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## Spiritual Ecology Across Faiths: A Comparative Study of Green Sufism in Indonesia and GreenFaith in the United States

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### Abstract

*This comparative study examined how different religious traditions operationalize ecological values. It focused on two cases: Green Sufism, a network of pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia that integrates Sufi spirituality into environmental education and daily routines, and the GreenFaith movement in the United States, an interfaith organization mobilizing religious communities for climate justice. Using a qualitative, interpretive phenomenological design, we collected interviews, observations, and documents across both contexts and analyzed them using a combined Heideggerian–Berger & Luckmann framework to trace how spiritual beliefs are translated into environmental norms. The findings revealed that both movements sacralize stewardship of the earth through theological principles such as tawhid (Oneness), khalifah (stewardship), and the interconnectedness of all creation, yet each followed a distinct pathway: pesantren privilege contemplative education and ritual practice, whereas GreenFaith foregrounded advocacy and public policy engagement. A translation chain, belief ritual → identity → action – emerged as the mechanism that connects spirituality to ecological activism. The study contributes to spiritual ecology by clarifying how embodied experiences and institutional processes co-produce ecological meaning, identifying boundary conditions for education-first versus advocacy-first pathways, and highlighting the potential of faith-based initiatives to support global environmental governance. Practical recommendations are offered for educators, policymakers, and interfaith leaders.*

**Keywords:** *Spiritual Ecology; Sufism; Interfaith Environmentalism; Phenomenology; Social Construction.*

## A. Introduction

Environmental crises have accelerated over the past three decades, prompting scholars and practitioners to revisit the moral resources within religious traditions that might support more sustainable relations with the non-human world (Rolston III, 2020; Sponsel, 2011; Lvovna, 2024). Yet the central scholarly challenge is not simply to affirm that religions can be “green,” but to explain when, how, and through what social processes religious moral imagination becomes durable ecological practice. This question has become more pressing as environmental governance increasingly depends on non-state actors—schools, civic groups, and faith communities—whose legitimacy often rests less on technical expertise than on moral authority and the capacity to mobilize collective action (Gomez, 2021; Naumowicz, 2010; Orr & Brown, 2019). For this reason, the study of religion and ecology is urgent not only as a theological conversation, but also as an empirical and theoretical problem about social change under ecological pressure (Henning & Walsh, 2020; Ogude & Mushonga, 2022).

Within this broader agenda, spiritual ecology sometimes called Eco spirituality refers to the study of how spirituality and ecological awareness are intertwined (Alley, 2019; Sponsel, 2011; Toncheva, 2019). However, the field remains conceptually heterogeneous. Some accounts emphasize inner transformation and contemplative ethics, while others foreground public activism and climate justice, generating unresolved tensions between spirituality-as-ethos and spirituality-as-movement (Blanco et al., 2025; Naumowicz, 2010). At the same time, scholars have warned against romanticizing “religion” as a coherent moral reservoir, because internal contestation, institutional constraints, and political economies can strongly shape whether ecological engagement becomes possible, legitimate, or sustainable (Naumowicz, 2010; Gomez, 2021; Abitolkha et al., 2025)

Existing scholarship in spiritual ecology can be grouped into at least three strands. First, normative and theological works argue that ecological crisis demands a renewed worldview and ethical reorientation, often drawing on Indigenous and religious cosmologies to reframe human–Earth relations (Fikri et al., 2024; Irawan, 2022; Tahir et al., 2025; Ridwansyah et al., 2025). This literature is valuable in identifying symbolic and doctrinal resources, yet it is frequently programmatic: it clarifies what traditions “should” mean for ecology without tracing how those meanings are negotiated, taught, and



sustained within everyday institutional life (Asari et al., 2023; Toncheva, 2019; Masnan et al., 2025). Second, empirical studies examine how religious and spiritual values shape environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Recent findings, however, are mixed: spiritual commitments may correlate with pro-environmental concern, but translation into sustained behavior is often mediated by community norms, social identity, and local opportunity structures (Gomez, 2021; Naumowicz, 2010; Orr & Brown, 2019). As a result, concluding that “religion matters” becomes insufficient unless the mechanisms of translation—social learning, ritual formation, moral emotion, and institutional reinforcement—are specified and compared across contexts (Igwe-Alufo, 2021; Salter & Wilkinson, 2023; Sayem, 2022). Third, studies of faith-based environmental movements document diverse organizational forms, from education-oriented initiatives to advocacy networks. Yet much of this work remains single-case or region-bound, making it difficult to explain why similar ecological vocabularies—stewardship, sacred creation, justice—yield different collective outcomes across traditions and institutions (Henning & Walsh, 2020; Firdaus et al., 2023; Nurjanah et al., 2024). Moreover, movement accounts often privilege visible outputs—campaigns, statements, programs—without showing how spiritual meanings are internalized as identities and routinised as practices over time (Asari et al., 2023; Toncheva, 2019).

