

Involvement of Religious Leaders in Environmental Awareness and Conservation Activities in Malaysia: A Preliminary Review

Azrina Sobian*

azrina@ikim.gov.my

Abstract

This article presents an early review of the involvement of religious leaders in environmental awareness and conservation activities particularly in developing regions such as Malaysia. The discussion includes the importance, challenges, and some suggestions to enhance the involvement of religious leaders in achieving sustainable development. This early review concludes that participation of religious leaders in environmental education and conservation in developing countries is visible but efforts to enhance their participation should be further explored. Studies on the relationship between religious leaders and environmental education and conservation in developing nations should also be increased in the quest to understand the role of religious leaders in sustainable development. The efforts to enhance religious leaders' participation in sustainable development hopefully will attract higher participation of the society in various environmental conservation programmes.

* Fellow at the Centre for Science and Environment Studies, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM).

Keywords

Environmental education, informal education, sustainable development, community engagement, developing countries, nature, religion, Islam, Christianity.

Introduction

In 1967, Lynn White Jr. wrote an article entitled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. In the article, White argued, with reference to Judeo-Christian, that religion plays a major role in various current environmental problems. According to White, this problem is due to the “Judeo-Christian Doctrine that man has God-given ‘dominion’ over the earth and all its lesser Creatures.”¹ Indeed, White stressed that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”²

White’s article since has stimulated a wave of debate among researchers around the world on the relationship between religion and environmental crisis. While some researchers like Ian McHarg and Max Nicholson agreed with White, others did not.³ For example, R. J. Berry rejected the notion that religion does harm to nature and criticised White’s diagnosis as “blunt.”⁴ Berry suggested that an analysis of the various principles of Christianity will actually show that the principles are in harmony with nature. Emphasising that the

1. T. S. Derr, “Religion’s Responsibility for the Ecological Crisis: An Argument Run Amok,” *Worldview Magazine* 18, no. 1 (January 1975): 39.
2. Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary H., in MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 31. White’s article, first appeared in *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–12, was later published in various publications, such as the one by MacKinnon & McIntyre.
3. See R. J. Berry “Is Religion Bad for the Environment,” first published in *Dialogue* no. 20 (April 2003), now accessible at both http://www.jri.org.uk/resource/Environmental_Ethics_RJBerry.pdf and http://www.jri.org.uk/resource/Environmental_Ethics_RJBerry.htm.
4. *Ibid.*

understanding of the principles of Christianity should include an understanding of the Bible (as a book of words) and also an understanding of the world as a creation of God (as a book of works), Berry stated that, “Those who read only one of God’s books will necessarily discover only a part of God’s Natures and Purposes.”⁵

As a Western scholar, White’s ideas have been well-known in the Western world. However, Eastern ideas of religion and environment, such as the ones proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, should be considered in order to see a perspective different from that of White’s. As a prominent Islamic philosopher who spoke and wrote on various subjects such as philosophy, religion, spirituality, music, art, architecture, science, literature, civilisational dialogues and the natural environment, Nasr’s discussions on religion and environment were presented in a series of lectures delivered at the University of Chicago in 1966. Unlike White, Nasr asserted that “the harmony between man and nature has been destroyed” due to “the destruction of the harmony between man and God.”⁶ In the context of the discussion on science and religion, Nasr claimed that “secularised knowledge of nature divorced from the vision of God in nature has become accepted as the sole legitimate form of science.”⁷ To him, a disconnection of science and spiritual values is the core reason for not only present environmental problems, but also various economic crises and wars.⁸ To overcome this, he suggested that “the metaphysical knowledge pertaining to nature must be revived and the sacred quality of nature given back to it once again.” Spiritual values, i.e. religion, must indeed be

5. Ibid.

6. S. H. Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (reprinted, London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1976), 20.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 13–14.

re-incorporated in the environment through education, management, development policy etc.

Although incomplete,⁹ White's thesis has not only triggered various research on religion and environment, but has also created a perception that any religion plays a significant role in increasing environmental problems of the day. Although White specifically referred to Christianity, indirectly his view has also created a perception that other religions also impose hostility to the environment. Roger E. Timm said that, "If one agrees with this thesis [by White], it is only natural to assume a corollary assertion that any monotheistic creation theology would lead to similar exploitative approaches to the natural environment."¹⁰ Nonetheless, many studies on the compatibility of different religions with nature have been conducted mainly to prove that religion is environmentally friendly, e.g. studies by Boyd, Kinsley, as well as both Palmer and Finlay.¹¹ Religious communities have also positively responded to White's argument by participating in various environmental programmes to prove that their belief is not contrary to the environment.

9. It seems that White (intentionally or otherwise) has failed to consider Nasr's ideas on religion and environment. Nasr's ideas on religion and environment were delivered in a series of lectures in 1966, but they were first published in 1968, whereas White wrote his famous *Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* in 1967.

10. R. E. Timm, "The Ecological Fallout of Islamic Creation Theology," in *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy and the Environment*, ed. M. E. Tucker and J. A. Grimm (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 83.

