

# Eco-Relational Khalīfah: A Posthumanist Performative Critique on The Modern Qur'an Commentaries

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**Abstract:** *This paper critically examines the construction of modern subjectivity within Islamic discourse, particularly through modern Qur'anic commentaries, and its implications for understanding the concept of "khalīfah." Modern interpretations often reinforce anthropocentric essentialism, Cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics, which situate humans as dominators over nonhuman creation, separate the spiritual from the material, and isolate individuals from other subjects. Through an analysis of hermeneutical engagement of prominent modern Muslim exegetes on the Qur'anic concept of khalīfah, this study identifies patterns of anthropocentric essentialism, dualistic thinking, and individual metaphysics in modern understanding of khalīfah. The research then explores how these frameworks limit ecological and relational understandings of khalīfah. In response, this paper proposes a posthumanist and performative reimagining of khalīfah based on relational metaphysics by drawing on contemporary philosophical perspectives. This reinterpretation shifts from human-centered dominion toward a recognition of the dynamic intra-action between human and nonhuman agents, offering a more holistic and ethically responsible interpretation aligned with the Qur'anic vision of interconnected creation.*

**Keywords:** *Khalīfah; Modern Qur'an Commentaries; Anthropocentrism; Relational Metaphysics; Posthumanism*

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary discourse on *khalīfah* has undergone a shift in focus, with increasing emphasis being placed on its implications for pressing ecological issues. The Qur'anic concept of humans as *khalīfatullāh fī al-arḍ* positions *khalīfah* as a pivotal element in shaping human relationships with the Earth and other forms of life. This concept is further accentuated by the pressing ecological necessity to rectify damaged relationships among living beings. Lynn White's seminal article on the subject posits that religion, from a Christian vantage point, is not merely a private belief system but rather a formative moral grammar that shapes human–nature relations. Consequently, ecological crises often compel reinterpretations, resulting in an expansion of the

concept of *love* to encompass all of creation.<sup>1</sup> The ecological problem under consideration is inextricably linked to the hermeneutical disagreements surrounding the concept of *istikhlāf*. A prevalent exegetical trend interprets *khalīfah* as a divine mandate that bestows a distinct and exceptional status upon humanity, frequently founded on epistemic or moral faculties. This interpretation thus substantiates human domination over the Earth and its creatures. However, a genealogical examination of *tafsīr*'s intellectual history suggests that the interpretation of human cosmic dominion as "representation of the Divine" is a conceptual-discursive construction that emerged after the prophetic period.

The conceptualization of *khalīfah* as deputy, representative, or superior subject invested with divine authority emerged amid post-Prophetic social turmoil and the institutionalization of caliphal rule. As Wadad al-Qadi aptly demonstrated, early exegetes who interpreted *khalīfah* as authority were profoundly attuned to the prevailing political *zeitgeist* and the intellectual-juridical landscape of their era.<sup>2</sup> Their exegesis developed in close dialogue with *kalām* and *fiqh*, providing technical vocabularies through which Qur'anic *istikhlāf* could be aligned with evolving institutions of governance.<sup>3</sup> This fusion of horizons provided exegetes with a technical vocabulary through which the Qur'anic notion of *istikhlāf* could be aligned with emerging institutions of governance. W. Montgomery Watt's account of the early political consolidation of *khalīfah*, corroborated by Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds' analysis of sovereignty and succession, further clarifies how *khalīfah* became tethered to specific practices of rule.<sup>4</sup> Notably, however, this classical perspective primarily confined authority to human-human relations; the office indexed one segment of humanity governing another, rather than a metaphysical rule of humankind over the more-than-human world (as also reflected in classical exegetical articulations).<sup>5</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, this historically contingent political grammar had expanded into a broader ontology. As Fritz Steppat clearly observed, humanity's deputyship became widely recognized as encompassing a comprehensive dominion over nonhuman creation.<sup>6</sup> Modern Qur'anic commentators did not simply reproduce the classical equation of *khalīfah* with the caliphal office; they generalized it into an ontological privilege that affirmed humanity as God's representative and ruler of cosmic reality (including in influential modern

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 1967): 1203–7, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.

<sup>2</sup> Wadad al-Qadi. "The Term 'Khalifa' in Early Exegetical Literature." *Die Welt Des Islams* 28, no. 1/4 (1988): 392–411. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571186>.

