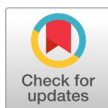
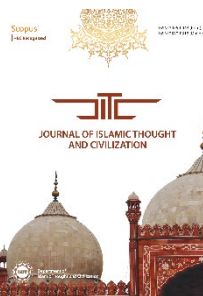


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# Reading Nature as Revelation: A Sufi-Based Ecotheological Interpretation of the Qur'ān in the Context of Global Ecological Crisis

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## Abstract

This article offers a Sufi-based ecotheological interpretation of the Qur'ān by positioning nature (*al-ālam*) as a living revelation (*āyah kauniyyah*) and a manifestation (*tajallī*) of God. In light of the global ecological crisis, this study reframes the human-nature relationship through a Sufi hermeneutic. Drawing on the cosmology of Ibn 'Arabi and the metaphysical critique of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, it argues that nature functions as a mirror through which God reveals Himself. Thus, environmental destruction becomes not only ecological damage, but a rupture in spiritual awareness and Divine connection. Using qualitative library research, this study employs thematic Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsīr maudhū'ī*) supported by Sufi hermeneutics. It interprets selected *āyāt* not merely through ethical or scientific lenses, but symbolically, emphasizing their spiritual dimensions. The dual identity of the human as *'abd* (servant) and *khalīfah* (vicegerent) is explored to show that ecological responsibility is rooted in both ethical duty and ontological design. This approach contributes a novel perspective in Islamic environmental thought by highlighting ecology as a spiritual path toward *ma'rifah* (gnosis). It presents ecological awareness not just as stewardship, but as a form of worship and remembrance. The article concludes that a Sufi interpretation approach can offer a transformative vision for restoring sacred relations between God, humanity, and nature.

**Keywords:** ecotheology, nature, Qur'ān, sufism, *tajallī*

## Introduction

The current global ecological problem has attained a pivotal juncture. Climate change, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss jeopardize the sustainability of the Earth's whole ecosystem. International organizations, like the IPCC and UNEP, assert that this crisis directly stems from a modern development paradigm focused on exploitation, over consumerism, and the disruption of natural equilibrium.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, behind the scientific and technical aspects of this catastrophe

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<sup>1</sup>"Climate Crisis 'Unequivocally' Caused by Human Activities, Says IPCC Report," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2021, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/climate-crisis-unequivocally-caused-by-human-activities-says-ipcc-report>

exists a profound underlying issue: the crisis of modern human spirituality that has disrupted its sacred connection with nature.<sup>2</sup>

Modernity establishes an anthropocentric framework that positions people as central figures, governing entities, and arbiters of the value of all works. Nature is diminished to an object assessed exclusively for its utility to humans, rather than recognized as an entity possessing intrinsic value.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the connection between humans and nature transforms into one of domination rather than harmony. The technical approach, while significant, has demonstrated inadequacy in tackling the core of the dilemma as it overlooks the theological and spiritual aspects that inform human perceptions and interactions with nature.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Qur'ān, nature is not a passive entity but an active and articulate revelation. This concept is referred to as *āyāt kauniyah*, which denotes divine signals evident in creations such as the heavens, earth, precipitation, or fauna.<sup>5</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr asserts that nature constitutes a cosmic text that requires interpretation through spiritual consciousness, akin to *āyāt qauliyah* (the written verses of the Qur'ān). Consequently, evaluating nature in accordance with the Qur'ān entails perceiving the manifestations of the Divine inside creation, rather than only exploiting it. This viewpoint underscores that the exploitation of nature not only yields ecological consequences but also signifies a repudiation of divine revelation that transcends textual boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the preservation of nature is essential to the experience of faith and the acknowledgment of God (*ma'rifaullah*).

Moreover, in numerous poems concerning the cosmos, it is not only shown as a backdrop or resource, but as *āyāt* (symbols) of God that warrant contemplation and reverence.<sup>7</sup> The notion of *wahyu kauniyah* (cosmic revelation) suggests that the universe serves as a dynamic manifestation of Divine communication, analogous to *wahyu qauliyah* (spoken revelation). From this viewpoint, harming nature signifies not just a breach of ecological ethics but also a profanation of the holiness of divine revelation in non-verbal expression.<sup>8</sup>

Despite advancements in Islamic ecotheology, the majority remain concentrated on normative-legal or scientific methodologies that highlight the cosmos's order and human ethical obligations. This article presents an alternative methodology utilizing Sufi hermeneutics, namely the concept of *tajallī*, to interpret nature as a dynamic revelation and a reflection of divine characteristics. This

<sup>2</sup>Augusto Lopez-Claros, Arthur L. Dahl, and Maja Groff, "Responding to Global Environmental Crises," *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century*, 2020, 360–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108569293.020>.

<sup>3</sup>Yi Zhou and Baojing Gu, "The Impacts of Human Activities on Earth Critical Zone," *Earth Critical Zone* 1, no. 1 (2024): 100004, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecz.2024.100004>.

<sup>4</sup>Meerab K, "Addressing the Global Environmental Crisis: A Comprehensive Review of Current Strategies and Challenges," *International Research Journal of Arts and Social Science* 11, no. 3 (2023): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.14303/2276-6502.2023.93>.