11. J. M. Boyd, "The Role of Religion in Conservation," *The Environmentalist* 4 (1984): 40–44; David R. Kinsley, *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Spirituality in Cross-cultural Perspective* (London: Prentice Hall, 1994); and Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, *Faith in Conservation: New Approaches to Religions and Environment* (Washington: The World Bank, 2003). All three as listed in S. A. Bhagwat, A. Ormsby and C. Rutte, "The Role of Religion in Linking Conservation and Development: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2011): 41.

In light of the above, White's paper has brought a new insight about the relationship between nature and religion. White's criticism on religion as the root of various environmental problems has also brought some negative perceptions—not only to the religion and its principles, but also to its adherents. Therefore, various studies on the involvement of religious communities, especially the religious leaders, have been steadily recognised. Religious leaders have also been widely accepted as a significant partner in environmental education and awareness.

This article discusses the involvement of religious leaders in environmental education and awareness, mainly on the rationale of their involvement, problems or challenges, and ways of strengthening their involvement to enhance environmental awareness of the society, especially those in developing countries like Malaysia, where environment often has to succumb to development. Its discussion shall focus on the informal environmental education and awareness programmes targeting the public.

Awareness and Environmental Education in Malaysia

As a developing country, Malaysia harbours a vision of becoming a developed nation by 2020. Similar to other developing countries, Malaysia faces the pressures of development and environmental conservation. Noticeably, development has been given priority; but, at the same time, conservation of the environment is not neglected.

Focus on environmental conservation in Malaysia can be seen in various stages. These stages begin with Malaysia's *National Policy on the Environment* with its general statement “for continuous economic, social and cultural progress and enhancement of the quality of life of Malaysians, through

environmentally sound and sustainable development”¹² through to the enforcement of the *Environmental Quality Act 1974*, followed by the establishment of various ministries and agencies such as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment¹³ and the Department of Environment Malaysia. Simultaneously, in the interest of escalating environmental literacy in the society, environmental education has been conducted not only by government agencies, but also private companies as well as local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In terms of environmental problems, Malaysia not only deals with those local but also trans-boundary in nature. Local environmental issues include the degradation of natural resources, waste management, low private sector participation in environmental management, low public involvement in environmental decision-making process, and inefficient enforcement of environmental laws. Examples of transboundary environmental problems are haze pollution, low regional cooperation in addressing environmental issues, and invasion of natural resources of different countries. In this regard, Malaysia also faces global environmental problems such as global warming. Global warming is cited as the reason for the increase of flash floods, haze pollution, and coastal erosion.

One of the ways to deal with the problem is to increase awareness towards the problems and the realisation that all

12. *National Policy on the Environment* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment Malaysia, 2002), 1. Conservation of environment in Malaysia began to receive more attention around the 1970's with the gazetted *Environmental Quality Act* in 1974 and the establishment of the Department of Environment Malaysia in 1975, but the *National Policy on the Environment* was only formulated and approved in 2002 by the Government of Malaysia.

13. The ministry started as the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment. However, in 2004, it became known as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

members of the society have a role to play in addressing the problem. Environmental awareness refers to “sensitivity of individuals to the total environment and its allied problems”¹⁴ and involves the awareness of “what is wrong with our world” and “a way to make the wrong right.”¹⁵ Such an awareness can be achieved through environmental education.

Studies on environmental awareness at the national level are quite rare in Malaysia. One of the major studies on environmental awareness in Malaysia was conducted in 1986 by the Department of Environment Malaysia. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the understanding, awareness, and attitudes of respondents on various environmental issues and pollution. The survey, which was conducted on 1,002 respondents in the state of Selangor, showed that only a handful of respondents knew the meaning of environment. Although the study showed that the level of awareness towards the pollution was quite high, the environment was not considered as important as socio-economic development.¹⁶ Findings of other studies, by Tan Peck Leong¹⁷ and Jamilah Haji Ahmad¹⁸ for examples, also showed that public awareness towards the environment was at low-medium level.

14. H. Mustapah, “State of Environmental Education,” paper presented at the *EPSM Seminar on A 21st Century Agenda for All*, University of Malaya, 14 August 1999, as cited in Evelyn Ai Lin Lim, “A Study on Environmental Awareness, Knowledge and Attitude towards Tropical Rainforest Issues among Malacca Secondary School Students” (Master’s thesis, University of Malaya, 2004), 23.
15. C. Benjamin, “Toward Environmental Awareness,” *Journal of Environmental Education* 3, no. (1): 10–11, as cited in Lim, “A Study on Environmental Awareness,” 23.
16. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
17. Tan Peck Leong, “Awareness and Attitude towards Environmental Issues: A Case Study in Section 17, Petaling Jaya, Selangor” (Master’s thesis, University of Malaya, 2000).
18. Jamilah Haji Ahmad et al., “Pengetahuan, Sikap dan Amalan Masyarakat Malaysia terhadap Isu Alam Sekitar,” *Akademika* 81, no. 3 (2011): 103–115.

