Islam and to render the culturally imbedded ongoing processes of negotiating traditions and practices. This overview on the basis of a cultural analysis also included considerations of power relations, (group) identity constructions, and interrelated cultural and social issues.³⁵ As a conclusion, it could be stated that Eco-Islam, on the one hand, represents a particular and confined Islamic practice for young German intellectuals, who are interested in environmental activism – namely from a Muslim perspective, – and who are engaged in diverse self-governed practices. And on the other hand, it functions as a typical social and political movement of our time by combining horizontal activism and debates with traditions, forms and contents of activism in local and trans-local spaces.

To enable these insights into the phenomenon of Eco-Islam, I referred to the sociological idea, that middle-aged people could also be considered as part of ‘the youth’ because of their shared ‘mental disposition’. ‘Juvenileness’ as a specific approach to the world – a mindset and way of life – becomes (apart from the question of age) a real ‘cultural alternative against the adult way of life’ (Hitzler & Niederbacher 2010:196). More and more people share and value the cultural patterns of creativity, spontaneity and communicative interactivity during their adulthood. Herewith, actors

33.Regardless, my exploration also indicates that the three young German Muslims are not just performing a process of fitting in or protesting silently in private, rather they found a field of engagement, where they could use more modest modes of social protesting (for instance, seduction and persuasion), which opens the stage for recognition instead of defence.

34.From a religious plurality perspective, it is furthermore an interesting question, to which to a certain degree Kerem, Amal and Laila are challenging and reconfiguring the usual answers that Western and secular ethics are providing.

35.However, it is not possible to reveal the whole picture in a short article. Other constellations and regions are also worthy to be discussed in further research (e.g. the symbolic meaning of ‘stewardship’ in a cross-cultural consideration, Eco-Islam under the conditions of post-socialist countries, the transformations and interrelations of politics, ethics and culture and so forth).

embody their mindset and way of life through their (almost) lifelong affiliation to, for example, a cultural scene.³⁶ I accounted Eco-Islam as such a ‘scenic’ formation of group identity (therewith shifting it from a mere ethnic or religious understanding to a greater extent to a public, general and postmodern version of group identity formation). Eco-Islam thus constitutes a ‘symbolic space’ in an Bourdieuan sense (Bourdieu 1966), where the adherents are constantly bargaining their relevancies, their power to define and their symbolic boundaries – who belong to the inner circle, and who to the outer circle? As part of the organisational elite, people have to give proof of their ‘realness’ and ‘authenticity’ by their ‘long-term acquired knowledge and skills’ (Hitzler & Niederbacher 2010:187). Importantly, it is not only the *knowing*, but also the *being* and *doing* of, for example, the theological concepts of unity, trusteeship and accountability, which are central for the reasoning and the performances of the adherents (and to be part of the in-group).³⁷ My three interviewees of the second-generation intellectual milieu of migrants in Germany exhibit their knowledge on climate change as well as on Hadiths and Suras. But even if they are all exercised in the Islamic practice of reasoning (Asad 2009:22), they still interpret the canonical texts in an individual manner.³⁸ In the long run it is crucial that they also *live* these ideas and link them to their everyday lives.³⁹

Religion and societies changed throughout the last decades crucially, and so the research on religiosity and religious phenomena must change, too. In this article, I argued to the core for an understanding of religion as Lived Religion, because of the fact that religion in its mediated and cross-cultural dimension becomes more and more part of the everyday lives of the people. This means that there is no longer a need for charismatic leaders, no need of priests and intellectuals to live or understand religion, rather more and more people could reach the ideas, the narratives and all the imaginaries, which are connected with and to religion(s).⁴⁰ Furthermore, people are carrying their (religious) repertoires with them and thus they interlink global imaginaries with local forms of expression and create diasporic spaces. My point is: The developments and expressions of ‘popular religion’⁴¹ should also be considered and reflected as part of a larger transformation process, where ‘electronic mass mediation and transnational mobilization have broken the monopoly of autonomous nation-states over the project of modernization’, and where novel ‘diasporic public spheres’ are emerging (Appadurai 2010:10).