Taken together, these strands leave an analytic bottleneck at the center of spiritual ecology: the field has not yet offered a sufficiently grounded, comparative explanation of the translation problem—how spiritual beliefs are externalized in ritual and pedagogy, objectivated in institutional arrangements, and internalized as ecological identities that sustain action beyond episodic enthusiasm (Toncheva, 2019; Salter & Wilkinson, 2023; Supriyanto et al., 2024). This gap is not merely empirical. It limits theory-building by leaving key causal links under-specified, and it limits practice by making it unclear whether long-term ecological change is better supported by education-first formation, advocacy-first mobilization, or hybrid pathways under different political and cultural conditions (Ogude & Mushonga, 2022; Orr & Brown, 2019).

Crucially, this article does not treat contemplative formation or public advocacy as inherently superior. Instead, it maps the social and institutional conditions under which each route is likely to work, stall, or be redirected. In doing so, the article



shifts the debate from “which approach is best” to “which approach fits which conditions, and why.”

To address this, the present study compares two faith-based environmental movements situated in different socio-cultural contexts: Green Sufism in Indonesia and the interfaith organization GreenFaith in the United States. The comparison is analytically strategic because the two initiatives represent contrasting institutional routes to ecological commitment. Green Sufism grew within *pesantren* and Sufi-oriented communities as educators embedded environmental stewardship into curricula and daily discipline, drawing on practices such as *dhikr*, ethical self-cultivation, and contemplative gardening (Fikri et al., 2024; Irawan, 2022; Tahir et al., 2025). In contrast, Green Faith—founded in 1992—operates as an advocacy-first network that mobilizes multiple traditions, including Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, to pursue climate justice through public campaigns, renewable-energy initiatives, and policy engagement (Naumowicz, 2010; Mauluddin et al., 2025; Blanco et al., 2025).

This article argues that differences in institutional pathway—education-first formation versus advocacy-first mobilization—shape how spiritual commitments become stable ecological identities and collective capacities. The study asks three questions: (1) how spiritual beliefs and practices shape ecological norms and identities in Green Sufism and GreenFaith; (2) what mechanisms translate these beliefs into collective environmental action; and (3) how socio-cultural and political contexts influence the efficacy of education-first versus advocacy-first pathways. Positioned within the interdisciplinary field of religion and ecology, the analysis combines phenomenology with Berger and Luckmann’s social-constructionist theory to trace lived spirituality and the institutional processes through which meanings become taken-for-granted realities (Bernard-Hoverstad, 2023; Toncheva, 2019).

This study is framed as a response to the translation problem identified above, namely the difficulty of explaining how spiritual commitments is converted into sustained ecological practice across different institutional settings. To address this problem, the analysis combines phenomenological attention to embodied religious practice with a social-constructionist perspective on externalization, objectivation, and internalization. This integrative approach enables a mechanism-oriented comparison,



moving beyond descriptive juxtaposition toward an explanation of how and under what conditions spirituality becomes environmentally actionable.

Conceptually, the study contributes to the development of spiritual ecology by articulating a translation-chain model—belief → ritual → identity → action—that illuminates the processes through which ecological commitments are reinforced, weakened, or redirected in response to institutional pressures. By examining Islamic eco-spirituality and interfaith climate activism within a shared analytical framework, the study highlights both common moral grammars—such as sacredness, stewardship, and justice—and the distinct organizational logics that shape practical outcomes (Blanco et al., 2025; Naumowicz, 2010).

Beyond its conceptual implications, the findings offer guidance for educators, religious leaders, and policymakers concerned with designing effective forms of faith-based climate engagement. The analysis suggests that *pesantren*-based formation can foster long-term ecological discipline through sustained spiritual practice, while interfaith networks are particularly well positioned to translate moral commitments into public advocacy and policy influence. On this basis, the article develops a comparative, context-sensitive explanation of how spirituality is enacted as ecological practice through the distinct yet complementary pathways represented by Green Sufism and GreenFaith.

