

THE ROLE OF MUSLIMS IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION BASED ON QUR'ANIC EXEGESIS: A THEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL VERSE

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Abstract: This study explores the role of Muslims in environmental conservation through a thematic interpretation (tafsir *maudhū'ī*) of Qur'anic verses related to nature and ecology. It aims to uncover how Islamic teachings position humans, particularly Muslims, as stewards (*khalifah*) responsible for maintaining ecological balance and preventing environmental degradation. Drawing on classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), this research identifies key principles that underpin a sustainable lifestyle in Islam. The analysis emphasizes two main perspectives: the integration of green economy values such as moderation (*wasatiyyah*), resource efficiency, and environmental ethics and the transformative role of education in shaping environmental awareness among Muslim communities. The study finds that Islamic environmental ethics, when implemented through eco-conscious economic practices and educational reform, offer a holistic framework for addressing contemporary ecological crises. It concludes that Muslims have a theological and moral imperative to actively engage in environmental preservation as part of their faith commitment and social responsibility.

Keywords: Environmental Conservation, Thematic Interpretation, Islamic Education, Muslim Role, Ecology in Islam.

1. Introduction

The contemporary world faces unprecedented environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion, which threaten the sustainability of life on Earth (1). In response to these crises, various religious traditions have revisited their teachings to offer ethical frameworks and practical guidance for environmental stewardship (2). Among these, Islamic teachings provide a rich yet underexplored resource for addressing ecological concerns through the concept of humans as stewards (*khalifah*) of the Earth (3).

The Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic guidance, contains numerous verses that emphasize the relationship between humans, nature, and the Creator. These verses establish fundamental principles for environmental conservation and sustainable living, as stated in the Qur'an:

وَأِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا عِنْدَنَا خَزَائِنُهُ وَمَا نُنَزِّلُهُ إِلَّا بِقَدَرٍ مَعْلُومٍ

“And there is not a thing but that with Us are its depositories, and We do not send it down except according to a known measure” (Qur'an 15:21).

However, the full potential of these teachings remains underutilized in contemporary environmental discourse and practice among Muslim communities (4). This study employs a thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhū'i*) of Qur'anic verses related to nature and ecology to explore the role of Muslims in environmental conservation. Thematic interpretation allows for a comprehensive understanding of the Qur'an's guidance on environmental issues by analyzing relevant verses across different chapters and contexts (5). This approach helps uncover the holistic vision of environmental ethics in Islam that integrates spiritual, moral, and practical dimensions.

The research aims to address three main questions: First, how does the Qur'an conceptualize the relationship between humans and the natural environment? Second, what principles does Islamic teaching offer for environmental conservation and sustainable development? Third, how can these principles be translated into practical action through education and economic practices.

By examining these questions, this study contributes to the growing discourse on Islamic environmental ethics and provides a theological foundation for Muslim engagement in environmental conservation. It also bridges the gap between religious teachings and contemporary environmental challenges, offering insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and environmental activists working toward sustainability.

2. Literatur Review

The Triangular Relationship between Allah, Humanity, and the Universe. The conceptual relationship between Allah, humanity, and the universe constitutes the core of the Islamic worldview. To understand the dynamics of this relationship, a systematic literature review is essential, delving into its theological, anthropological, cosmological, and practical implications. This review organizes key findings from Muslim scholars to construct a holistic understanding.

2.1. The Tawḥīdic Paradigm: The Ontological and Epistemological Foundation

The principle of Tawḥīd (the Oneness of Allah) is the fundamental pillar underpinning the entire Islamic intellectual framework. This paradigm asserts that all existence originates from Allah, subsists by His will, and ultimately returns to Him (6). Tawḥīd categorically rejects all forms of dualism, such as the separation of religion and the world, the sacred and the profane, or humanity and nature (7). Instead, it offers a monistic vision where all of existence is a unified, interconnected whole, subject to the sovereignty and will of the One God.

Within the context of the Allah-Humanity-Universe relationship, Tawḥīd functions as the "super-ordinate framework" (7). It is not merely a theological doctrine but the unifying principle that governs all dimensions of life and knowledge. Al-Attas, a highly influential contemporary thinker, argues that Tawḥīd is the very foundation of Islamic epistemology, wherein true knowledge is that which acknowledges and points to the Oneness of Allah in all aspects of reality (8). Consequently, studying the universe is never an act divorced from remembering its Creator. This perspective ensures that humanity's relationship with nature is not based on exploitation or secularization, but on the recognition of the signs (*āyāt*) of Allah's majesty within it.