<sup>5</sup>Muhammad Naufal Ashshiddieqi and Muhammad Rofi Elwafa, "The Qur'an as a Treatise on Revelation: A Hermeneutical Analysis of the Concept of Revelation by Fazlur Rahman and Abdullah Saeed," *Ishraqi* 24, no. 1 (2025): 257–272.

<sup>6</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, 1990, 95.

<sup>7</sup>Rüdiger Lohlker, "Islamic Ecotheology: Transcending Anthropocentrism through Wahdat Al-Wujūd," *Ascarya: Journal of Islamic Science, Culture, and Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (2024): 82–89, <https://doi.org/10.53754/ISCS.V4I2.705>.

<sup>8</sup>William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: University of New York Press, 2008), 101.

article presents a novel interpretation of the *kauniyah* verses by integrating the concepts of *'ubūdiyyah* and *khlāfah* as a spiritual basis for Islamic environmental ethics.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative method through *library-based research*, using thematic exegesis (*tafsīr maudhū'ī*) on Qur'ānic verses concerning nature (*āyāt kauniyyah*).<sup>9</sup> To deepen the interpretative framework, a *Sufi hermeneutic* is applied, particularly drawing on the metaphysical cosmology of Ibn 'Arabi and the ecospiritual philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Hermeneutically, nature is interpreted not only as textual content but also as a symbol system that reflects divine reality (*ḥaqīqah*).<sup>10</sup> Primary sources include Qur'ānic texts and tafsīr (both classical and contemporary), while secondary sources involve scholarly works in ecotheology, Islamic cosmology, and environmental ethics. The integration of theological, symbolic, and ethical readings aims to generate a spiritually grounded model of ecological awareness rooted in Islamic theology.

This article deliberately positions Sufism as the central framework, employing the concept of *tajallī* as the principal instrument for interpreting nature as a verse, in contrast to works of scientific interpretation or environmental law. This strategy uncovers both textual significance and the deeper aspect of revelation.

## 3. Nature as Revelation: Reading the Cosmos as Divine Language

Revelation (*wahy*) is often narrowly understood as God's word revealed to prophets and codified in the Qur'ān. However, revelation also manifests in non-verbal forms, through the universe and God's creations. Verses like *Surah An-Nahl* (16): 68 and *Al-Qashash* (28): 7 indicate that revelation includes inspiration, instincts, and inner guidance that govern living beings according to God's will. The Qur'ān uses the term *āyāt* not only for the verses of the book but also for natural phenomena, showing that every creation, both macrocosm and microcosm, is a sign of God's presence. As explained by the Sufi 'Aziz al-Nasafi, nature can be seen as divine revelation that must be interpreted. In *Surah Al-Baqarah* (2): 164 and *Ali Imran* (3): 190–191, the creation of the heavens, earth, and the alternation of day and night are called *āyāt* for those who think, signifying that the cosmos is an open book to be read contemplatively.<sup>11</sup>

In the Sufi tradition, Ibn Arabi saw that revelation is divided into two books: the written book (*al-kitāb al-maṣṣū'ūr*), which is the Qur'ān, and the unfolded book (*al-kitāb al-mansyūr*), which is the universe. Both originate from the same divine source and complement each other in guiding humanity towards the knowledge of God (*ma'rīfatullāh*). Just as the Qur'ān contains symbols, parables, and hidden meanings, the universe is also full of divine messages that require inner sensitivity to interpret. Tafsīr of the universe is not merely a scientific endeavor, but a spiritual one: it demands *qalb* (an enlightened heart) in addition to *'aql* (sharp ratio).<sup>12</sup>

The verses in the Qur'ān that explain the cosmos are almost always concluded with contemplative calls such as *li-qawm yatafakkarūn* (for those who reflect), *ya'qilūn* (those who

<sup>9</sup>Muhammad Irfan Apri Syahril, *Thematic Interpretation of the Qur'ān* (Jakarta: PTIQ Press, 2019), 10.

<sup>10</sup>Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*.

<sup>11</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Harvard, vol. 3 (Harvard Press, 1978), 2.

<sup>12</sup>Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyah*, vol. I (Cairo: Būlāq Press, 1967), 155.

understand), or *yashkurūn* (those who give thanks). This pattern shows that the primary function of the cosmic verses is not merely for scientific proof, but to awaken human spiritual awareness.<sup>13</sup>

The Qur'ān used the term *āyat* to denote both the verses of the Quran and natural phenomena. This concept signifies that every aspect of creation, encompassing both the macrocosm (sky, earth, rain, wind) and the microcosm (human soul, animals, plants), serves as a manifestation of God's presence and magnificence. Sufi 'Aziz al-Nasafi elucidates that every aspect of nature, from genus to specific species, parallels surahs, verses, and letters in the Quran; thus, the study of nature is tantamount to deciphering divine revelation on a macrocosmic level.<sup>14</sup>

As explained by the Sufi 'Aziz al-Nasafi, every part of the universe, from genus to specific species, is likened to a surah, verse, and letter in the Qur'ān, so studying the universe is akin to interpreting divine revelation in a macrocosmic sense.<sup>15</sup> Thus, observing the sky, reflecting on the rain, or contemplating the beauty of nature becomes a form of intellectual worship that directs humanity towards the recognition and worship of God. The understanding that the universe is a revelation opens up the space to view it not just as a text, but also as a mirror reflecting the attributes of God. In this framework, the concept of *tajallī* in Sufi cosmology plays an important role in interpreting the universe as a direct manifestation of the Divine presence.