<sup>3</sup> Han Hsien Liew. *The Caliphate of Adam: Theological Politics of the Qur'ānic Term Ḥalīfa*. Brill, February 29, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700585-12341381>.

<sup>4</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968); Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds, *God's Caliph: Religious Authority in the First Centuries of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> cf. Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Qurṭūbī, *Al-Jāmi' Li Ahkām Al-Qur'ān Wa al-Mubayyin Limā Taḍammanah Min al-Sunnah Wa Āy al-Furqān*, ed. 'Abdullah ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin, I (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālāh, 2006), 394–98; Abū al-Qāsim al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kasasyāf 'an Haqāiq Ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl Wa 'Uyūn al-Aqāwīl Fī Wujūh al-Ta'wīl*, ed. 'Ādil A. 'Abd al-Maujūd and 'Alī M. Mu'awwad, I (Riyadh: Maktabah al-'Ubikān, 1998), 251; Abu al-Fidā' Ismā'il Ibn Katsīr, *Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-'Āzīm*, ed. M. al-Sayyid Muḥammad and M. al-Sayyid Rasyād, I (Giza: Mu'assasah Qurṭubah, 2000), 339–40.

<sup>6</sup> Fritz Steppat, "God's Deputy: Materials On Islam's Image of Man," *Arabica* 36, no. 2 (January 1989): 163–72, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157005889X00034>.

commentaries).<sup>7</sup> Philosophically, this evolution reflects Islamic thought's entangled encounter with Western modernity—often mediated by colonial power—importing an anthropocentric essentialism in which human subjectivity, now theologically authorized, legitimates instrumentalization of nature.<sup>8</sup> The vertical authority once exercised by a caliph over human subjects is transposed into a vertical relation between humankind and the rest of creation, reinforcing modern dualisms and veiling the Qur'anic vision of a vibrantly interconnected cosmos. The visibility of this genealogy is of consequence. Therefore, the ecological crisis is not merely the result of moral negligence. Rather, it is the consequence of a particular history of authority and subjectivity. An eco-relational rereading of then *khalifah* must interrogate and transform this history.

In contemporary Islamic ecological discourse, scholars such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Fazlun M. Khalid, and Anna M. Gade have critically evaluated modernity's discourse and praxis and proposed faith-based environmental ethics in response to ecological catastrophe. Nasr diagnoses modernity's disasters—subjectivism, individualism, desacralization, domination, and destructive exploitation—alongside a scientific tendency to detach knowledge from spiritual meaning and responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Khalid similarly calls for reevaluating consumerism and industrial modernity and for ethical reconnection within a sacred order.<sup>10</sup> Gade complements these projects by attending to lived, cultural, and local practices of Muslim environmentalism and by re-situating *khalifah* within that discourse.<sup>11</sup> Correspondingly, a range of studies has challenged the plausibility of construing humans as God's vicegerent in an anthropocentric sense—one that baptizes humanity as The notion of the *center of the universe* has been identified as a significant site of contention in the context of ecological morality, particularly with regard to the concept of *khalifah*.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, the field of environmental humanities has undergone a shift toward relational perspectives, which Kocku von Stuckrad has termed the “relational turn.” This relational turn has challenged conventional binaries such as human/nonhuman, nature/culture, and mind/body.<sup>13</sup> At this juncture, we can underscore that relational turn exhorts the necessity

<sup>7</sup> cf. M. Husain Fadhlullah, *Min Waḥy Al-Qur'ān*, I (Beirut: Dār al-Malāk, 1998), 227–31; 'Abd al-Razzaq Majid Mazdah, *Al-Tajdid Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, I (Qom: Mu'assasah al-Islāmiyyah li al-Buḥūs wa al-Ma'lūmāt, 2007), 312–61; Mohsen Qera'ati, *Tafsīr Al-Nūr*, trans. Muhammad Ayyub, I (Beirut: Dār al-Mu'arrikh al-'Arabī, 2014), 88–92.

<sup>8</sup> Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002); Farzin Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (London: Anthem Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1986); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1993); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, Revised and Enlarged Edition (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Fazlun M. Khalid, “Islam and the Environment – Ethics and Practice an Assessment,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 11 (2010): 707–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2010.00249.x>; Fazlun M. Khalid, “Exploring Environmental Ethics in Islam,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 130–45; Fazlun M. Khalid, *Signs on the Earth: Islam, Modernity, and the Climate Crisis* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Anna M. Gade, *Muslim Environmentalisms: Religious and Social Foundations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Anna M. Gade, “Muslim Environmentalisms and Environmental Ethics: Theory and Practice for Rights and Justice,” *The Muslim World* 113, no. 3 (2023): 242–59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muw.12474>.