## **B. Method**

This study employed a qualitative research design integrating an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (IPA) with a comparative case study framework. The combination of these approaches was intended to capture both the lived, embodied dimensions of spirituality and the ways in which such experiences are organised and enacted within different institutional and socio-cultural contexts. IPA enabled close attention to participants' experiences of spirituality and ecological commitment, while the comparative case study design facilitated systematic cross-contextual analysis of how these experiences were translated into collective practices.

Fieldwork was conducted between May 2023 and January 2024 at two research sites. The first site was a *pesantren* in West Java associated with the Green Sufism movement, and the second was the New York City office of GreenFaith, including



several affiliated congregations. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. The study did not involve minors or vulnerable populations, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives within each movement. A total of fifteen informants participated in the study, including *pesantren* leaders, teachers, students, community activists, GreenFaith staff members, clergy, and volunteers. The adequacy of this sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, as recurring themes consistently emerged across interviews, observations, and documents, indicating that further data collection was unlikely to yield substantively new insights.

Data collection involved three complementary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants in Indonesia and seven in the United States. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and explored spiritual practices, ecological commitments, organisational roles, and perceived challenges in translating spiritual values into environmental action. Second, participant observation was undertaken during educational, ritual, and advocacy activities, including environmental classes and communal *dhikr* in *pesantren* settings, as well as interfaith worship services, climate marches, and advocacy meetings in the United States. Third, organisational documents—such as curricula, mission statements, policy briefs, and social media materials—were collected to trace the discursive articulation of ecological values.

Data analysis proceeded in two stages. First, following hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2016), interview transcripts and field notes were analysed iteratively to identify meaning units related to spirituality and ecological engagement. These were clustered into thematic categories. Second, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social construction theory guided the analysis of how meanings were externalised through practice, objectified through institutional arrangements, and internalised as ecological identities. This framework enabled systematic comparison of translation processes across the two cases.



To enhance credibility and reliability, data triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents was employed. Intercoder agreement was established through collaborative coding and discussion, and an audit trail documented analytical decisions. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the study, with researchers acknowledging their positionality as members of Muslim communities and observers of interfaith environmental activism.

### **C. Results and Discussion**

This section reports what was found in the field. To keep the boundary between “findings” and “interpretation” clear, the description stays close to interview accounts, observations, and documents. We first present each case separately, organized around the themes that repeatedly appeared in the data. We then provide a brief cross-case summary highlighting similarities and differences in observable practices and reported experiences. Analytical interpretation is reserved for the discussion section.

#### **1. Results**

##### **a. Green Sufism (Indonesia): An education-first pathway**

Across interviews with the founder, teachers, students, and a community liaison, Green Sufism was described as a *pesantren*-based effort where environmental care is learned through daily religious routines, supported by curricular content, and extended through community programs. Three themes were most visible in the data.

##### *1) Sacralization of nature through spiritual practice*

Many participants located ecological care inside their devotional life, rather than treating it as an “extra” activity. Several teachers described how dhikr circles were deliberately held outdoors, so students would connect remembrance of God with the presence of plants, soil, water, and other creatures. One teacher explained the message they repeat to students: “*We teach that every plant is praising Allah; when we water plants, we are joining their dhikr.*” (Teacher, Interview, 4 Apr 2023)

In practice, this framing made routine tasks—watering, cleaning, sorting waste—feel like part of worship. The founder described environmental work in similarly direct terms, speaking of “religious duty” and ecological care as one



continuous obligation: “Farming and recycling are part of our religious duty. We see nature as a manifestation of God’s signs, so protecting it is a form of gratitude and devotion.” (Founder, Interview, 13 Feb 2023).

Students also reported that being physically present in the garden while reciting Qur’anic verses shaped how they experienced the space. One student described the garden as a place where learning and worship overlap: “Every morning we recite Qur’an in the garden. Caring for plants and soil has become a form of dhikr – it makes us feel closer to the Creator.” (Student, Interview, 21 May 2023)

Taken together, these accounts show that ecological care was narrated as meaningful because it was embedded in repeated spiritual practice, not because students were asked to “care about the environment” only at the level of ideas.

## 2) *Integration into curriculum and daily life*

A second theme was the systematic integration of environmental topics into *pesantren* teaching and everyday discipline. Teachers reported that ecological themes were brought into Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) lessons through concrete examples, especially when discussing cleanliness, moderation in consumption, and responsibility toward shared resources. Practical lessons—waste sorting, composting, organic farming, water conservation—were presented as part of the *pesantren*’s routine rather than occasional events.