#### 4. *Tajallī* and the Mirror of the Real: Sufi Cosmology as Ecological Ethics

In Sufi tradition, particularly in the teachings of Ibn 'Arabi, the universe is not just a collection of created objects but a manifestation of *tajallī* (the manifestation or appearance of God's attributes in the cosmic reality). God, as emphasized in a *ḥadīth qudsī*, says: "I was a hidden treasure, and I desired to be known. So I created creatures so that I may be known."<sup>16</sup> This statement serves as the foundation for Ibn 'Arabi's explanation that the universe exists not merely because of God's creative will but also because of His longing to be known through creation. The cosmos is an existential expression of the Ultimate Reality (*al-Haqq*), not just a product.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of *tajallī* implies that all creation is a mirror reflecting the Names and Attributes of God. Every cosmic entity, from a cluster of stars to a single leaf, is a reflection of one of the divine dimensions. As explained by Ibn Arabi in *Fushush al-Hikam*:

The One who is High in Himself is the One who possesses the perfection in which all matters of existence are absorbed, as are all non-existent relations, inasmuch as it is not possible that any of these attributes be lacking from Him, be they praiseworthy by custom, logic, or law, or blameworthy by custom, logic or law. That belongs only to the One named Allah. As for what is named other-than-Allah, it is either a locus of His *tajalli* or a form which is in it. If it is the locus of His *tajalli*, it contains distinction. Be-cause of that, there must be distinction between the One who makes *tajalli* and the place of *tajalli*; if it is a form in it, that form is the source of the essential perfection because it is the same as what is manifested in it. That which belongs to Allah belongs to that form. However, it is not said that it is Him nor that it is other-than-Him.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Abu Sayem, "The Eco-Religious Understandings of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr: A Comparative Study," *Islamic Studies* 61, no. 1 (2022): 45–62, <https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v61i1.2195>.

<sup>14</sup>Nasr, *Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, 3:2.

<sup>15</sup>Fritz Meier, *The Problem of Nature in the Esoteric Monism of Islam* (New York: Spirit and Nature, 1954), 202–3.

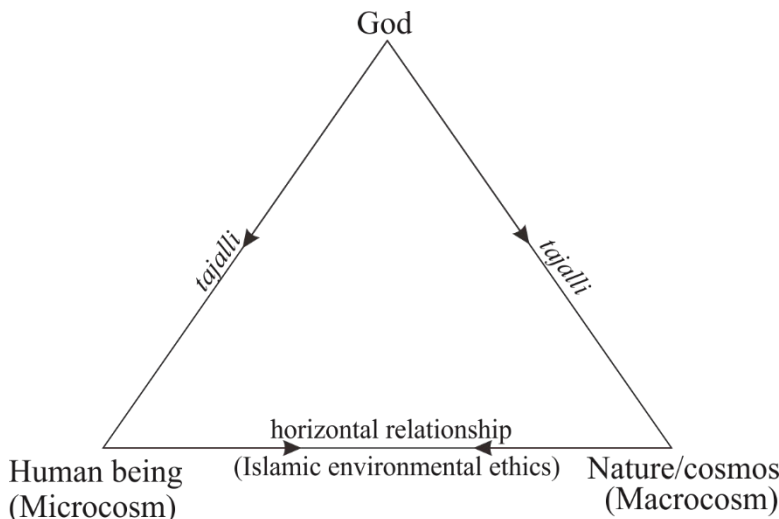
<sup>16</sup>Ibn Arabi, *Fushush Al-Hikam* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub, 2006), 91.

<sup>17</sup>Bambang Irawan, Ismail Fahmi Arrauf Nasution, and Hywel Coleman, "Applying Ibn 'Arabi's Concept of *Tajallī*: A Sufi Approach to Environmental Ethics," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism* 10, no. 1 (2021): 21–36, <https://doi.org/10.21580/tos.v10i1.7204>

<sup>18</sup>Arabi, *Fushush Al-Hikam*, 30.

God's creation reflects His perfection, but it cannot be equated with the Creator and remains connected to Him as a manifestation of His attributes.<sup>19</sup> For the Sufis, witnessing nature is a spiritual experience that brings them face-to-face with God's hidden presence in creation, making natural phenomena a place of *musyāhadah* (Divine witnessing). Nature is a form of *tajalli*, so destroying it is akin to destroying the symbolic representation of God speaking through His creation.