<sup>12</sup> Jaafar Sheikh Idris, “Is Man the Vicegerent of God?” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990): 99–110; Rudi Paret, “Signification Coranique de Halifa et d'autres Derives de La Racine Halafa,” *Studia Islamica*, no. 31 (1970): 211, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595074>; Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Kocku Von Stuckrad, “Undisciplining the Study of Religion: Critical Posthumanities and More-than-Human Ways of Knowing,” *Religion* 53, no. 4 (October 2023): 616–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2023.2258705>.

for Muslim scholarship to assess the limitations of established *istikhlāf* frameworks and to formulate a more relational account of *khalīfah* that is commensurate with environmental devastation and mass extinction.

Farzin Vahdat's critique of modern subjectivity in Islamic discourse offers an indispensable diagnosis. According to him, modern constructions of *khalīfah* often internalize an autonomous human subject who stands over against the world as an object to be known, controlled, and improved.<sup>14</sup> In this way, the anthropocentric dominion sanctifies itself as politics is transposed into cosmic rule. However, Vahdat does not fully provide an alternative ontology of agency capable of displacing this sovereign subject. At this point, we need to elaborate Karen Barad's agential realism, which posits that agency does not reside in pre-given entities but rather emerges through intrapersonal and inter-personal interactions that entangle matter and meaning.<sup>15</sup> Read together, Vahdat and Barad allow us, on the one hand, to trace how modern notions of subjectivity have shaped Qur'anic hermeneutics on *khalīfah*, and, on the other, to reimagine *khalīfah* not as a fixed predicate of the human, but as a distributed pattern of relational responsibilities in which humans and nonhuman are co-constituted before God. Making this transition from critique to relational ontology explicit is crucial for grounding what we call the "eco-relational *khalīfah*"; a reconceptualization aligned with the Qur'anic logic of *tawhīd*, in which divine unity undercuts human exceptionalism and invites ethical entanglement with all creation.

The present article posits that prevailing contemporary commentaries on *khalīfah* are characterized by anthropocentrism, dualism, and individualism. It further contends that a relational posthuman perspective facilitates a more contextually adequate reading of *khalīfah fī al-arḍ* in response to environmental crises. Our methodology is structured in three phases. Initially, it provides a comprehensive exposition of Barad's agential realism and the metaphysical problems it addresses. This is followed by Vahdat's account of modern subjectivity as a conduit to exegetical analysis. The second phase involves an examination of four influential modern commentaries—Shirazi (*al-Amṣal fī Tafsīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*), Mughniyyah (*Tafsīr al-Kāsyif*), Hamka (*Tafsīr al-Azhar*), and Qutb (*Fi Zilāl Al-Qur'ān*) selected for their hermeneutical authority and for representing a mainstream socio-political and revivalist trajectory across geographic (Arab and non-Arab) and denominational (Sunnī and Shī'a) horizons. Throughout this article, the term "modern Qur'an commentaries" is therefore used in this focused sense and does not claim to encompass the full spectrum of modern interpretive projects such as modernist rationalist, literary-thematic, or feminist readings even though these four works have been highly formative in shaping popular and institutional understandings of *khalīfah*. The third and final phase is the proposal of an eco-relational reinterpretation of *khalīfah* that brings nonhuman agencies into view as co-constitutive of vicegerency, with reflections on Islamic ecotheological possibilities. As Vahdat notes, human subjectivity serves as *the very cornerstone of modernity*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2015), 14.

Posthuman critiques of the human/nonhuman boundary (e.g., Donna Haraway<sup>17</sup> and Rosi Braidotti<sup>18</sup>) demonstrate how this pattern of domination is intertwined with colonialism, racism, and sexism. Barad's posthumanist proposal elucidates the necessity of pairing critique with a relational ontology of agency, thereby facilitating a performative reorientation of *khalifah* beyond modern sovereign subjecthood.<sup>19</sup>

This section presents the philosophical foundation of the article. The first part will highlight the problems of anthropocentric essentialism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics through Barad's philosophy while the second part will explore Farzin Vahdat's critique of modern subjectivity in Islamic discourse. This exposition will later highlight the problems of anthropocentric essentialism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics within the Islamic discourse, which constructs a flawed understanding of the concept of *khalifah*, which comes at the expense of Earth's ecological wholeness.