The curriculum teacher explained that students rotate across study, remembrance, and cultivation, and that the rotation itself is treated as a form of discipline: “Students rotate between studying the Qur’an, reciting dhikr, and gardening. What this means is that prayer and working the land strengthen each other – the discipline of worship, the discipline of caring for the land.” (Teacher, Interview, 4 Apr 2023)

In daily practice, this integration meant that environmental tasks were not separated from the rhythm of *pesantren* life. Observations and documentation in the *pesantren* space also indicated that ecological messages were made visible through posters and photographs displayed in public areas, reinforcing shared routines and collective responsibility.



### 3) *Community-based action and expansion beyond pesantren*

A third theme was the effort to extend *pesantren* routines to the surrounding community. Participants described collaborations with local farmers and village actors to organize tree-planting and river clean-up activities. The community liaison described outreach in practical terms, focusing on how neighbors learn techniques at the *pesantren* and then apply them at home: *"We invite neighbors to plant seedlings here, and then they take the techniques home – composting, sorting organic materials – so the benefits spread."* (Community liaison, Interview, 29 Aug 2023)

Photos of collective harvesting and posters inviting participation were displayed in *pesantren* public spaces, indicating that outreach was treated as a visible part of the program. In several interviews, students connected this outreach to a sense of service to the surrounding community, especially in rural settings where livelihoods depend on land and water.

## **b. GreenFaith (United States): An advocacy-first pathway**

In the United States case, interviews and organizational materials pointed to an interfaith organization that mobilizes faith communities primarily through public engagement and policy-oriented action. Three themes were salient.

### 1) *Interfaith liturgy and narrative framing*

Interviewees described interfaith worship as a key entry point, especially in public settings such as climate marches and community gatherings. Organizers used songs, prayers, and scriptural readings drawn from multiple traditions to frame climate action as a shared moral concern. A local Circle organizer described how joint prayer and joint action were linked at the local level: *"Our local Circle brings different faiths together – tree-plantings, retrofits, solar projects at churches and mosques. Praying together makes action feel possible."* (Circle organizer, Interview, 17 Mar 2023)

Documents and observations also suggested that these gatherings were deliberately structured not merely as symbolic encounters, but as strategic spaces for cultivating mutual trust across religious and cultural traditions. Through sustained dialogue, shared activities, and informal interactions, participants were encouraged to move beyond formal tolerance toward deeper relational understanding. This atmosphere of trust functioned as a social foundation that strengthened participants' commitment and



collective motivation to pursue concrete initiatives after the event, particularly those aimed at collaborative action and long-term engagement. In this sense, the gatherings operated as catalysts, transforming inter-traditional encounters into practical cooperation that extended beyond the temporal boundaries of the event itself.

### 2) *Policy advocacy and organizational partnerships*

A second theme was structured civic engagement. Interviewees described letter-writing campaigns, press events, and legislative visits as recurring activities. Partnering with NGOs, labor unions, and environmental justice groups was also described as a practical strategy for amplifying faith voices in public debates. A programme volunteer highlighted the role of step-by-step guidance materials in helping smaller congregations participate: *“The toolkit lays out steps – energy conservation, food systems, advocacy calls. It’s clear what a small congregation can start with.”* (Program volunteer, Interview, 28 Jul 2023)

In organizational schedules and guidance materials, advocacy activities were often presented through detailed action calendars and clearly defined standardized steps, providing a shared framework for collective engagement. These instruments functioned as practical coordination tools that aligned timelines, roles, and expectations among participants, thereby enabling synchronized participation across different regions and congregations. By translating broad advocacy goals into concrete, time-bound actions, the calendars and guidelines reduced ambiguity and strengthened organizational coherence, ensuring that local initiatives remained connected to wider collective agendas while still allowing contextual adaptation at the regional level.

### 3) *Leadership development and strategic training*

A third theme was the strong emphasis on training and leadership development as a core strategy of organizational capacity building. GreenFaith offered a range of programs that concentrated on public speaking, media engagement, and systematic preparation for non-violent direct action, equipping participants with both communicative and organizational skills. Interviewees consistently described these training initiatives as crucial mechanisms for enabling participants to mobilize their



congregations, articulate moral and environmental concerns with confidence, and engage effectively in public and political arenas. As observed in organizational materials, this focus on training was not implemented in isolation, but was closely integrated with the organization’s broader campaign calendar and strategic partnerships, ensuring that leadership development directly supported ongoing advocacy efforts and collaborative actions at multiple levels.