The paradigm of sufism enriches Islamic environmental ethics by combining aesthetic, spiritual, and ethical responsibility values. All creations are meaningful and reflect the Divine, teaching that the relationship between humans and nature is one of trust and contemplation, not superiority.<sup>20</sup> *Tajalli* teaches humility, that humans are not rulers, but witnesses to God's greatness in the universe. This ethic encourages humans to act with goodness beyond their obligations to all creatures.



**Figure 1.** Islamic Environmental Ethics of Sufism

### 5. Critique of Anthropocentrism: From Exploitation to Sacred Relation

One of the deepest roots of the contemporary ecological crisis is the dominance of the anthropocentric paradigm, a perspective that places humans at the center of the universe and as the rightful owners of all creation. This paradigm forms the foundation of the epistemology and value system of modernity, which underpins development, economics, and technology.<sup>21</sup> Within this framework, nature is reduced to an object without spiritual meaning, merely a resource to be exploited for human progress. The climate crisis, species extinction, and ecosystem destruction are the logical consequences of a world that sees the Earth not as a partner, but as a tool.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, 118.

<sup>20</sup>Syafaatun Almirzanah, "God, Humanity and Nature: Cosmology in Islamic Spirituality," *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6130>.

<sup>21</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>22</sup>Erle Christopher Ellis. et al., "Used Planet: A Global History," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110, no. 20 (2013): 7978–7985, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1217241110>.

The secular modern paradigm has produced an environmental ethics that lacks spirituality, where ecological decisions are driven by pragmatic benefits rather than awareness of sanctity and interconnectedness.<sup>23</sup> Even sustainability policies often emphasize domination and cost-benefit calculations, rather than the interconnected responsibility towards nature.<sup>24</sup> This shows that ecological solutions require a shift in the ontological and cosmological paradigm regarding the position of humans in the cosmic order.

The Qur'ān places humans as part of a larger existential network, but not as the center of everything.<sup>25</sup> All creatures glorify God (Al-Isra' (17): 44) and nothing is created in vain (Sad (38): 27). All entities have spiritual value, not just utilitarian value. Therefore, living beings should be viewed as sacred entities that carry the *tajallī* of God. Islamic ethics rejects human hegemony over other creatures and places humans as guardians of cosmic harmony.

As an alternative to the impacts of anthropocentrism, Islamic ecotheology offers the cosmoteandric paradigm, a three-way relationship between God, humans, and nature, where humans receive the trust (Al-Ahzāb (33): 72) and coexist with other creatures, with God as the center (theocentric). The cosmos is not for domination, but a place for humans to know God through spiritual and ethical engagement with creation. This relationship demands empathy, responsibility, and reverence toward God as the true Owner of all existence.<sup>26</sup>

In this context, spirituality is not merely an addition to environmental activism but its foundation. Awareness of God's presence in every element of creation gives rise to fear, respect, and love that transcends pragmatic interests. By placing nature as part of revelation and *tajallī*, and rejecting the anthropocentric paradigm, Islamic ecotheology offers both an ontological critique and an ethical proposal.<sup>27</sup> It guides humans to live in harmony with nature not merely for its benefits, but because they realize that every fallen leaf and every still stone contains the Divine presence that deserves to be respected.

## 6. Human as 'Abd and Khalīfah: Ontological Dualism and Ethical Consequence

The first ontological identity of humans in the Qur'ān is as *khalīfah* (God's vicegerent) and *'abd* (servant of God).<sup>28</sup> This role is not only understood in a moral-theological sense but also carries ontological depth in the Sufī perspective. As *khalīfah*, humans are entrusted with the responsibility of managing the earth based on principles of justice, balance, and order. This role is not an expression of absolute authority, but rather a trust given by God to a creation deemed capable of carrying it.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World* (Chicago: Kazi Publication, 1994).

<sup>24</sup>Hesty Widiastuty and Khairil Anwar, "Islamic Ecotheology: Principles of Environmental Conservation in the Qur'an and Hadith and Their Policy Implications," *Risalah, Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Studi Islam* 11, no. 1 (2025): 465–80.

<sup>25</sup>Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, 95.

<sup>26</sup>Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, 105.

<sup>27</sup>Lewis E. Hahn and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 28 (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1007/9780812694147>.

<sup>28</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 2004), 276.

<sup>29</sup>Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyah*, vol. II (Cairo: Būlāq Press, 1967), 181.

In modernity, the concept of *khalifah* is often reduced to a basis for legitimizing human domination over nature.<sup>30</sup> Because humans do not fully understand their role as *khalifah*, they tend to exercise ownership and control over everything other than their own kind.<sup>31</sup> However, in a spiritual reading, *khalifah* is not about power, but rather a sacred responsibility. The role of the *khalifah* is closer to that of a *rawī* (a trustee or guardian of a trust), not a ruler. As stated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

The purpose and aim of creation is in fact for God to come 'to know' Himself through His perfect instrument of knowledge that is the Universal Man. Man therefore occupies a particular position in this world. He is at the axis and centre of the cosmic milieu at once the master and custodian of nature. By being taught the names of all things he gains domination over them, but he is given this power only because he is the vicegerent (*khalifah*) of God on earth and the instrument of His Will. Man is given the right to dominate over nature only by virtue of his theomorphic make-up, not as a rebel against heaven.<sup>32</sup>

However, the position of the human as *khālīfah* (vicegerent) does not stand alone. It is intimately tied to another fundamental ontological identity in Islamic spirituality: that of a *'abd* (a servant who submits completely to the will and decree of God). If *khālīfah* entails a cosmic responsibility, then servanthood (*'ubūdiyyah*) affirms that humans do not possess absolute autonomy over creation.<sup>33</sup> In this context, nature is not the possession or domain of human power, but rather part of God's kingdom, which also submits to Him (Al-Isra' (17): 44). By recognizing themselves as *'abd*, humans are called to treat nature with reverence and spiritual humility, not domination.