Anthropocentrism is defined here as a tendency to put humans at the center of all things. This anthropocentric tendency is rooted within the humanist tradition. Humanism places the humans as "measure of all things," as it is a "doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress".<sup>20</sup> This tendency shapes how humans relate with other entities in a binary logic, separating the humans and the nonhuman others. It would be easier to understand anthropocentrism in relation to the next two problematic ideas.

Cartesian dualism also binarily separates the immaterial *res cogitans* and the material *res extensa*, placing the former as more important than the latter. This dualism assumes an inherent, fixed, and unambiguous separation of subjects and objects.<sup>21</sup> It goes in tandem with the anthropocentric tendency of human exceptionalism based on the idea of intellectual superiority. As Badmington mentioned, "There is, in other words, an absolute difference between the human and the inhuman: only the former has the capacity for rational thought. Reason belongs solely to the human and, as such, serves to unite humans".<sup>22</sup> This point will be explored further later within the modern Islamic discourse.

Individual metaphysics refers to a way of understanding the reality of things as individuated and isolated entities, capable of existing independently of other entities.<sup>23</sup> Combined with anthropocentrism and Cartesian dualism, individual metaphysics assumes humans exist as independent individuals, with pre-existing metaphysical separation between entities because of their rationality. It takes root in atomism, according to which "the properties of all things derive from the properties of the smallest unit—atoms (the "uncuttable" or "inseparable"). Liberal social theories and scientific theories alike owe much to the idea that the

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<sup>17</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Socialist Review*, 1985; *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Rosi Braidotti. *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Neil Badmington, "Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism," in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (London: Macmillan Education UK, 2000), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-05194-3>.

<sup>23</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.



world is composed of individuals with separately attributable properties”.<sup>24</sup> As such, current modern humanist discourses often rely on this individualist idea of human subjectivity.<sup>25</sup>

At the face of the ongoing ecological devastation, the idea of putting humans at the center has been heavily criticized. Haraway’s article, the “Cyborg Manifesto” points out that the line separating humans and nonhuman was not as clearly delineated as previously thought by humanist thinkers.<sup>26</sup> One significant critique has been put forward by Carolyn Merchant, who argues that the modern idea of human-nonhuman separation has shaped the view of nature as a dead object instead of living being.<sup>27</sup> This mechanistic view has allowed for modern exploitation of Earth, viewed as an object, as the chaotic wilderness to be conquered by human rationality.

Anthropocentrism, Cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics are entangled with the problems of power relation. Haraway pointed out that in order to subdue the others into a structure of domination, the Western tradition employs dualistic categories, e.g: “self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man”.<sup>28</sup> Karen Barad addresses these problems by proposing agential realism. Barad highlights the increasingly blurry line separating humans and nonhuman to argue against anthropocentric humanism; and a relational onto-epistemology instead of cartesian dualism and individual metaphysics.

Francesca Ferrando discusses how the terms “posthumanism,” “transhumanism,” “antihumanism,” “*metahumanism*,” and “new materialisms” differ from and relate with each other.<sup>29</sup> First Ferrando makes clear that each of these movements share a common view about humans that is not static, although they might differ in content. Posthumanism, in this sense, refers to the posthumanism and postanthropocentrism, which means that it goes past the idea of humanity within the framework of humanism and anthropocentrism. In Ferrando’s words: “... it is ‘post’ to the concept of the human and the historical occurrence of humanism, both based, as we have previously seen, on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions”.<sup>30</sup> It also deals with the speciesist human exceptionalism that assumes the superiority of human species above other species. Posthumanism, Barad explains, “... does not attribute the source of all change to culture, denying nature any sense of agency or historicity”.<sup>31</sup> Put simply, Barad’s

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<sup>24</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137.

<sup>25</sup> Human biology: Scott F. Gilbert, Jan Sapp, and Alfred I. Tauber, “A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 87, no. 4 (December 2012): 325–41, <https://doi.org/10.1086/668166>; Myra J. Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies*, 1. publ (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Human rights: Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp, “Will Human Rights Save the Anthropos from the Anthropocene?,” in *International Law and Posthuman Theory*, ed. Matilda Arvidsson and Emily Jones (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024).

<sup>26</sup> Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*.

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and The Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review*, 1985, 96.

<sup>29</sup> “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations,” *Existenz* 8, no. 2 (2013): 26–32.