2.2. The Human as 'Abd and Khalīfah: A Dual Role in the Triangular Relationship

Within the Tawḥīdic framework, humanity occupies a unique and strategic position, defined by two primary roles: 'Abd (servant) and Khalīfah (vicegerent) on Earth. This concept is directly sourced from the Qur'an, such as in Surah al-Baqarah [2:30], which describes the creation of humanity as a *khalīfah*, and Surah al-Dhāriyāt [51:56], which states that jinn and humans were created only to worship Allah (9).

The role of 'Abd establishes humanity's vertical and absolute orientation towards Allah (Humanity → Allah). In this capacity, humans are obligated to submit, worship, and express gratitude to the Creator (10). Obedience as a servant is the ultimate boundary that governs all human actions, including interaction with the natural world. Concurrently, the role of Khalīfah signifies humanity's horizontal and relational orientation with the universe (Humanity ↔ Universe). The *khalīfah* is not an absolute ruler with the right to exploit, but a trustee who has been given an *amanah* (trust) to manage, protect, and cultivate the Earth responsibly (11)

This duality of roles creates a balanced, reciprocal relationship. The status of *khalīfah* must never supersede the status of 'abd. The act of managing the world (as *khalīfah*) must always be imbued with the spirit of worship and obedience to Allah (as 'abd). As explained by al-Faruqi, the human is a "worshipping vicegerent," where worldly activity is an extension of worship itself. This theory clearly clarifies the nature of humanity's relationship with nature: one of *amanah* (trusteeship) and *stewardship*, not ownership and domination.(12)

2.3. Islamic Cosmology: The Universe as Āyāt (Signs) of Allah

Islamic cosmology perceives the universe (al-ʿĀlam) not as a dead or random material entity, but as a system replete with āyāt (signs) that point toward the truth and Oneness of Allah (12). Every creation, from the most distant galaxy to the smallest particle, from natural phenomena to the laws governing them, possesses purpose (*maqāṣid*), order, and profound meaning (10)

This worldview places humanity not as an absolute master over nature, but as an integral part of a larger cosmic system. Humans are the beings endowed with consciousness to "read" these signs, such that through the observation and understanding of nature, faith in Allah is strengthened (7). The Qur'an explicitly calls upon humans to contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth, the alternation of night and day, and the diversity of living creatures as proof of Allah's power and wisdom

Within the triangular relationship structure, Islamic cosmology acts as the bridge connecting humanity to Allah through the universe. Nature is not a passive object but a medium of communication and general revelation (*waḥy ʿāmm*) that continuously conveys a divine message. This concept rejects an extreme anthropocentric view and places humanity in a position of humility as part of a greater cosmic order, entrusted with maintaining its equilibrium.

2.4. Islamic Ecotheology: An Ethical Framework for Human-Nature Interaction

Islamic ecotheology is a contemporary development of the aforementioned principles, specifically addressing ecological crises and environmental ethics from an Islamic perspective (13). This framework integrates theology, Islamic law (Sharia), and ethics to formulate humanity's responsibilities towards the environment.

Three central principles in Islamic ecotheology are *amānah* (trust), *mas'ūliyyah* (responsibility), and *mīzān* (balance) (14). The concept of *amānah*, referring to Allah's offer of the trust of *khalīfah* to humanity (Q. al-Aḥzāb 33:72), provides the moral foundation that nature is a trust to be safeguarded, not owned property to be squandered. *Mas'ūliyyah* is the logical consequence of *amānah*, wherein humanity will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment for its stewardship of the Earth. The principle of *mīzān* emphasizes that Allah created all things in a perfect balance (Q. al-Raḥmān 55:7), and the human role as *khalīfah* is to preserve this balance, not disrupt it through excessive exploitation(15).

Scholars like Fazlun Khalid and S. Nomanul Haq have utilized this framework to critique destructive modern development models and to offer Islam-based alternatives for sustainability(16). Islamic ecotheology provides a strong theological foundation for environmental movements in the Muslim world, transforming ecological responsibility from a mere ethical choice into a religious obligation.