36.For more information about the idea of ‘scenes’ as individualised modes of commoditisation, see the book ‘Leben in Szenen’ (Hitzler & Niederbacher 2010).

37.For the original and instructive concept of three interdependent modalities – Knowing, Being and Doing (Religion), see Illman and Czimbalmos (2020).

38.On the question of how religious people actualise ideas from canonical texts in consideration of current conflicts and transform them into modes of action, see Willms (2021).

39.Of course, their forms of expressions are differing, as a Sufi is searching for the spirit of the law, while the engineer is planting his own vegetables. But they are nevertheless interconnected in the ‘symbolic space’ of Eco-Islam, where they are linked to collective distinctness adverse to the surrounding society.

40.That doesn’t mean that there are no religious leaders at all, but the conditions and prospects of their appearance also changed.

41.Hubert Knoblauch describes the on-going religious changes and according to this the changes in religion as a transformation that spills all the traditional societal borders (see Knoblauch 2009).

It will still be significant to utilise relational thinking as a path to understand, and sometimes to expand the processual and contextual realness of the everyday. As one of these forms, a cultural analysis offers the potentiality on 'following the actors' (Marcus 1995), who live their everyday lives self-evidently in transcultural conditions and contexts, where religious action, political expression and convictions are mingled. Furthermore, cultural anthropologists have to constantly rethink the narrowed concepts of religion, culture and politics.

Ammerman's (2005) critique on the limited understanding of religion in public is a good example for this ongoing reconsideration process. She tries to change the perspective, when she argues to demolish the borders between secular and religious, private and public spaces:

[B]y locating religion in practices rather than in ideas and authorities, we can gain a new perspective that will allow us to see how religious organizations and their members participate in the civic lives of their communities and how religious narratives are present in public action. (p. 147)

Notwithstanding the complexities that I unfolded in context and related to Eco-Islam, I hope that my reflections are opening up a more vivid discussion on several lived Islam phenomena practised throughout the world. A *Lived Islam Approach* would help to understand not just religious forms of expressions, but Islam (to transform Leonard Primiano's famous definition of vernacular religion in the field of anthropology) 'as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (Primiano 1995:44). This practical notion should also be accompanied by a multi-dimensional approach to Lived Religion, which includes the practice oriented dimensions of *Knowing, Doing and Being* (see Illman & Czimbalmos 2020) and aspects of embodiment, morality and emotion (Ammerman 2020).

After all, I am convinced that the study of Eco-Islam provides new insights in regard to, for instance, the study of religiosity,⁴² the social movement theory,⁴³ narrative studies⁴⁴ and studies in the field of globalisation.⁴⁵ For that reason, it will certainly serve as an interesting and interdisciplinary case in further upcoming studies.

42. In analysing the significance and interrelatedness of, as Ammerman listed them, the dimensions of embodiment, materiality, emotions, aesthetics, morality, narrativity and the spiritual dimension in the field of and in relation to Eco-Islam (see Ammerman 2020).

43. From a further point of view, Eco-Islam could also be classified as an example for the transformation of social movements. As Juris and Khasnabish (2015:581–588) pointed out, these new social movements and their practices could be studied ethnographically by highlighting the different modes of activist practice: local-global networking, everyday cultural production, new media activism and performative protest. To study Eco-Islam in this perspective also allows to define an understanding of everyday politics within and between the people – politics, which are perceived not as governmental, but as fundamentally social (Rolshoven 2008).

44. Especially the functions and meanings of meta-narratives, group identity narratives and micro-narratives and their interdependencies would be worth to examine (my current study on religious anti-capitalism pays particular interest on this topic).

45. Globalisation theories are interested in understanding how ideas, images and concepts emerge inside of local contexts, spread into the world, are shaped through power constellations and how they create new public spheres. Appadurai's consideration of ideoscapes is one example of pursuing this notion (Appadurai 1990). Alongside, Colin McFarlane's idea of 'Translocal Assemblages' is currently often used as an alternative to stiff network concepts (McFarlane 2009).

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