Being both *'abd* and *khālīfah* is not a contradiction. So, when a human being fulfills their role, which identity comes first, *khalifah* or *'abd*? Sachiko Murata describes that one must first become a servant, recognizing their position, before carrying out the task of *khālīfah*. As a *khālīfah* (God's representative), one should be a servant in action embodying and actualizing God's attributes, spreading divine mercy, compassion, and justice. Not the opposite: exploiting nature or oppressing the weak.<sup>34</sup>

The dual role of humans as *'abd* and *khālīfah* finds its deepest meaning within the Sufi framework. In a *hadiith qudsi*,<sup>35</sup> God states that He created creation out of a desire to be known: "*I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known, so I created creation in order to be known.*" As a servant, the human reflects submission and limitation; as God's representative, the human mirrors divine attributes. These two aspects make the human being a mirror or *tajallī* of God's (a locus where God beholds Himself through creation)<sup>36</sup>. Thus, human ecological responsibility is not merely a social ethic, but part of a metaphysical project: making the earth a space for divine recognition and witnessing in its most perfect form.

<sup>30</sup>Fazlun M. Khalid, "Islam and the Environment," in *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change*, vol. 5, *Social and Economic Dimensions of Global Environmental Change*, ed. Peter Timmerman (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 332–339.

<sup>31</sup>Arabi, *Fusus Al-Hikam*, 8.

<sup>32</sup>Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, 96.

<sup>33</sup>Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, 31.

<sup>34</sup>Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Bandung: Mizan, 1999), 84.

<sup>35</sup>*Hadīth Qudsi* is a divine saying delivered by the Prophet Muhammad outside of the Qur'an. Its meaning comes from God, while the wording is from the Prophet. It often deals with spiritual matters and the relationship between God and His servant.

<sup>36</sup>Ahmad Shahid, "The Morality of the Caliphate of Humanity in The Qur'an According to the Theory of Islamic Ecotheology: A Thematic Interpretation Study," *Jurnal Perspektif* 4, no. 2 (December 21, 2020): 82–106, <https://doi.org/10.15575/JP.V4I2.80>.

### 7. A Sufi Perspective on *ayāt kauniyah*: From Scientific Object to Divine Sign

After understanding the universe as part of God's living revelation, humans are not merely inhabitants of the earth, but *khalīfah* (representatives of Allah) entrusted with the responsibility to read, care for, and interpret nature as signs of God (His *ayāt*). Human as *khalīfah* (QS. Al-Baqarah: 30) does not mean power to exploit, but a spiritual and moral responsibility to maintain the harmony of creation. The universe speaks and contains Divine messages waiting to be understood with a clear heart and conscious mind.

Every Qur'ānic verse about the universe is not merely scientific information, but a living revelation leading human to knowledge of God (*ma'rifatullāh*), strengthening faith (*īmān billāh*), and activating ecological responsibility.<sup>37</sup> Reading nature means reading God's symbol, making them part of the spiritual and ethical curriculum for humans as *khalīfah*.

Below is a collection of verses in the Qur'ān that speak about the cosmos:

**Table 1.** Qur'ānic Verses on Cosmic Signs (*Ayat Kauniyyah*)

	Qur'ānic Reference	Description of Signs
1	Al-Baqarah (2): 164	The creation of the sky, the earth, the change of night and day, ships at sea, rain water, wind
2	Āli 'Imrān (3): 190–191	Heaven and earth as signs for <i>ulul albab</i>
3	Al-Nahl (16): 10–11	Rainwater, plants and fruit
4	Al-Rūm (30): 20–25	The creation of man, differences in language and skin color, sleep and wakefulness, lightning and rain
5	Yā-Sīn (36): 33–36	The dead land coming back to life, the wine, the fruit, the pair of creatures
6	Al-Ghāshiyah (88): 17–20	Camel, sky, mountain, earth
7	Al-Nūr (24): 43	Clouds, rain, lightning, thunder
8	Al-An'ām (6): 99	Rainwater that grows plants and fruit
9	Al-Mulk (67): 3–4	The creation of a flawless, multi-layered sky
10	Al-Dhāriyāt (51): 20–21	Signs on the earth and in man