<sup>30</sup> Francesca Ferrando “*Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations*,” 29.

<sup>31</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 136.

posthumanism is the movement to include the agency of nonhuman entities in considering the ever-changing history of the world. Barad's posthumanism intends to address the problems of anthropocentrism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics mentioned above by proposing a posthuman turn that employs relational assumption of reality.

Within the Islamic context, the phenomenon of nature's objectification cannot be attributed solely to the adoption of Cartesian mind-body dualism. The focal point of this inquiry lies in an idiosyncratic theological configuration of dualism, wherein agency is distributed in a hierarchical manner across a triadic relation between God, humans, and the rest of creation. Modern Muslim discourses construct humans as the uniquely legitimate conduit for the implementation of divine will in the world, while nonhuman beings are reduced to the status of passive objects whose value primarily lies in their capacity to serve and benefit humans. This "veiling of agency" does not deny that God acts in and through creation; rather, it obscures the Qur'anic depiction of earth, animals, mountains, and celestial bodies as responsive, praising, and obedient subjects. The issue at hand, therefore, is not merely a philosophical dualism that has been imported from the West, but rather a theological dualism that is intrinsic to certain Islamic thought streams, enabling and sanctifying human dominion.

Vahdat identifies *subjectivity* and *universality* as the two defining pillars of modernity.<sup>32</sup> Subjectivity designates a vision of the human being as the determinant of her or his own life-processes, closely tied to notions of freedom, volition, consciousness, reason, and individuality. Universality, in turn, refers to the removal of restrictions based on inherited privilege, status, or other essentialist criteria.<sup>33</sup> Within modern Islamic discourse, Vahdat argues that subjectivity is predominantly articulated as an indirect and mediated subjectivity through the concept of *khalīfatullāh fī al-arḍ*: the human is imagined as standing simultaneously as creature and as divine deputy, in a dual position that both elevates and effaces human agency.<sup>34</sup>

Here, God is constructed as the only truly "real" agent, while the humankind itself is deemed ontologically derivative and, at least in principle, in need of effacement. The attributes of the divine are projected onto the human as the vicegerent, who is called to rise from the "low" of mundane existence to the "high" station of representing God on earth. Yet, as Vahdat appropriately underscores, it is in fact the human who labours, plans, and acts upon the world, and who tacitly knows this. Human agency is thus practically operative but conceptually veiled: it is submerged in the discourse of God's agency, treated as a gift from an external, transcendent source rather than acknowledged as a locus of responsibility. This duality is not a simple humility before God; it functions as a discursive mechanism that allows humans to act with an authority that is experienced and exercised as divine, while disowning the contingency and fallibility of their own subjectivity.<sup>35</sup>

By obscuring human responsibility behind the language of divine mediation, this veiling of agency creates a framework in which human decisions and projects are framed as direct extensions of God's will. Vahdat explicitly links this modern Islamic form of subjectivity to the

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<sup>32</sup> Farzin Vahdat, "Metaphysical Foundations of Islamic Revolutionary Discourse in Iran: Vacillations on Human Subjectivity," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 8, no. 14 (March 1999): 49–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669929908720140>.

<sup>33</sup> Farzin Vahdat, *Metaphysical Foundations of Islamic Revolutionary Discourse in Iran*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*.

<sup>35</sup> Vahdat, *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, 16.

objectification of nature: once humans are installed as the privileged site where divine volition is realised, other creatures are readily reduced to instruments for that realisation. In this sense, Islamic modernity reproduces anthropocentrism, dualism, and the elevation of the human subject through a distinct theological idiom.

At the core of Karen Barad's agential realism lies a profound ontological shift, rooted in quantum physics, that challenges the atomistic individualism of the classical metaphysics by positing *intra-action* as the fundamental mechanism of reality.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the concept of "interaction" that presupposes pre-existing independent entities that subsequently enter relations, Barad's concept of "intra-action" presumes that fundamentally "*relata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions.*"<sup>37</sup> In other words, "things" emerge performatively through relations. This framework, which insists on the inseparability of epistemology, ontology, and ethics (an onto-ethico-epistemology), redefines agency as distributed and relational: *it is not a property* that belongs to an individual subject (e.g. human or divine representatives), *but a doing* that is enacted across material-discursive practices. In the context of Islamic eco-theology, such mechanism strengthens the critique of anthropocentric interpretations of *khalifah* by envisioning stewardship as an intra-active entanglement in which human and nonhuman agents co-constitute ethical responsibilities, echoing the Qur'anic portrayal of creation's collective glorification (Q. 17:44).