In addition to research, some local data can also be an indicator of the low level of environmental awareness in Malaysia. For example, the recycling rate in Malaysia is only about two to five per cent¹⁹ compared to recycling rates in neighbouring countries like Singapore (59 per cent).²⁰ This shows that Malaysians are not very keen on recycling activities. Based on the Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020, only 20 per cent of Kuala Lumpur's population use public transport.²¹ Moreover, the report published by the Ministry of Transport showed that, by 2011, the number of vehicles registered in this country was about 21.4 million. New motor vehicles registered in the country in 2011 stood at 1.21 million—an increase of almost five per cent over 2010.²² These are among the examples of low public awareness on the need to reduce the number of vehicles on the road.

Malaysia's contribution to the world emission of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the use of energy should not be underestimated. In 2010, Malaysia released 181 million tonnes of CO₂ from energy use. This amount was far less compared to the amount of CO₂ released by China. In the same year, China was the world's biggest contributor of CO₂ from energy use i.e., 8320.9 million tonnes. However, in terms of CO₂ emissions from energy use per capita, Malaysia and China were not much different. CO₂ emissions per capita in China was at 6.25 tonnes while Malaysia at 6.43 tonnes. This indicates that, although the total CO₂ emissions from energy

-
19. *Summary of Final Report: The Study on National Waste Minimisation in Malaysia* (Ministry of Housing and Local Government Malaysia, 2006), downloadable at http://www.kpkt.gov.my/jpspn/fileupload/Laporan/GEJR06042_Summary.pdf (accessed 13 August 2012).
 20. 2011 data from Singapore National Environment Agency website, http://app2.nea.gov.sg/topics_wastestats.aspx (accessed 13 August 2012).
 21. See "Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2020" at <http://www.dbkl.gov.my/pskl2020/malay/pengangkutan/index.htm> (accessed 13 August 2012).
 22. "21,401,269 Kenderaan Berdaftar," *Harian Metro*, 18 April 2012.

use from Malaysia was far less than China, in terms of CO₂ emissions per capita, Malaysia and China were very much similar. This shows that environmental behaviour in Malaysia was not much different than China.²³

Based on the data above, efforts to increase awareness and public participation in environmental issues are highly required. One of the methods to increase environmental awareness is education. The education and awareness strategy is the first in Malaysia's *National Policy on the Environment*.²⁴ This strategy outlined 11 efforts to "achieve a deeper and better understanding of the concept of environmentally sound and sustainable development, and a caring attitude towards nature."²⁵ The said strategy is in fact consistent with what is required at the international level. Chapter 36, Agenda 21, notes that,

. . . education is critical for achieving environmental and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skill and behaviour consistent with sustainable development and for effective public participation in decision-making. Both formal and non-formal education are indispensable to changing people's attitudes so that they will have the capacity to assess and address their sustainable development concern.²⁶

The focus of the education and awareness strategy is on the formal and informal environmental education, intergration of environment and development into educational

23. US Energy Information Administration website at www.eia.gov (accessed 13 August 2012).

24. *National Policy on the Environment* (Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment Malaysia, 2002) listed eight principles and seven green strategy.

25. *Ibid.*, 8.

26. S. Pudir, K. Tagi and A. Periasamy, "Environmental Education in Malaysia and Japan: A Comparative Assessment" (2003), p. 1, downloadable at <http://www.cceindia.org/esf/download/paper20.pdf> (accessed 24 November 2011).

activities, establishment of national centres of excellence for interdisciplinary research and education in environment and development, providing environmental information to the community, promoting of non-formal education activities at local and national level, strengthening the role of media as the medium for dissemination of environmental information to the public, focusing on the cooperation of various parties, and the formation of training programmes.²⁷

Environmental education in Malaysia is carried out through two channels, which are formal and informal education.²⁸ Formal environmental education in Malaysia is based on the principle of “environmental education across the curriculum.” It was introduced in 1998. The Ministry of

27. *National Policy on the Environment*, 8–9.

28. Education process can be divided into three major parts, which are formal education, non-formal education, and informal education. UNESCO defines “formal education” as learning that takes place in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions. It is education that is provided by institutions like the system of schools, colleges, universities, and other educational institutions that fall under the sphere of formal learning. Formal education can be characterised by a continuous “ladder” system of full-time learning and caters to an audience between the ages of 5 to 25. A certification of the learning achieved may be conferred. Next, “non-formal education” refers to education that is sustained and organised but does not follow the continuous “ladder” system of learning that formal education does. It takes place within and outside educational institutions and caters to all age groups, be it out-of-school children, illiterate adults or workers needing certain work skills. Lastly, “informal education” concerns learning that takes place in daily life without clearly stated objectives. The term refers to a lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills, and knowledge from daily experiences and the educative influences and resources in his/her environment—e.g. family and neighbours, work and play, the marketplace, the library, the mass media. The aforementioned descriptions can be found at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/education-for-sustainable-development/education-settings-of-esd/> (accessed 3 August 2012). To understand the terms further, see C. Z. Dib, “Formal, Non-formal and Informal Education: Concepts/Applicability,” in *Cooperative Networks on Physics Education—Conference Proceedings 173* (New York: American Institute of Physics, 1988), 300–315; and A. Etling, “What is Non-formal Education?,” *Journal of Agricultural Education* 34, no. 4 (1993): 72–76.