In the tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis (*tafsir*), *ayat kauniyah* (verses that describe natural phenomena such as the sky, earth, rain, wind, plants, and animals) have become a broad field of interpretation, approached from various perspectives. In the modern era, a strong trend has emerged that interprets these verses through a scientific lens.<sup>38</sup> Figures such as Tantawi Jauhari (d. 1940) and Zaghlul An-Najjar (b. 1933) are known as pioneers of scientific exegesis. They sought to demonstrate that the Qur'ān contains scientific indications that preceded modern discoveries, thus empirically proving the truth and miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.<sup>39</sup>

In this empirical approach, natural phenomena mentioned in *ayat kauniyah* are seen as rational objects that can be explained through scientific methodology. For example, the verses about human

<sup>37</sup>Abu Sayem, "Islam and Environmental Ethics: Environmental Ethics: A Qur'anic Approach," in *Asian Spiritualities and Social Transformation*, ed. Simon Shui-Man Kwan and Wai-Yin Chow (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), 263–276, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-2641-1\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-2641-1_15)

<sup>38</sup>Ipin Tajul, "The Paradigm of Scientific Interpretation from the Perspective of Classical and Modern Exegetes," *Ahwaluna | Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Islam* 2, no. 1 (2023): 72–84, <https://doi.org/10.70143/ahwalunajurnalhukumkeluargaislam.v2i1.149>.

<sup>39</sup>Muhammad Rifaki, Luthfi Raziq, and Abdul Azis, "Interpretation of the Kauniyah Verses [Tafsir Ayat-Ayat Kauniyah]," *Jurnal Studi Qur'an Dan Tafsir* 3, no. 2 (2024): 170–191.

creation (Qurʾān, Al-Muʾminun (23): 12–14) are interpreted in the context of embryology; verses about mountains (Qurʾān, An-Naba (30): 6–7) are explained through geology. Nature is understood as a system governed by natural laws, and the human role is to study and manage it responsibly.<sup>40</sup>

**Table 2.** Closing Expressions of Qurʾānic Cosmic Verses: Literal Meaning and Theological-Ethical Implication

	Qurʾānic Reference	Closing Pattern	Theological-Ethical Implication
1	Al-Baqarah (2): 164	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yaʿqilūn</i> “Signs for a people of understanding”	Use intellect to grasp divine order.
2	Āli ʿImrān (3): 190–191	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yatafakkarūn</i> “Signs for people who give thought”	Deep contemplation leading to insight.
3	Al-Naḥl (16): 10–11	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yashkurūn</i> “Signs for a grateful people”	Gratitude through ecological care.
4	Al-Rūm (30): 20–25	<i>inna fī dhālika la-āyāt</i> “Truly in that there are signs”	Unity of God within diversity.
5	Yā-Sīn (36): 33–36	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yuʾminūn</i> “Signs for those who believe”	Faith strengthened by life-giving power.
6	Al-Ghāshiyah (88): 17–20	<i>inna fī dhālika la-āyāt</i> “Truly in that there are signs”	Reminder of divine wisdom.
7	Al-Nūr (24): 43	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yaʿqilūn</i> “Signs for a people of understanding”	Nature as cosmic praise.
8	Al-Anʿām (6): 99	<i>li-āyātīn li-qawmin yuʾminūn</i> “Signs for those who believe”	God’s providence inspires stewardship.
9	Al-Mulk (67): 3–4	<i>dhālika la-āyātīn lil-mutasimīn</i> “These are signs for people of discernment”	Requires refined spiritual perception.
10	Al-Dhāriyāt (51): 20–21	<i>inna fī dhālika la-āyāt</i> “Truly in that there are signs”	Self-knowledge linked to cosmic awareness.

However, this approach differs significantly from the spiritual-theological perspective, especially within the Sufi tradition. The Sufi Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240) did not view *ayat kauniyah* merely as descriptions of objective phenomena, but as symbols of the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). In this view, all creation is *tajalli* (a manifestation of God’s attributes and names in outward forms). Nature is a mirror (*mirʾah*) in which God reflects Himself, and each element of the cosmos is a divine sign to be perceived with the inner eye (*basirah*), not merely understood by intellect alone.<sup>41</sup> If we observe the closing part of each verse in the Qurʾān that speaks about the cosmos (see Table 2).

One of the most distinctive characteristics of *ayat kauniyah* (verses about the natural world) in the Qurʾān is that they are almost always concluded with contemplative calls such as: “for those who reflect” (*yatafakkarūn*), “use reason” (*yaʿqilūn*), “listen” (*yasmaʿūn*), or “give thanks” (*yashkurūn*). The universe is created in such a way that it inherently reflects and reminds of God’s presence. The

<sup>40</sup>Muhammad Firdaus, “Interpretation of the Kauniyyah Verse from the Perspective of Thanthawi Jauhari in the Interpretation of Al-Jawahir in the Interpretation of the Qurʾan Al-Karim,” *Bashaʾir: Jurnal Studi Al-Qurʾan Dan Tafsir* 4, no. 1 (2024): 55–66, <https://doi.org/10.47498/bashair.v4i1.3127>.