Another fundamental element of this theoretical framework is the concept of "*agential cuts*." The world is not simply a collection of discrete objects awaiting description; it is continually articulated through practices that establish boundaries such as "human" versus "nature," "subject" versus "object," or "sacred" versus "profane." These "cuts" are not merely descriptive; they are performative, helping to produce the very realities they purport to represent. Exegetical discourse can thus be understood as an apparatus that enforces agential cuts between humans and the rest of creation, between divine agency and creaturely responsiveness, and thereby establishes the conceptual framework through which *khalifah* is envisioned and enacted. In contrast, when Qur'anic commentators consistently frame the nonhuman world as passive material for human use under the rubric of *taskhīr*, they participate in stabilizing a Cartesian cut that isolates human rationality as the primary locus of meaningful agency and veils the interactive agencies of nonhuman creation.

Therefore, the leap from "interaction" to "intra-action" logic becomes a significant point of departure to the main argument proposed in this article. While individual metaphysics presupposes a separation between human and nonhuman entities in understanding *khalifah*, Barad's agential realism emphasizes more on the relations that produce the distinctions between

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 801–31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>; Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*.

<sup>37</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 140.



what are then called “humans” and “nonhumans.” We propose to view *khalifah* with a recognition of human and nonhumans being in one single frame together, whose existence are inextricably linked with each other.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a diffractive hermeneutic method informed by Karen Barad’s agential realism to analyze interpretations of *khalifah* in a collection of selected modern Qur’anic commentaries. The diffractive method reads multiple discourses through one another to identify patterns of difference that matter.<sup>38</sup> This approach treats Qur’anic texts, interpretive traditions, ecological concerns, and philosophical concepts as intra-acting agencies that co-produce meaning, not as isolated and independent domains. Therefore, it does not claim Barad’s ontology as normative over Islamic scripture; rather, it allows the Qur’an to intervene in the blind spots of posthuman theory, and vice versa. Diffractive hermeneutics therefore aims at mutual illumination rather than replacement: the Qur’an’s cosmic relationality troubles secular categories of agency, while agential realism helps disclose where modern commentaries rely on anthropocentric agential cuts.

The paper focuses on selected modern Qur’anic commentaries on Q. 2:30 and closely related verses. Four exegetes, Makari Shirazi, Jawad Mughniyyah, Hamka, and Sayyid Qutb are examined for their geographically and sectarianly diverse set of mainstream socio-political and revivalist trajectories in twentieth-century *tafsīr*, capturing Shī‘ī and Sunnī as well as Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian contexts. These commentators neither exhaust the field of “modern” interpretation nor represent all hermeneutical schools; rather, they function as paradigmatic cases of a widely influential activist strand in which *khalifah* is mobilised to articulate human sovereignty and responsibility in history. The aim then is not to produce a comprehensive survey of modern exegesis, but to interrogate a dominant configuration of authority and subjectivity that has shaped Muslim imaginaries of human-world relations.

This paper will use several concepts from Barad’s agential realism to structure the analysis. The concept of intra-action highlights how agency emerges through relations rather than from autonomous, pre-existing subjects. The notion of agential cuts is used to identify where commentators delimit human agency over against nonhuman creation. Material-discursive apparatus refers to the exegetical, theological, and modern intellectual assumptions shaping their interpretations. With this consideration, the method employed in this paper proceeds in three steps:

1. In the next section the paper will identify exegetical patterns in the four commentaries that privilege human exceptionalism, dualism, and instrumental understandings of nature.

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<sup>38</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

2. In the first part of discussion section, diffractive reading will highlight the emergent concept of an eco-relational *khalīfah*, placing these patterns in conversation with Qur'anic affirmations of nonhuman agency and Barad's relational ontology.
3. As its theoretical implications, the second part of the discussion section will present the relational reconstruction of *khalīfah*, *taskhīr*, and *tawhīd* as emergent through the entangled fields of agency that is shared across creation.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### Modern Exegetical Constructions of the Khalīfah

This section will point out the problems of anthropocentric essentialism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics in modern commentaries on the Qur'anic concept of *khalīfah*. First, the section will present some notes on the characteristics and defining features of modern Qur'anic commentaries. The second part will explore the modern exegetes' hermeneutical engagement of the Qur'anic *khalīfah*. Lastly, the third part of the section will point out the problems of anthropocentric essentialism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics in the modern commentaries from the previous part. This exploration also will offer a critique toward the modern interpretation, on which the article will base its argument of the necessity of constructing a relational interpretation of *khalīfah*.