2.5. Islamic Epistemology: The Integration of Revelation, Reason, and Empirical Observation

The foundation that enables a holistic understanding of the Allah-Humanity-Universe relationship is Islamic epistemology, known as the theory of integrated knowledge. Unlike secular views that fragment sources of knowledge, Islam asserts that true and comprehensive knowledge is acquired through the integration of three primary sources: revelation (*wahy*), reason (*‘aql*), and empirical observation .

Revelation (the Qur'an and Sunnah) provides the overarching framework, fundamental principles, and ethical boundaries. Reason allows humans to analyze, infer, and understand the connections between various pieces of information. Empirical observation of the universe is the method for gathering data and evidence about physical reality(17). These three sources are not meant to be in conflict; revelation guides reason and observation, while reason and observation help humanity understand and apply revelation in an ever-changing context .

Thinkers like Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Ismail Raji al-Faruqi are chief proponents of this holistic approach. Al-Attas emphasizes that the ultimate purpose of education and knowledge in Islam is to form a good person (*adab*) who knows their place in the cosmos and acknowledges the connection of all things to Allah (18)]. Al-Faruqi, through his concept of the "Islamization of Knowledge," argued that all academic disciplines must be re-examined and re-located within the Tawhīdic worldview, ensuring that knowledge produces benefit, not corruption]. This epistemology ensures that the study of nature (science) is never divorced from ethics and its ultimate purpose: to know and worship the Creator.

The literature review above reveals a remarkably coherent and internally consistent theoretical framework within Islamic thought for understanding the relationship between the Divine, the human, and the natural world. The analysis of this framework yields several key insights:

First, the principle of Tawhīd is not merely a starting point but the pervasive, unifying theme that connects all other components. It dissolves artificial dichotomies and establishes a sacred ontology where all existence is interconnected and points towards a single source. This stands in stark contrast to the fragmented and often conflicting worldviews that have contributed to modern ecological and existential crises. The Tawhīdic paradigm inherently promotes a sense of unity, purpose, and responsibility that is fundamental to a sustainable global ethic.

Second, the dual concept of humanity as ‘Abd and Khalīfah provides a powerful check against both anthropocentric hubris and a passive, nihilistic view of humanity. By defining the human role as a "worshipping vicegerent," this framework masterfully balances humility with agency. The vertical relationship as a servant (*‘abd*) imposes divine limits and ethical constraints, while the horizontal relationship as a trustee (*khalīfah*) empowers humanity with a profound sense of purpose and responsibility. This model effectively counters the modern narrative that sees humans as either the "conquerors of nature" or an insignificant accident in a meaningless universe.

Third, the integration of cosmology, ecotheology, and epistemology demonstrates that Islam offers more than just a set of moral commands; it provides a comprehensive way of knowing

and being. The universe, understood as a book of divine signs (*āyāt*), becomes a primary text for theological reflection, blurring the lines between science and spirituality. Islamic ecotheology then translates this profound cosmological understanding into a practical, action-oriented ethics centered on trust (*amānah*) and balance (*mīzān*). Finally, the epistemology of integrated knowledge provides the methodological justification for this holistic approach, insisting that true wisdom can only be achieved by harmonizing revelation, reason, and empirical evidence.

In conclusion, the triangular relationship framework is not a relic of the past but a vital and relevant paradigm for addressing contemporary challenges. It offers a robust alternative to both secular materialism, which has led to environmental degradation, and otherworldly spiritualities that neglect human agency in the world. By grounding human identity and purpose within a sacred, unified cosmos, this Islamic framework provides a compelling vision for fostering ecological stewardship, social justice, and a meaningful existence, making it a significant contribution to global discourse on sustainability and the future of humanity.

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a focus on thematic interpretation (*tafsir maudhū'i*) of Qur'anic verses related to environmental issues(19). The thematic interpretation method was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive analysis of the Qur'an's guidance on environmental topics by examining relevant verses across different chapters and contexts(20).

The research process began with the identification of Qur'anic verses related to nature, ecology, and human-environment relationships. These verses were identified through a systematic review of the Qur'an and reference to existing indices of Qur'anic themes (21). The identified verses were then analyzed using both classical and contemporary Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), including *Tafsir al-Ṭabarī* by al-Ṭabarī (1998), *Tafsir al-Qurṭubī* by al-Qurṭubī (2006), *Tafsir al-Misbah* by Quraish Shihab (2001), and *Tafsir al-Marāghī* by al-Marāghī (1946).