Education provides a handbook of environmental education to guide the implementation of the education in schools. However, the implementation is said to be incomprehensive and highly dependent upon “the commitment, efforts and the level of enthusiasm of [the] headmasters, [the] principals and the teachers” only.²⁹

Besides formal education, non-formal environmental education is also important. In fact, non-formal environmental education is the focus of discussion in this article. In Malaysia, non-formal environmental education is carried out mostly by NGOs and individuals. However, various government agencies also participate in this type of environmental education. For example, the Department of Environment Malaysia has conducted a series of public environmental awareness programmes such as Malaysia Environment Week, Environmental Camp, Langkawi Award, and Cell Phones Recycling Campaign.³⁰ Non-formal environmental education seems to offer wider opportunities for the public to better understand various issues of the environment. As such, religious leaders should play an important role in non-formal environmental education in order to increase community participation pertaining to various environmental issues and activities.

Religious Leaders and Environmental Awareness Activities

As stated, the relationship between religion and the environment has been discussed for quite some time. Although religion has been criticised as the cause of environmental crisis,

29. Pudin et al., “Environmental Education,” 4–5. For further information on the development of environmental education in Malaysia, see Lim, “A Study on Environmental Awareness,” 13–18.

30. See the Department of Environment Malaysia website, www.doe.gov.my (accessed 3 August 2012).

the current situation is rather different. Religion and religious communities are seen to be relevant in the effort to overcome various environmental problems. The religion-environment conflict is thus seen as a form of “artificial barriers”³¹ only.

The significance of religion in environmental awareness and conservation can be traced through various statements and observations. Gore considered that religion is “the most powerful source of ethical guidance for our civilisation.”³² In the same vein, Rozita stated that religion has a role in shaping the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour of the society towards the environment, and therefore, it is appropriate to use religion to enhance the environmental literacy in the community.³³ In another study that further highlighted the importance of religion in the restoration of the environmental crisis, Bhagwat, Ormsby and Rutte collected views of various researchers on the importance of religion in the environment and concluded that religion not only provides ethical values and morals but is also fully equipped to generate public awareness on conservation of the environment.³⁴ In a 2007 article, Posas studied the utilisation of religion in the global warming crisis and listed four key roles of religion in climate change issues which are based on their traditional and unique functions in the society, namely: religion’s ethical teachings, ability to reach and influence, and ability to inspire adherents to action. Posas also outlined fourteen key ways in which religion can contribute to ethical feedback in climate change issues.³⁵ Gardner, in a paper published in 2002, also listed a number of

31. P. J. Posas, “Role of Religion and Ethics in addressing Climate Change,” in *Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics* (ESEP) (2007), 34, downloadable at <http://www.int-res.com/articles/esep/2007/E80.pdf>.

32. A. Gore, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (New York: Plume, 1993) as cited in *ibid.*, 40.

33. Rozita Ibrahim, “Literasi Alam Sekitar Menurut Paradigma Agama,” *Jurnal Pengajian Umum* 3 (2002): 141.

34. Bhagwat et al., “The Role of Religion,” 40–41.

35. Posas, “Role of Religion and Ethics,” 38–39.

religious significances in environmental conservation, namely: shaping people's worldview, wielding moral authority, having abundant number of adherents, substantial physical and financial resources, and capacity to generate social capital.³⁶

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that religion has an important role in environmental conservation. Yet, who should communicate religious principles that are relevant in controlling the actions of the community in its relation with the environment? In this context, the role of religious leaders is considered to be relevant in providing the real understanding of the principles of religion that are environmentally friendly and they should be able to initiate public participation in environmental conservation. Yet, who are the religious leaders?³⁷ In general, we understand religious leaders to be individuals who lead a group of religious communities in many ways including in matters of faith, worship, and community relations and as such, are very well-respected and trusted in the society. As they are expected to understand and be proficient in various aspects of religious teachings, they should receive appropriate religious training. In the context of this article, the Islamic religious leaders refer to religious scholars, *imāms*, religious officials, religious teachers, and religious leaders in any Islamic organisations at various levels such as in government agencies and NGOs. In the context of Malaysia,

36. G. Gardner, "Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for Sustainable World," *Worldwatch Paper* 164 (December 2002): 11–20.

37. In the Islamic worldview, every Muslim is regarded as a leader. The Messenger of Allāh said in one of the *ḥadīths*: "Behold! Every one of you is a leader and you shall be asked about those you lead. (An) Imām is a leader over the people and shall be asked about them: a man is a leader of the house and shall be asked about his household; a woman is a leader over her children and shall be asked about them." (Bukhāri & Muslim). In Islam, the words "caliph" and "*imām*" also often refer to a leader. They are mentioned in the Qur'ān in *sūrah al-Baqarah* (2): 5, *al-Qāṣas* (24), and *al-Sajadah* (74). However, in the context of this article, a leader is considered to be a knowledgeable person and he or she has been going through various religious training courses.

these categories of religious leaders hold a special position in society. Members of the society always refer to them for various social and religious problems. Due to these advantages, it is essential to enhance the role of religious leaders in various environmental agenda.