**c. Cross-case descriptive summary**

Across both cases, participants spoke in moral and religious terms about why environmental action matters, and both settings used ritual and shared gatherings to build commitment. The most visible differences were in (i) where the work typically begins, (ii) how it is organized over time, and (iii) which arenas of action are prioritized. In the *pesantren* context, the program begins inside daily routines and teaching, and community action grows outward from those routines. In the GreenFaith context, mobilisation often begins through public interfaith gatherings and campaign activities, and then expands through coalitions and trainings.

Table 1 summarizes the main observable contrasts reported in interviews and documents, while Figure 1 provides a simple descriptive overview of the typical sequences of activities described in each case.

*Table 1. Summarizes the main observable contrasts reported*

<b>Mechanism</b>	<b>Ath-Thaariq (education-first)</b>	<b>GreenFaith (advocacy-first)</b>	<b>Risks / tensions</b>
Entry pathway	Curriculum; ritual immersion	Trainings; certification; campaigns	Doctrinal disagreement; polarization
Objectivations	Modules; SOPs; field rotations	Standards; toolkits; action calendars	Institutional inertia; resource gaps
Internalization	“Amanah” cues	“Creation-care” identity; liturgy	Economic trade-offs (e.g., energy jobs)
Scaling lever	School and <i>pesantren</i> networks	Interfaith coalitions; media	Coalition fragility; doctrine dilution
Failure mode	Ritual practice without	Events without habit change	Program fatigue; resistance



## 2. Discussion

The two cases examined here point to a shared insight: faith-based environmental engagement becomes durable when spiritual meanings are repeatedly enacted in concrete settings, supported by organizational routines, and recognized by a community. What differs is not whether spirituality matters, but how it is carried into practice, and which social environments make particular routes more workable. In this discussion, we develop that argument in a connected way: we first clarify what this comparison adds to spiritual ecology scholarship, then show the conditions that shape “education-first” and “advocacy-first” routes, and finally position our mechanism-focused account against existing models. We close with broader implications, limitations, and directions for future work.

### *Theoretical contribution to spiritual ecology*

Spiritual ecology has grown into an interdisciplinary arena that links religious studies, anthropology, ecology, and public health, often around the claim that environmental crises are also crises of meaning (Blanco et al., 2025; Higgins et al., 2020; Hubbell & Ryan, 2021). Yet much of the literature still falls into two parallel tracks: work that elaborates ecological teachings within religious traditions, and work that document faith-based environmental programs. What is less often made explicit is the process by which spiritual commitments are stabilized as everyday ecological conduct, especially across different institutional and cultural contexts (Bestebreurtje, 2013; Conradie et al., 2014; Salter & Wilkinson, 2023).

This study contributes by treating “translation” as the central analytic problem. By combining phenomenological attention to lived experience with Berger and Luckmann’s social-constructionist emphasis on how meanings are made durable through social routines, we show how ecological engagement is built through repeated practices that people recognize as spiritually meaningful. In our material, participants did not describe belief as a detached statement. They described beliefs as something that becomes real through habitual ritual and shared discipline, and then becomes socially legible as an identity that can organize action. In that sense, the translation chain (belief -> ritual -> identity -> action) is not introduced as a slogan; it is a concise way to name the sequence that participants themselves narrated across both sites. The



main value of the chain is that it directs attention to the “middle steps” that many studies assume rather than demonstrate (Alley, 2019; Sponsel, 2011; Toncheva, 2019).

A second contribution follows from the comparative design. The findings suggest that spiritual ecology should not be treated as a single, uniform phenomenon. The Indonesian *pesantren* case shows how long-term communal discipline can cultivate ecological sensibilities through immersion, whereas the U.S. interfaith case shows how spirituality can be mobilized as a public moral language that enables coalition-building and policy engagement (Haryanto et al., 2025; Utami et al., 2022; Ichwan et al., 2024). Rather than ranking these approaches, the comparison highlights that different contexts reward different ways of stabilizing commitment. This point matters because the field often debates whether religious environmentalism is mainly about inner transformation, institutional reform, or political advocacy. Our evidence suggests it can be any of these, but not in the same way everywhere, and not with the same organizational requirements.

From this theoretical lens, it becomes necessary to pose a question that is simultaneously practical and analytic: under what conditions does each pathway become plausible and sustainable in shaping long-term commitments and collective action? This question directs attention to the boundary conditions that enable or constrain the effectiveness of the two routes identified in this study. Specifically, it invites an examination of how institutional structures, moral frameworks, and pedagogical traditions shape the durability of education-first and advocacy-first pathways within different socio-religious contexts.