The analysis focused on two main aspects: (1) the concept of environmental stewardship (*khalīfah*) and associated principles for sustainable living, and (2) the role of education in promoting environmental awareness among Muslim communities. For each aspect, relevant Qur'anic verses were examined through multiple interpretive lenses to extract comprehensive ethical and practical guidance (22). The research also involved a review of contemporary scholarly literature on Islamic environmental ethics to contextualize the Qur'anic teachings within current environmental challenges and solutions. This interdisciplinary approach helped bridge classical Islamic interpretations with modern environmental discourse. The findings were synthesized to develop a holistic understanding of the role of Muslims in environmental conservation based on Qur'anic teachings. The study concludes with recommendations for integrating Islamic environmental ethics into education and economic practices to address contemporary ecological challenges.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. The Concept of Khalīfah: Environmental Stewardship in the Qur'an

The Qur'an establishes the concept of humans as *khalīfah* (stewards or vicegerents) on Earth, which forms the foundation of Islamic environmental ethics. This concept is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً

“And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, ‘Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority (khalīfah)’” (Qur'an 2:30).

The term khalīfah implies a responsibility to maintain, preserve, and develop the Earth in accordance with divine guidance (23). According to classical exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī (1998), the concept of khalīfah carries significant moral and spiritual obligations toward the environment. Al-Ṭabarī explains that humans are entrusted with the responsibility to act as God's representatives on Earth, which includes maintaining ecological balance and preventing environmental degradation. Similarly, al-Qurṭubī (2006) emphasizes that the khalīfah role requires humans to act as caretakers rather than exploiters of natural resources (23).

Contemporary scholars have further developed this concept in relation to modern environmental challenges. Quraish Shihab (2001) in his Tafsir al-Misbah interprets the khalīfah role as requiring humans to establish justice and balance in all aspects of life, including environmental management (24). This interpretation aligns with the Qur'anic emphasis on balance (mīzān) in nature:

وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِي الْمِيزَانِ

“And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance. That you not transgress the balance” (Qur'an 55:7-8).

The principle of balance is complemented by the prohibition of corruption (fasād) in the Qur'an:

ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِي النَّاسِ

“Corruption has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of people have earned” (Qur'an 30:41).

Al-Marāghī (1946) interprets this verse as a direct reference to environmental degradation caused by human activities, emphasizing that such actions contradict the role of khalīfah. These Qur'anic principles establish a framework for environmental conservation that is both theological and practical (25). Muslims, as khalīfah, have a divine mandate to protect the environment, prevent pollution, conserve resources, and maintain ecological balance for current and future generations, as stated:

وَلَا تُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ بَعْدَ إِصْلَاحِهَا

“And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation” (Qur'an 7:56).

4.2. Green Economy Principles in Islamic Teachings

Islamic teachings offer comprehensive principles for a green economy that integrates environmental sustainability with economic development. These principles are derived from Qur'anic injunctions and prophetic traditions that promote moderation, resource efficiency, and environmental ethics (26). The principle of moderation (wasatiyyah) is central to Islamic economic ethics and has significant implications for environmental sustainability. The Qur'an states:

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَنْفَقُوا لَمْ يُسْرِفُوا وَلَمْ يَقْتُرُوا وَكَانَ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ قَوَامًا

“And those who, when they spend, are neither extravagant nor stingy, but are between the two in moderation” (Qur'an 25:67).

Quraish Shihab (2001) interprets this verse as promoting balanced consumption patterns that avoid both wastefulness and extreme frugality. This principle discourages overconsumption, which is a major driver of environmental degradation, while acknowledging legitimate human needs.(27) Resource efficiency is another key principle in Islamic environmental economics. The Qur'an emphasizes the value of resources and prohibits waste:

يَا بَنِي آدَمَ خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ

“O children of Adam, take your adornment at every place of prayer, and eat and drink, but be not excessive. Indeed, He likes not those who commit excess” (Qur'an 7:31).

Al-Ṭabarī (1998) explains that this verse prohibits waste (isrāf) in all aspects of life, including resource consumption. This principle encourages efficient use of natural resources, reduction of waste, and recycling, which are essential components of a green economy(28).Environmental justice is another fundamental aspect of Islamic economic teachings. The Qur'an emphasizes the equitable distribution of resources and the rights of all creatures, including future generations:

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا

“It is He who created for you all of that which is on the earth” (Qur'an 2:29).