As important figures in the community, religious leaders should have special functions in the society. They are seen to be able to “motivate great movements [for environmental protection], to convince reluctant leaders and reluctant governments and reluctant community peoples” in order to mobilise changes. Therefore, scientists are beginning to invite religious communities (including religious leaders) to be involved in the efforts of environmental care.³⁸ At the same time, religious leaders can (and should) be an important agent to “effectively communicate various issues in environmental conservation and development, and their support is often necessary for outreach activities. They are also [expected to be] conversant with their group’s vocabulary.”³⁹ In fact, historical records make clear that religious teachings, example, and leaderships are powerful and able to influence personal conduct and commitment.⁴⁰

There are many examples of worldwide organisations that have successfully carried out various environmental programmes to enhance environmental awareness. These organisations have been gathering different level of stakeholders including community and religious leaders to increase awareness and involvement in environmental conservation. Examples are the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM), Aga Khan Development Network, and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). In fact, the World

38. Posas, “Role of Religion and Ethics,” 38.

39. Bhagwat et al., “The Role of Religion,” 53.

40. C. Sagan, “Guest Comment: Preserving and Cherishing the Earth – An Appeal for Joint Commitment in Science and Religion,” *Am. J. Phys* 58 (1990): 615–617, as cited in Posas, “Role of Religion and Ethics,” 38.

Bank has been actively working with faith-based groups to reduce poverty and promote environmental conservation in developing countries.⁴¹ The involvement of religious leaders in environmental conservation is in fact a good effort. Since they are well-respected and trusted by members of society, they should be able to educate the society with various principles of religion on the environment. In this respect, their expertise and close relationship with the community should be harnessed to increase public awareness of environmental conservation.

The involvement of religious leaders in environmental programme is considered vital especially in Islam. Environmental problems and the Islamic religious community are inseparable. Currently, a huge number of Muslims live either in developing or poor but resource-rich countries.⁴² It is said that 24 per cent of the global population are Muslims.⁴³ In this context, the pressure to create wealth and to maintain rapid development is often a priority compared to environmental protection. On the other hand, the depletion of natural resources in poor countries is highly related to their huge national debt and massive problems of poverty. Eventually, these problems impose great pressure on their natural resources. In this case, the possibility of using religion to increase public awareness and involvement in environmental conservation should be considered and explored.

41. Bhagwat et al., "The Role of Religion," 40. Other examples have been mentioned in E. Kula, "Islam and Environmental Conservation," *Environmental Conservation* 28, no. 1 (2001): 2–9. Kula notes, for instance, that "The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the New Rome, which is the spiritual centre of the world Orthodox Christianity, has been conducting regular seminars on religion and the environment since the early 1990's." (p.2)

42. F. M. Mangunjaya, "Developing Environmental Awareness and Conservation through Islamic Teaching," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 39.

43. 2010 Data, cited from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life at <http://features.pewforum.org/muslim-population-graphic/> (accessed 15 August 2012).

Initiatives to engage religion in environmental awareness programmes are actually not alien to some Muslim countries. Although the level of success is diverse, this effort is considered to be substantial and it demonstrates that the knowledge of local culture is increasingly taken into account in various environmental conservation programmes. Failure to engage the local culture will lead to incomprehensive set up of environmental awareness and conservation programme. In fact, acknowledging local culture is considered as a key requirement in any environmental education agenda, particularly non-formal environmental education programme.⁴⁴ In Indonesia, the success story of religious involvements in environmental conservation can be seen through INFORM (Indonesia Forest and Media) Campaign. Under this project, 31 *pesantren*⁴⁵ scholars have been involved in forest protection projects in Sumatra and Kalimantan.⁴⁶

Other justification for involvement of religious leaders in environmental conservation programmes can be seen from the local situation in Malaysia. Malaysia has a population

44. See pp. 11–12 of *Adult Environmental Education* (UNESCO), which is Booklet no. 6a of a series of 29 Booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, Hamburg, Germany, July 1997, downloadable at <http://www.unesco.org/education/tiue/confinitea/pdf/6a.pdf> (accessed 31 July 2012).

45. *Pesantren* is a Javanese/Indonesian word, referring to a type of Islamic-based school. For further information, see <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0632> (accessed 10 December 2012).

46. Mangunjaya, “Developing Environmental Awareness,” 41. Other than this example, the successful involvement of religious leaders can be seen in various other issues, such as reproductive health and HIV/AIDS in Pakistan and Africa respectively. See F. Surur and M. Kaba, “The Role of Religious Leaders in HIV/AIDS Prevention, Control, and Patient Care and Support: A Pilot Project in Jimma Zone,” *Northeast African Studies* 7, no. 2 (2000): 59–79; E. C. Green, “The Impact of Religious Organisations in Promoting HIV/AIDS prevention,” revised version of paper presented at *Challenges for the Church: AIDS, Malaria & TB*, Christian Connections for International Health, Arlington, Va., 25–26 May 2001; and Moazzam Ali & H. Ushijima, “Perceptions of Men on Role of Religious Leaders in Reproductive Health Issues in Rural Pakistan,” *Journal of Biosocial Science* 37 (2005): 115–122.