Regarding the education-first pathway, the *pesantren* setting offers particularly conducive boundary conditions. In this context, environmental care is not introduced as an external agenda but is embedded within an institutional system that already regulates time, discipline, and moral formation. The daily rhythms of *pesantren* life—structured learning schedules, collective rituals, and sustained teacher-student relationships—create a setting in which values are repeatedly reinforced and internalized (Huda & Salem, 2022). Prior studies have shown that such environments are effective in cultivating self-regulation and moral consistency, especially when spiritual intelligence and religious faith function as internal motivational resources guiding behavior (Utami et al., 2022). This internalization process is further



strengthened by pedagogical approaches that connect ethical reflection with existential awareness, as demonstrated in models of moral education designed to address behavioral formation among youth (Rahmatullah & Azhar, 2020).

Moreover, the plausibility of the education-first route in *pesantren* is supported by their capacity to integrate tradition with contemporary challenges. Recent scholarship highlights how *pesantren*-based institutions increasingly bridge classical Islamic knowledge with modern scientific and social paradigms, allowing ethical teachings to remain relevant to current global issues, including environmental concerns (Haryanto et al., 2025). Transformations in instructional practices, such as the revitalization of hadith teaching through contextual and problem-oriented approaches, further enhance this capacity by linking normative religious sources to lived social responsibilities (Tamjidnor et al., 2025). Under these conditions, environmental education becomes sustainable not because of episodic campaigns, but because it is continuously reproduced through institutional routines, epistemic traditions, and moral authority structures that define *pesantren* life.

Students live within a structured daily rhythm, and teachers have the authority to connect religious instruction with routine practice. This environment makes it possible for ecological habits to be learned repeatedly, corrected when they slip, and reinforced through shared expectations. In such a setting, moral instruction does not remain at the level of abstract norms but is continuously translated into embodied discipline through everyday supervision and example. In other words, the education-first pathway is supported by three interrelated conditions: (i) prolonged co-presence that allows values to be internalized over time, (ii) stable leadership and supervision that sustain behavioral consistency, and (iii) close alignment between doctrinal teaching and practical routines that makes ethical commitments visible and enforceable in daily life (Bestebreurtje, 2013; Conradie et al., 2014; Hasibuan et al., 2025).

Where these conditions weaken—when routines become largely symbolic rather than lived, or when institutional resources for practice and monitoring are limited—participants themselves cautioned that ecological engagement risks turning into a “ritual of environmentalism” rather than a sustained form of moral responsibility. The point here is not to diminish *pesantren*-based initiatives, but to



clarify that immersion-based education functions effectively only when practices remain consequential, observable, and socially accountable within the community's moral order (Tamjidnor et al., 2025; Rahmatullah & Azhar, 2020).

GreenFaith's advocacy-first route, by contrast, operates in a social setting where participants are largely volunteers and religious communities are pluralistic, geographically dispersed, and often situated within politically contested environments. Under these conditions, public action becomes a viable entry point precisely because it generates urgency, visibility, and a tangible sense of collective purpose. Advocacy campaigns, interfaith services staged in public arenas, and partnerships with NGOs or labor organizations function as mechanisms for translating dispersed moral concern into coordinated action. From an organizational perspective, such strategies resemble forms of strategic human capital mobilization, where alignment around shared goals temporarily compensates for the absence of stable institutional discipline (Firdaus et al., 2023).

These features make the advocacy-first route particularly workable in contexts where policy influence depends on coalition-building across religious traditions and where public legitimacy must be actively constructed. At the same time, the very conditions that enable rapid mobilization also generate structural vulnerabilities. Campaigns tend to be episodic, participant commitment can fluctuate, and political polarization may strain fragile coalitions assembled around specific issues. Without complementary practices that cultivate sustained moral formation and relational depth within congregations, advocacy risks becoming a sequence of public events rather than a durable transformation of everyday life (Fauzi & Pribadi, 2024). This tension echoes broader observations in studies of spiritual and ethical traditions, which emphasize that collective action remains resilient only when it is supported by practices that stabilize meaning, discipline motivation, and integrate values into daily routines (Lvovna, 2024; Afifi et al., 2025). In the absence of such grounding, advocacy-oriented engagement may achieve short-term visibility but struggle to sustain long-term responsibility across diverse and shifting publics.