<sup>41</sup>Arabi, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiyah*, 1967, 167.

structure of the cosmos is not only physical, but also contains spiritual messages that connect human beings with the Divine. Seyyed Hossein Nasr emphasizes that the universe is a divine revelation containing the signs (*āyāt*)<sup>42</sup> of God, such that every natural phenomenon is a symbol of a higher reality, calling humanity to know and remember God.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, the universe functions as a “memory” or mirror that keeps the awareness of God alive within human beings and all creation. Moreover, humans, as *khalifah* (vicegerents) on Earth, are endowed with the capacity to understand nature and through this understanding, they can draw nearer to knowing God.<sup>44</sup> This indicates that the primary purpose of these verses describing natural phenomena is not merely to form scientific knowledge, but to awaken human spiritual consciousness guiding contemplation of creation toward remembrance of the Creator.

For Ibn ‘Arabi, the *ayat kauniyah* (cosmic verses) are manifestations of the Ultimate Reality. He stated that nothing exists in this world except as a manifestation of God’s Being.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, when a Sufi gazes at the sky or hears the rumble of thunder, they do not stop at its physical aspect, but perceive behind it the presence of God speaking in the language of symbols.

Jalaluddin Rumi, in his *Mathnawi*, even describes the natural world as a prison for those trapped in materialistic understanding those who fail to grasp the truth behind the universe. “This world, indeed, is the prison of your souls: oh, go in younder direction, for there lies your open country. This world is finite, adn truly that (other) is infinite: image and form are a barrier to that Reality.”<sup>46</sup>

Within the framework of Sufism (*tasawwuf*), the goal of interpretation is not the accumulation of scientific information, but an existential closeness to God (*ma’rifatullah*). Qur’anic verses that speak of the cosmos serve as a means for witnessing (*syuhud*) and inwardly experiencing the Divine existence. Sufis do not seek to control or explain nature, but to spiritually unite with it, because nature is part of the living expression of God.

## 8. Ecological Ethics in Islam: Caring for the Earth as Worship and Tawhid

The global ecological crisis is a planetary emergency marked by serious and widespread damage to the Earth’s life-support systems, caused by excessive, unsustainable, and often exploitative human activities.<sup>47</sup> This crisis encompasses multiple, interconnected dimensions of environmental degradation. It is not merely an environmental issue, but also an ethical, economic, social, and spiritual problem. It reflects that the modern development paradigm centered on economic growth and natural exploitation has exceeded the Earth’s carrying capacity (*planetary boundaries*).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Within the Arabic language, *āyāh* is interpreted as a symbol, a sign or representation of something broader. Therefore, the verses in the Qur’ān, as symbols, depict a deeper dimension of life and humanity’s relationship with God.

<sup>43</sup>Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 26.

<sup>44</sup>Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man*, 21.

<sup>45</sup>Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*.

<sup>46</sup>Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Mathnawi of Jalalu’d-din Rumi, Translation by Reynold Alleyne Nicholson “E.J.W. Gibb Memorial” Series.*, vol. 2 (London: Messrs Luzac, 1972), 31.

<sup>47</sup>Ellis, et al., “Used Planet: A Global History.”

<sup>48</sup>Ahmad Zuhdi, M. Agus Muhtadi Bilhaq, and Lusiana Rahmadani Putri, “Islamic Philosophy’s Approach to Environmental Ethics: An Analysis of the Teachings of the Qur’ān and Hadith,” *Journal of Noesantara Islamic Studies* 1, no. 4 (2024): 198–213, <https://doi.org/10.70177/jnis.v1i4.1392>.

Organizations such as the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change)<sup>49</sup> and UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) consistently report that ecological damage has reached a critical point, and without drastic change, the future of human life and other creatures on Earth is at serious risk.<sup>50</sup> Even more concerning, this crisis is accelerating globally, crossing national borders and generational lines. Developing countries suffer the most severe impacts, despite the majority of the damage being caused by industrial nations. This creates an ecological imbalance that also implicates global justice.<sup>51</sup>

Humans who recognize the universe as a living revelation (*ayat kauniyah*) and a manifestation of God will no longer view nature as a resource to be exploited, but as God's book that speaks of Divine wisdom. The global ecological crisis arises from humanity's failure to fulfill its khalifah role, treating nature as a commodity. Qur'anic ecological ethics teaches that damaging nature is akin to damaging God's symbol (*ayāt*).<sup>52</sup> Preserving the earth is part of worship, making ecology a theological issue, not just a technical or political one. This awareness calls for ecological solutions to be supported by a spiritual vision of nature as trust and Divine sign.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that modern technology is neither neutral nor entirely positive. He emphasizes that while technology brings benefits, it also carries a "demonic" aspect that harms the spiritual atmosphere of human beings both inwardly and outwardly. Nasr warns that the Muslim world should not blindly imitate modern technology, but must develop its own critique of it, just as some Western thinkers did in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>53</sup>