Al-Qurṭubī (2006) interprets this verse as establishing the principle of common heritage of natural resources, which must be managed for the benefit of all creation, not just a privileged few. These principles provide a comprehensive framework for a green economy that is environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically viable(29). They offer alternatives to conventional economic models that often prioritize profit over environmental protection and social equity.

4.3. The Role of Education in Shaping Environmental Awareness

Education plays a crucial role in translating Islamic environmental ethics into practical action. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of knowledge and learning:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

“Read, In the name of your Lord who created” (Qur'an 96:1).

This verse, according to Quraish Shihab (2001), establishes the foundation for seeking knowledge about all aspects of creation, including the natural environment. Islamic education has traditionally integrated environmental awareness through the study of Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions related to nature. Al-Marāghī (1946) emphasizes that understanding the signs of God in nature (āyāt Allah) is a religious obligation that leads to greater environmental

consciousness (30). This approach fosters a sense of wonder and respect for the natural world, which is essential for environmental stewardship, as reflected in the Qur'an:

وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ * وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ

“And in the creation of yourselves and what He disperses of moving creatures are signs for a people who are certain [in faith]” (Qur'an 45:4).

Contemporary Islamic education systems can further enhance environmental awareness through several approaches. First, environmental education should be integrated across the curriculum rather than treated as a separate subject (31). This integration helps students understand the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic issues from an Islamic perspective. Second, Islamic educational institutions should model sustainable practices through campus design, resource management, and operations (32). This practical demonstration reinforces theoretical teachings and instills environmentally responsible behaviors.

Third, Islamic education should promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills to address environmental challenges. The Qur'an encourages reflection on natural phenomena:

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى الْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ وَإِلَى السَّمَاءِ كَيْفَ رُفِعَتْ وَإِلَى الْجِبَالِ كَيْفَ نُصِبَتْ

“Do they not look at the camels, how they are created? And at the sky, how it is raised? And at the mountains, how they are erected?” (Qur'an 88:17-19).

Al-Ṭabarī (1998) interprets these verses as encouraging observation, analysis, and reflection on the natural world as a means of understanding divine wisdom and developing environmental solutions(33). Finally, Islamic education should foster a sense of collective responsibility for environmental protection. The Qur'an states:

وَتَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ وَلَا تَعَاوَنُوا عَلَى الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ

“And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression” (Qur'an 5:2).

Al-Qurṭubī (2006) explains that this verse requires Muslims to work together for the common good, which includes environmental conservation. This principle of collective action is essential for addressing large-scale environmental challenges that require community-wide participation.(34)

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has explored the role of Muslims in environmental conservation through a thematic interpretation of Qur'anic verses related to nature and ecology. The analysis reveals that Islamic teachings provide a comprehensive framework for environmental stewardship based on the concept of humans as *khalifah* (stewards) on Earth. This concept establishes both a theological foundation and practical guidance for environmental conservation.

The study identifies three key principles that underpin Islamic environmental ethics: the concept of balance (*mīzān*), the prohibition of corruption (*fasād*), and the principle of moderation (*wasatiyyah*). These principles offer guidance for sustainable living that integrates spiritual, moral, and practical dimensions.

The research also highlights the importance of two main areas for implementing Islamic environmental ethics: green economy principles and educational reform. Islamic teachings on moderation, resource efficiency, and environmental justice provide a framework for a green economy that is environmentally sustainable, socially just, and economically viable. Meanwhile, Islamic education plays a crucial role in shaping environmental awareness through the integration of environmental knowledge, modeling sustainable practices, promoting critical thinking, and fostering collective responsibility.

The study concludes that Muslims have a theological and moral imperative to actively engage in environmental preservation as part of their faith commitment and social responsibility. This engagement requires translating Islamic environmental ethics into practical action through individual behaviors, community initiatives, institutional reforms, and policy advocacy.

The findings of this research have several implications for theory, practice, and policy. For theory, the study contributes to the discourse on Islamic environmental ethics by providing a thematic interpretation of Qur'anic verses related to nature and ecology. For practice, the study offers guidance for Muslim individuals and communities seeking to integrate environmental stewardship into their daily lives. For policy, the study provides insights for developing environmental policies and educational programs that are grounded in Islamic teachings and responsive to contemporary ecological challenges. Further research is needed to explore the application of Islamic environmental ethics in specific contexts, evaluate the effectiveness of environmental education programs in Islamic institutions, and develop indicators for measuring progress toward sustainability from an Islamic perspective.

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