of 28 million of which more than 60 per cent are Muslims. Generally, the basis of life of Malaysians is assigned to one of the key principles of *Rukun Negara* (National Principle), which is the “Belief in God.” Thus, in general, the religious life of most Muslims in Malaysia is strongly maintained. Religious matters are also very much appreciated in the daily life of most Malaysian Muslims. Matters related to purity of food, cleanliness, places of worship, and the inclusion of Islamic principles in medical process, are among the common issues in the daily life of Muslims in Malaysia. Therefore, linking and enhancing the role of religion in environmental conservation are appropriate and relevant to this country. As Mangunjaya stated that, in reference to the 177.5 million Muslims in Indonesia, “it is possible to mobilise awareness about the environmental issues through Islamic principles.”⁴⁷ Thus, the same effort should also be applied in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the involvement of religious leaders in environmental awareness and protection programmes is gaining attention. One of the programmes conducted by WWF Malaysia where *imāms* were gathered and involved is the conservation programme of turtles in Terengganu and tigers in Perak.⁴⁸ Another example is the Recycling of Cooking Oil for Biodiesel Programme under the Selangor Water Management Authority (LUAS), which was conducted in several mosques and *suraus* in the state of Selangor.⁴⁹ At the same time, the

47. Mangunjaya, “Developing Environmental Awareness,” 39.

48. See the details provided at the WWF website, http://wwf.panda.org/who_we_are/wwf_offices/malaysia/news/?162082/Eco-Islam-Malaysias-Imams-to-preach-against-poaching (accessed 7 August 2012); and “First Handbook On Islam And Conservation To Be Published – Helps To Protect Wildlife,” press release on 16 May 2012 regarding a collaboration project between IKIM and WWF Malaysia, available at the IKIM website, www.ikim.gov.my (accessed 7 August 2012).

49. This programme is part of an environmental awareness programme under LUAS, supported by several local authorities of Selangor, the community (NGOs) and local religious leaders (e.g. *imāms*). This effort is part of the implementation of Local Agenda 21 in the states to assist

Institute of Islamic Understanding of Malaysia (IKIM), a think tank, has long been involved in linking and discussing many issues of environment and religion. IKIM has conducted various seminars and workshops on those issues. Some of the programmes conducted⁵⁰ show that, participation⁵¹ of religious leader is quite satisfactory with more room for improvement. Therefore, these examples show that involvement of religious leaders in environmental issues in Malaysia is essential but still very modest. Thus, in order to ensure impactful effects of religious leaders' participation in various environmental issues, their involvement at national level is very much required.

In the process of engagement in environmental conservation, religious leaders should participate through several efforts. According to Johnson, who conducted a study on individual's contribution to environmental degradation and the change in individual attitudes by religion towards nature, such efforts would include delivering messages about the individual's role in the environment, uniting communities and framing disputes in environmental justice controversies, as well as activating personal norms.⁵² Johnson also added that religious leaders and their community may respond to environmental issues through statements and their activities. In

in conserving and protecting water resources, river basins and specific coastal areas from pollution caused by used cooking oil from residential areas, restaurants, food stalls, and night markets. For more information, refer to the LUAS website at www.luas.gov.my.

50. Examples are "Seminar Kebangsaan 'Islam Dalam Pembangunan Habitat di Malaysia'," 28–29 March 2001, "Seminar 'Air Anugerah Tuhan'," 16–17 July 2002, and "Seminar Islam Hadhari 'Kefahaman Mengenai Pemuliharaan Alam Sekitar'," 22–23 March 2005.
51. Participation in this context include the willingness of religious leaders to attend programmes, their interest in seeking answers on environmental issues, and their willingness to share their views and experiences on the same issues.
52. S. M. Johnson, "Is religion the environment's last best hope? Targeting change in individual behavior through personal norm activation," *J. Environ. Law and Litigation* 24 (2009): 121, accessible at <http://law.uoregon.edu/org/jell/docs/232/Johnson.pdf>.

Johnson's observation, any environmental actions undertaken will eventually become a habit no matter how difficult it is at the onset.⁵³ Posas also discussed the role of religious leaders in terms of their traditional and unique functions in society. The religious leaders should communicate religious ethical teachings on environmental issues, reach out and influence the community as well as inspire the adherents to take action towards the issues.⁵⁴ The studies by Johnson and Posas prove that much can be done by religious leaders in environmental education and conservation. Religious leaders should be able to look at the environmental issues from the perspective of religion and regard it as important. Yet, such an effort would not come into reality if they lack the awareness and drive to make changes in this increasingly contaminated environment.

Nevertheless, engaging religious leaders in various environmental education and awareness programme has a particular set of challenges. Hitzhusen cited three challenges:⁵⁵

1. The uncertainty of integrating religion in environmental education due to the lack of knowledge. For religious leaders, the religious knowledge they attain can be integrated into the environmental education but the extent of their knowledge of the environment will affect their ability to integrate religion into the environmental education and awareness programmes.
2. Controversies that arise from the process of incorporating religion in environmental education, such as debates on religious myths of origin and evolutionary theory.

53. Ibid.

54. Posas, "Role of Religion and Ethics," 38-45.

55. G. E. Hitzhusen, "Religion and Environmental Education: Building on Common Ground," *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 11 (2006): 11-12.

3. The perception that religion is subjective and thus is incompatible with the objective nature of science.

However, a large part of this controversy could actually be resolved, especially for the Muslim community, as the relationship between science and Islam has long been recognised as being compatible. But the question is: Is the absence of conflict between them understood by Muslim religious leaders?