Modern life has brought significant negative impacts on the environment. One of its major shortcomings is environmental degradation caused by the uncontrolled use of modern technology. Technology, once seen as a tool for progress, has in many cases become a force capable of destroying the natural web that sustains human life.<sup>54</sup> This occurs because modernization often neglects the rights of other creatures and the balance of nature, prioritizing human interests alone, leading to severe environmental damage.<sup>55</sup> In addition, massive industrialization and urbanization have resulted in the loss of agrarian life and increased pollution, along with the destruction of natural habitats. This process also leads to social isolation and nihilism, further deepening humanity's disharmony with the natural world.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, environmental conservation and technological development must be supported by a spiritual vision that views nature as a trust and a sign of God. From a Sufi eco-theological perspective, the relationship between human needs and theological obedience is not dichotomous, but interrelated within the framework of tauhid balance. Human utilisation of nature is not negated, but is guided and

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<sup>49</sup>Michael E. Mann, "Widespread and Severe: The Climate Crisis Is Here, But There's Still Time to Limit the Damage," *Time*, August 9, 2021, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://time.com/6088531/ipcc-climate-report-hockey-stick-curve/>.

<sup>50</sup>"Climate Crisis 'Unequivocally' Caused by Human Activities," *The Guardian*.

<sup>51</sup>Ilona M. Otto et al., "Social Tipping Dynamics for Stabilizing Earth's Climate by 2050," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 117, no. 5 (February 4, 2020): 2354–65, <https://doi.org/10.1073/PNAS.1900577117>.

<sup>52</sup>Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an* (Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2008), 259.

<sup>53</sup>Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam, Science, Muslim and Technology* (Islamabad: Dost Publication, 2009), 65.

<sup>54</sup>Fernando Gabriel, Leon Pijnenburg, and Bedir Tekinerdogan, "Perspectives and Impacts of Modern Technology on the Environment and Society," *Sustainable Futures* 11 (2026): 101583, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.SFTR.2025.101583>.

<sup>55</sup>Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, 191.

<sup>56</sup>Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, 205.

limited by the awareness of *'ubūdiyyah* (servitude) and *khilāfah* (trust). When human needs are fulfilled within the horizon of obedience to God—by recognising nature as *āyāt kauniyyah* and the space of Divine existence—environmental conservation is no longer understood as a goal of human welfare, but as a spiritual prerequisite for the sustainability of life itself.

Sufi ecological ethics are not intended as a set of technical rules or instant solutions to the environmental crisis, but rather as an effort to guide humans toward a consciousness of tawhid that unites ecological responsibility, servitude to God, and respect for nature as a sign of the Divine presence. The awareness that views nature as a living revelation and a divine trust is the foundation for the emergence of a sustainable ecological attitude, whether at the personal, communal, or structural level. Thus, the spiritual dimension is not placed as a complement to environmental ethics, but as an ontological and ethical basis that animates all human ecological practices amid the increasingly complex challenges of the global crisis.

This study still has limitations because it focuses on the development of a theoretical framework and theological reflection, so it has not yet elaborated in depth on the practical dimensions of Sufi ecological ethics. The implementative aspects, particularly in the realm of public policy, environmental governance, and the formation of ecological morals in everyday life, have not been the main focus of discussion. Therefore, further research needs to examine how the principles of *'ubūdiyyah*, *khilāfah*, and *āyāt kauniyyah* awareness can be translated into equitable environmental policies, spirituality-based ecological education programs, and ethical practices that shape the ecological character of society. An empirical and interdisciplinary approach is expected to complement this theological study, so that Islamic ecological ethics not only functions as a normative framework, but also as a relevant practical guide for contemporary ecological challenges.

## 9. Conclusion

The current global ecological crisis is not merely a technical issue, but a profound spiritual and ethical crisis, caused by the anthropocentric view that disconnects humans from the sacred meaning of nature. Nature, as part of God's revelation (*ayat kauniyah*), must be understood not just as a resource, but as a manifestation of God's attributes. In Islam, humans, as vicegerent and servant of God, are responsible for maintaining the balance of creation and recognizing God's presence in nature.

This article proposes an eco-sufism approach, interpreting nature as a symbol of God's *tajallī*, rather than a rational object. It introduces an ecological ethic based on spirituality that integrates spiritual, ethical, and cosmological dimensions, expanding the scope of Islamic ecotheology and opening space for dialogue with environmental spirituality in other Abrahamic religions. Building an ecological ethic based on sufism requires a paradigm shift: from exploitation to spiritual relationship, from a technical approach to a holistic one that combines knowledge, faith, and compassion. Caring for nature is part of worship and ecological *tawhīd*, where the awareness that damaging the earth is a violation of God's *ayāt* makes environmental preservation an integral part of humanity's spiritual, social, and ecological piety.

### Author Contribution

**M. Nawa Syarif Fajar Sakti:** conceptualization, methodology, data curation, supervision. **Muh. Nur'Afwan:** conceptualization, methodology, supervision. **Bagus Haziratul Qodsiyah:** formal analysis, methodology. **Nur Hidayaturrohmah:** writing – original draft. **Khoerul Anwar:** writing – original draft, formal analysis. **Fina Lailatul Masruroh:** writing – original draft. **Muhammad Taufiqurrahman:** writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. **Muhamad Maulana:** project administration, writing – review & editing.

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The manuscript author has absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

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The data associated with this study will be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

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