These contrasts align with a wider observation in the literature: religious environmentalism is often shaped by tensions within traditions and between traditions, and by the institutional capacities that communities have to manage those tensions (Koehrsen et al., (2021; Afifi et al., 2025; Damis et al., 2025). The present



findings sharpen that point by specifying how tensions are “handled” differently in each route. Education-first settings can reduce contestation by grounding action in shared practice and shared authority, while advocacy-first settings must continuously negotiate differences and keep coalitions intact. This is why the study argues against one-size-fits-all prescriptions: the same religious language may inspire commitment in one setting and provoke disagreement in another, depending on institutional structure and political climate (Irawan, 2022; Qorib, 2015; Tahir et al., 2025).

If boundary conditions explain why different routes become viable, it remains important to ask how our mechanism-based account relates to the models that already exist in this field. The next section makes that positioning explicit.

#### *Comparison with previous models*

Several influential approaches have helped scholars map the landscape of religious environmentalism, but many of them work primarily as typologies or stage descriptions. For example, Mangunjaya and McKay (2012) describe stages in Islamic environmentalism that move from scriptural awareness to interpretation, dissemination, and community practice. That model is valuable for tracing how ideas travel, but it often leaves the micro-process of stabilization implicit: how do teachings become routines that people keep doing when attention fades? Our comparison suggests that ritual and repeated practice are not simply “one stage” in the sequence. They are the mechanism that makes earlier stages durable, because they bind meanings to embodied routines and to shared expectations.

Similarly, Jenkins and Chapple (2011) emphasize “cosmic ecology” and the role of cosmological narratives in shaping ecological care. Our data support the importance of narrative, but they also show that narrative alone does not explain persistence. In the *pesantren* case, cosmological and theological ideas were repeatedly rehearsed through daily discipline; in the GreenFaith case, moral narratives were reinforced through liturgy in public settings and through structured programs. In both contexts, narrative was effective when paired with practices that people could enact together.

Koehrsen’s (2018) typology distinguishes grassroots, professionalized, and political forms of faith-based organizations. This is useful for classification, and it fits



the broad contours of our cases: Green Sufism resembles a grassroots religious-institution initiative, while GreenFaith operates as a professionalized organization engaged in political arenas. However, the typology does not fully capture why some organizations sustain participation while others struggle, or why similar organizations can produce different kinds of engagement. The mechanism-focused lens proposed here does not replace typologies, but it adds a missing layer: it explains what organizations do to move from moral commitment to stable practice, and how those moves differ across institutional environments.

Seen this way, the main theoretical wager of this article is straightforward: spiritual ecology is best analyzed not only by asking what people believe, or which organizational type they belong to, but by tracing the social work that makes spiritual meaning actionable. That wager also frames the wider implications of the findings.

#### *Global relevance and implications*

The comparison suggests several implications beyond the two cases. First, faith-based initiatives can complement secular environmental programs by mobilizing moral languages, trusted leaders, and dense community networks that many people already rely on for meaning and guidance (Sponsel, 2011; Alley, 2019; Harry et al., 2024). Where environmental messaging is experienced as abstract or politically divisive, spiritual language and ritual practice can provide alternative ways to motivate care and restraint. At the same time, the findings caution against romanticizing religion as uniformly “green”: internal disagreement, competing priorities, and resource constraints shape what is possible in practice.

Second, the results point to the importance of organizational design. In education-first settings, strengthening ecological practice may depend on curricular integration, teacher training, and community extension that keeps routines connected to real environmental problems. In advocacy-first settings, sustaining engagement may depend on pairing campaigns with practices that support long-term formation within congregations, not only public mobilization. Put simply, different routes require different kinds of “maintenance work,” and policy partners should avoid assuming that one template can travel across contexts unchanged.



Third, the cases also invite more careful thought about collaborations with Indigenous and local knowledge traditions. Many communities already hold Eco spiritual orientations that treat land and water as morally charged, not merely as resources (Alley, 2019). Partnerships that respect those orientations—rather than treating them as cultural ornaments—may broaden the legitimacy of climate governance and deepen community ownership of environmental programs.