#### *Characteristics of Modern Qur'anic Commentaries*

What makes a Qur'anic Commentary considered as a modern tafsir? How can we identify the epistemic prisms and interpretative procedures used in modern commentaries and distinguish them from their predecessors, the classical tafsir? What is the nature and characteristic of meaning proposed by the modern interpreters? Such inquiries give rise to a series of hermeneutical problems within the domain of Qur'anic and tafsir scholarship, inciting vigorous discourse among scholars and giving rise to a plethora of responses. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept of *istikhlāf* in modern Muslim interpretations, it is imperative to first offer a concise exposition on the definition and characteristics of modern tafsir. From a terminological perspective, we can define modern tafsir as an interpretation that engages directly with the actual realities of the modern world. As already mentioned by Mun'im Sirry, a work of Qur'anic commentary is called "modern" because of its interpretive activities that reflect the concrete struggles of the interpreter with modern reality, be it at the sociological, economic, political, cultural, or religious levels.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to the traditional approach, modern commentary does not merely seek to decipher the meaning from the sacred text. Rather, it aspires to engage with reality in a direct manner, aiming to provide practical guidance for humanity by drawing upon the tenets of the Qur'an.<sup>40</sup> It is not an exaggeration to state that "The most original part of modern Qur'anic exegesis," as Massimo Campanini exactly pointed out, "has

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<sup>39</sup> Mun'im Sirry, "What's Modern about Modern Tafsīr: A Closer Look at Hamka's Tafsīr al-Azhar." In *The Qur'ān in the Malay-Indonesian World: Context and Interpretation*, edited by Majid Daneshgar, Peter G. Riddell, and Andrew Rippin, 198–211. (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Johanna Pink, "Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qur'anic Exegesis: Qur'anic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and Their Interpretation of Q 5:51," *Die Welt Des Islams* 50, no. 1 (2010): 3–59.

been directed at discovering the Qur'an's practical dimension, which is to say its function in modifying the structure of social reality and revolutionizing human relations."<sup>41</sup>

One of the considerable challenges faced by modernist Muslims is the challenge of negotiating their religious commitments and reconciling it with the horizon of Western modernity, which has profoundly impacted Muslim societies through historical processes such as colonialism. In this context, modernity has had a significant impact on scholars' imaginations of interpretive activity. Muslim scholars find themselves compelled to respond to a variety of challenges and crises, as well as to reform the Islamic intellectual tradition.<sup>42</sup> Given the widely held belief that the Qur'an serves as the primary source of guidance for Muslims, Muslim intellectuals are concerned that if they exclusively refer to exegetical materials documented in classical tafsir, their understanding of the Qur'an's relevance may not align with contemporary needs.<sup>43</sup>

This emphasis subsequently motivates modern commentators to seek universal values directly from the Qur'anic text for application in their respective contexts.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, these commentators strive to eliminate traditional intermediaries that are regarded as impediments to direct engagement with the Qur'an. They vehemently object to the excessive glorification of tradition, which they deem as a limitation to the universality of the Qur'an. They contend that the horizon of human knowledge is perpetually expanding in accordance with the historical trajectory of humanity. Therefore, various challenges to the authority of classical interpretation emerge as a basis and justification for opening the space of interpreting and reinterpreting the Qur'an. In this regard, J. M. S. Baljon correctly noticed the fundamental postulate of Islamic modernism, asserting that all individuals are allowed to engage in reflection on the contents of the scripture.<sup>45</sup> Because, the Qur'an is regarded as a guide (*hudan*) for all human beings, not only a selected group of religious elites.

As the result of their contact with the Western intellectual tradition that brought the metaphysical notion of Cartesian rationalism, modern commentators highly value the power of reason. In the face of numerous pressing issues in the modern era, these interpreters strive to adapt the field of interpretation to the prevailing *zeitgeist* of modernity. In this pursuit, they have been known to employ a range of sophisticated intellectual tools and contemporary discursive idioms that align with the evolutionary development of Western thought.<sup>46</sup> Avoiding reproductive interpretations that merely reiterate the contents of classical commentaries works, modernist Muslims contend that the interpretation of the Qur'an must be productive to yield an interpretation that is not only rational in the modern sense but also solutive for the modern

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<sup>41</sup> Massimo Campanini, *The Qur'an: Modern Muslim Interpretations*. Translated by Caroline Higgitt. (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2011)

<sup>42</sup> Amer Zulfikar Ali, "A Brief Review of Classical and Modern Tafsir Trends and Role of Modern Tafasir in Contemporary Islamic Thought," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (November 2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v3i2.87>.