Gardner, on the other hand, listed two barriers that prevent collaboration of religious communities and environmentalists (including advocates of sustainable development), namely: misperceptions and differences in worldview. Misperceptions are shown by both groups and this is due to a deep conflict between science and religion. One of the misperceptions is related to the function of the natural world to human beings. Environmentalists see that the natural world has equal rights like humans do, while this is not the case for most religions. Next, the differences in worldview between the two groups can be seen in many issues related to the environment. Gardner listed several examples of the conflict, such as the status of women,⁵⁶ the role of abortion in combating overpopulation, and the different perspectives on the place of humanity in the natural world i.e., whether human beings are above the natural world or vice versa.⁵⁷

Attitudes of religious community as well as religious leaders pose some kind of challenge in the effort to engage them in various environmental issues. In relation to conflicts between attitudes and actual behaviour of the Islamic religious community in addressing environmental problems, Kula stated

56. In many parts of developing countries, the role of women in the environment is vital. Women play a major role in the household, such as providing clean water for family members by carrying the water from one water resource point to the house or cutting wood for energy uses.

57. Gardner, "Invoking the Spirit," 23–28.

that "...it is quite hard to find in these countries [ruled by *Shariah* and must be majority Muslim countries] the environmental conduct that is better than in secular Western nations."⁵⁸ Bhagwat and his research colleagues contrasted attitudes of religious communities and the principles of religion and accordingly observes that even though religion holds ethical values and good morals, this does not necessarily translate well in the actions of the religious groups. Their discussion about religious conflicts that have hampered any effort for religion-environment conservation cooperation indeed extends to (i) differences in worldviews; (ii) conflict between identities; and (iii) the divergent attitudes and behaviour.⁵⁹ This clearly shows that attitudes of some religious communities (including religious leaders) towards the environment are opposed to the principles of religion on the environment. Is this due to their failure to see the issues as relevant to the principles of the religion itself, or do they fail to see the contribution they could offer in environmental conservation?

On the involvement of religious communities in the United States, Edward O. Wilson, a renowned biologist and author of a book entitled *The Creation*, found that, from his observations, to date, the activities of environmental awareness and conservation of the Christian community have been conducted and reviewed. However, for Islam (and other Eastern religions), similar effort appears to be less significant but increasing in number.⁶⁰ A corresponding situation is evident in Malaysia. Although no concrete data is available on the level of involvement of different religious communities in any environmental conservation and awareness programmes in Malaysia, the general observation shows that the involvement

58. Kula, "Islam and Environmental Conservation," 7.

59. Bhagwat et al., "The Role of Religion," 43.

60. Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (New York: Norton, 2006), as referred to in Posas, "Role of Religion and Ethics," 15 (footnote 32).

of the Islamic religious community in environmental issues is still low. The vision and activities undertaken by several Islamic NGOs in Malaysia show that, besides strengthening the faith of adherents, their focus is more on local social issues such as baby dumping, the rights and status of Muslim women in the community, and the defence of the status of Islam.⁶¹ Thus, it is a challenge to bring the Islamic community into the mainstream of environmental conservation activities in Malaysia.

Ordned with a complete worldview towards the environment, Muslim religious leaders and communities should dispel any reservations in participating in any environmental conservation and awareness activities. In the Malaysian context, efforts to engage religious leaders and religious communities in addressing environmental issues should be explored and if the proper approach is used, any effort to integrate religion and environmental will most likely be successful. With access to the large number of mosques and religious schools in the country, environmental awareness activities can be organised and conducted to give a positive impact.

Enhancing the Role of Religious Leaders

In his explication, White opined that “since the roots of our trouble [environmental crisis] are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious.”⁶² He was convinced

61. The observation involves examining the vision and activities of several Islamic NGOs in Malaysia such as Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), Jamaat Islah Malaysia (JIM), Muslim Consumers Association Malaysia (PPIM), Chinese Muslim Association of Malaysia (MACMA), Malaysian Indian Muslim Missionary Council (MIM), Association of Islamic Scholars Malaysia (PUM), and the Organisation of the Islamic Women’s Action Malaysia (PERTIWI). In Malaysia, many NGOs are involved in environmental conservation but Islamic NGOs specialising in environmental issues have yet to be identified.

62. White, “The Historical Roots,” 35.

that any efforts to overcome human-induced ecological crisis is inadequate unless “we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”⁶³ Although White’s idea of religion as the fundamental reason for environmental degradation is open for contention, his idea on religion as the remedy of environmental crisis is somewhat motivating. However, to “find a new religion” will not necessarily promise better human-nature relationship because acceptance of the new religion will in no way ensure better understanding of its principles. Failure to understand the principles will in the end affect the practices of adherents. In such a case, to “rethink our old one” would be the best choice.