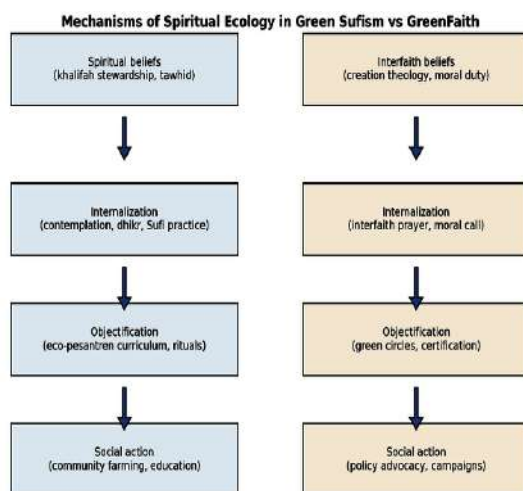


Figure 1. Mechanisms of spiritual ecology in Green Sufism vs GreenFaith

Figure 1 presents this argument in a compact form. It does not introduce new data; it synthesizes patterns already reported in the Results by illustrating how each case typically moves from spiritual meaning to public ecological practice through different organizational sequences. The figure is included to help readers see the comparative logic at a glance, while the discussion clarifies why the same endpoint (“environmental action”) can be reached through different routes.

### Limitations and future research

This study focuses on two cases and therefore cannot represent the full diversity of spiritual ecology, even within Islam or within interfaith environmentalism. Future research could broaden comparison across additional traditions and organizational forms, and could also examine variation within each setting—for example, differences between urban and rural *pesantren*, or differences between



interfaith coalitions in distinct political regions. Longitudinal work would be especially valuable for observing whether the practices described here persist, change, or fade over time. Mixed-method studies could also test specific outcomes (e.g., changes in consumption, waste practices, or civic participation) while remaining attentive to how participants interpret those changes. Finally, researcher positionality matters. As the Indonesian case involves Muslim communities, interpretive familiarity can be an advantage for rapport but also a source of blind spots. Collaborative research across traditions, and explicit attention to gender and socio-economic dynamics within movements, would strengthen the field's ability to understand how spiritual ecology is practiced under unequal conditions.

#### **D. Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand how spiritual values are translated into concrete ecological practices by comparing Green Sufism in Indonesia and the interfaith GreenFaith movement in the United States. The findings demonstrate that spirituality does not automatically generate environmental action; rather, ecological involvement emerges through a dynamic process in which belief is embodied in ritual, stabilized through institutional arrangements, and sustained through the formation of ecological identities. In the *context of Pesantren-based* Green Sufism, prolonged spiritual discipline, contemplative practices, and curriculum integration create an education-first pathway that fosters durable habits of environmental care and community-orientated action. In contrast, GreenFaith operates through an advocacy-first pathway, where interfaith narratives, organizational tools, and public participation translate shared spiritual commitments into advocacy and collective mobilization. Together, these cases show that the relationship between spirituality and ecology is mediated by social, institutional, and political contexts, rather than determined solely by theological principles.

The study makes a substantive contribution to the field of spiritual ecology by moving beyond descriptive or normative accounts of religious environmentalism. By integrating phenomenological analysis with Berger and Luckmann's social constructionist framework, this research offers a mechanism-based explanation of how spirituality becomes an actionable ecology. The proposed translation chain, belief in ritual identity → action—clarifies the internal dynamics through which spiritual meaning is externalized,



institutionalized and internalized across different settings. The distinction between education-first and advocacy-first pathways further advances existing scholarship by explaining variation in faith-based environmental initiatives not only as differences in organizational type, but as outcomes of distinct translational processes. In practical terms, the findings suggest that religious education institutions can cultivate long-term ecological dispositions when environmental care is embedded in daily spiritual practice, while interfaith organizations can amplify climate action by framing advocacy within shared sacred narratives and investing in leadership development.

At the same time, the study points to several avenues for future research. Expanding the comparative scope to include other religious traditions or indigenous spiritual movements would help assess the broader applicability of the translation chain model. Longitudinal research could illuminate how ecological identities formed through spiritual education or advocacy evolve over time and respond to shifting political or environmental conditions. More attention to gender, class, and economic constraints would also deepen the understanding of who participates in spiritual ecology initiatives and under what conditions. Methodologically, combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures of behavioral change could strengthen claims about the long-term impact of faith-based environmental engagement.

Ultimately, this study underscores that spirituality can become a meaningful force for ecological transformation when it is translated into lived practice through context-sensitive pathways. Faith-based environmentalism is neither uniform nor merely symbolic; it operates through concrete mechanisms shaped by institutional structures and sociopolitical environments. By revealing how spiritual convictions are transformed into enduring forms of ecological action, this research highlights the importance of religious communities as partners in the management of contemporary environmental crises. In a world facing accelerating ecological challenges, recognizing and engaging these translational processes offers an important bridge between moral commitment and sustainable practice.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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