Since White provided scant elaboration to “rethink our old one,” various interpretations are left open on the statement. One of the possible interpretations that corresponds to the objectives of this article is to “understand correctly the various principles of one’s religion.” White’s misinterpretation of religion, that is, Judeo-Christian, had led him to conclude that religion is the sole reason for present environmental problems. As such, it is imperative to properly understand the principles of a religion in the hope to achieve better human-environment relationship. In fact, such an understanding is part of Nasr’s suggestion of reviving science (or nature) in his book *Man and Nature*. With the view that harmonious relationship between man and nature can only be a reality by incorporating spiritual values back into science and nature, Nasr emphasised that “science (including nature) must be integrated into a metaphysics from above so that its undisputed facts could also gain a spiritual significance.”⁶⁴

Indeed, Nasr’s view affirms the arguments mooted thus far. To convey an accurate understanding of various religious principles, the role of religious leaders is indeed

63. Ibid., 33.

64. Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 38.

crucial. With all the religious knowledge and training they have acquired, religious leaders have great responsibilities to disseminate information and educate the public on religion and environmental conservation.

The involvement of religious groups in conservation and environmental education is, in fact, not isolated, though some religions exhibit better engagement than others. In this regard, strengthening the engagement of religious groups should be an ongoing effort especially in the ever-increasing present environmental problems. The low involvement of Muslim leaders in various environmental issues requires special attention. Thus, efforts to enhance the role of Islamic leaders in environmental issues are necessary. In this endeavour, several suggestions that can be taken into account are as follows:

1. To support the activities of religious leader in conservation and environmental education, the group needs at least a basic knowledge on the environment. As noted, the leaders' religious knowledge is generally sufficient. However, their knowledge of the environment leaves much to be desired. According to Rozita, a knowledge-driven attitude on certain issues is expected to prevail in a more environmentally friendly behaviour.⁶⁵ In this case, religious leaders equipped with proper environmental knowledge are expected to act in an environmentally friendly manner. Subsequently, they should be able to use their knowledge to raise environmental awareness and practice, starting with their own selves and spreading it to the local community. If such an effort is implemented correctly, then the desire to improve environmental literacy of society may be achieved. In order to accommodate the need to increase the knowledge of

65. Rozita, "Literasi Alam Sekitar," 141.

- religious leaders, specific training should be given to them. Therefore, a training module on religion and environment should be developed.
2. Developing such training modules as in (1) necessitates certain inputs such as awareness and knowledge of religious leaders, and the level and nature of their involvement in environmental education and conservation programme. In achieving this, an in-depth study of the level of awareness, knowledge, and involvement of religious leaders in environmental activities is required. Input from the study will be used to develop comprehensive training modules. Such a comprehensive study is yet to be conducted in Malaysia. Hence, one should be conducted and its findings can help develop education, training or other programmes for religious groups.
 3. Although Islam does not expressly enjoin protecting the environment, the Qur'an carries several verses on the imperative role of mountains as earth stakes.⁶⁶ This shows that mountains are created to act as stabilisers of the earth. Thus, in any development, mountains should be maintained and not levelled. Several other Qur'anic verses and Ḥadīth stress on the importance of environment which have yet to be fully compiled. There exists urgent need to compile and organise various principles of Islamic teachings related to the environment in a structured and complete manner, or commonly known as *Fiqh al-Bī'ah*. Such compilations shall benefit religious leaders as references in environmental awareness programmes.

66. Examples are in *al-Nabā'* (78): 7; and *al-Nahl* (16): 15.

4. Finally, cooperation between religious groups should be enhanced to ensure greater significant impact of any environmental conservation activity. As highlighted by Rozita, the cooperations forged may overcome the “psychology of despair” syndrome possibly encountered by religious groups whose efforts to conserve the environment do not give the desired impact.⁶⁷ For Posas, positive impact of religion on environmental conservation will be greater through cooperation among religious groups.⁶⁸ Besides inter-religious cooperation, intra-religious cooperation is just as necessary. Both types of cooperation are urgently required in addressing environmental problems in Malaysia. Even though cooperation among Malaysia’s Islamic NGOs on environment-related matters is hardly easy to identify, their cooperation on other issues related to Islam is increasing and quite successful; for example, HIMPUN (Gathering of A Million Faithfuls) which garnered more than 20 groups of Islamic NGOs and ACCIN (Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs) which addresses issues related to faith.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the importance of integration of religion and environmental conservation in the efforts to achieve environmentally sustainable development. Religion and its various principles shape the human worldview and thus influence human-nature relationships. Therefore, environmentally friendly principles of religion should be conveyed to all adherents. Towards this end, religious leaders

67. Rozita, “Literasi Alam Sekitar,” 143.

68. Posas, “Role of Religion and Ethics,” 35.

have profound duties to communicate religious principles on the environment, and to persuade as well as convince adherents to take part in various activities of environmental conservation.

In this context, this article has focused on the role of religious leaders. Religious leaders must play a vital role to ensure that environmentally friendly religious principles can be conveyed accurately to the public, who will then be able to appreciate the importance of environmental conservation. Such commendable efforts may hopefully generate action to conserve nature.

Be that as it may, current engagements of religion in environmental conservation show varying degree of success from one religion to another. This means that some religious communities show greater involvement than others. As religion plays a pivotal role in the effort of conserving the environment, attempts to unite all religions into the mainstream of environment conservation activities should be strongly supported. Ultimately, the success of the integration of religion and environmental conservation highly depends on the capability of religious leaders to create awareness regarding the importance of environmental conservation to religious communities.