<sup>43</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980).

<sup>44</sup> Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies, and Interpretative Communities* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2019).

<sup>45</sup> J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)* (Leiden: Brill, 1968).

<sup>46</sup> Johanna Pink, "Striving for a New Exegesis of the Qur'an," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 765–92.

problems.<sup>47</sup> This (re)affirmation underscores the pivotal role and function of reason, intertwined with a discerning and critical examination of mythological and primitive concepts that permeate classical interpretations.<sup>48</sup> In this context, modern epistemology equips the modernist Muslim mind with the tools to dispel the shadow of supernatural notions when engaging with the Qur'anic narrative. Various traditions, especially those derived from Jewish-Christian mythological legends (*Isrā'iliyyāt*), recorded in classical exegesis were firmly rejected.<sup>49</sup>

Also, a notable feature in modern commentary is the transition from polyvalency to monovalency in the hermeneutical process. Polyvalency signifies the capacity for diverse interpretations, often presenting contradictory meanings before a final judgment is rendered. Conversely, monovalency presents a singular interpretation within a single exegesis. While polyvalency refers to a person's interpretative activity that presents a variety of meanings often contradictory—before deciding on his hermeneutical position and judgment, monovalency will present a single meaning in his exegetical exercise. In classical exegetical culture, there is a tendency to present a variety of possible meanings in explaining a Qur'anic verse. Qur'anic commentators in the pre-modern era could propose many solutions to a single hermeneutical problem and were more tolerant of diverse interpretations. By contrast, modern tafsir tends to eschew such interpretive struggles, seeking to present a singular interpretation of the Qur'an. The modern exegesis, constrained by the interpretive prism of contextualization, exhibits a marked reluctance to delve into exegetical materials that offer less relevance to the resolution of specific problems. What happens then is the disambiguation of the ambiguity that was celebrated vibrantly in the classical era.<sup>50</sup>

This dissociation from the polyvalency of meaning is inextricably linked to the modernization of Muslim societies. Indeed, there is a continuous discursive relationship between the horizon of modernity and the tendency of interpretations that strongly emphasize monovalency of meaning.<sup>51</sup> The shift from ambiguity to simplification of meaning is the result of the socio-cultural impact of simple truth egalitarianism brought about by Western modernity.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the advent of modernity has exerted a profound hermeneutical influence on the diminution of semantic diversity and ambiguity of meaning within Islamic thought.<sup>53</sup> As Pieter

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<sup>47</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah Fī 'Ulum Al-Qur'ān* (Kairo: al-Markaz al-Ṣaqafī al-'Arabī, 2014); Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982); Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, *Al-Hirminiyūtiqā: Al-Kitāb Wa al-Sunnah*, ed. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifa'i, trans. Haidar Najaf (Beirut: Dār al-Tanwīr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nasyr, 2014); Muhammad Syahrur, *Al-Kitāb Wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah* (Damaskus: al-Aḥālī li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nasyr wa al-Tauzī, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Third Edition (New York: Routledge, 2005), 229–30.

<sup>49</sup> Hamilton Alexander R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1947).

<sup>50</sup> Pink, *Muslim Qur'anic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies, and Interpretative Communities*.

<sup>51</sup> Norman Calder, "Tafsir from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr: Problems in the Description of a Genre, Illustrated with Reference to the Story of Abraham," in *Approaches to the Qur'an*, ed. Gerard R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam*, trans. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

Coppens astutely observes, modernity has played a pivotal role in curtailing the intensity of polyvalency within the intellectual milieu of modern tafsir.<sup>54</sup>

A salient point that must be emphasized is that, despite endeavoring to establish a distinct identity, modern interpreters have not radically detached themselves from their association with classical tafsir.<sup>55</sup> Following Walid Saleh's<sup>56</sup> argument that posits tafsir as a genealogical tradition a historical activity that records the historical traces of interaction between an interpreter and the Qur'an, it suggests that modern interpreters remain situated in the historical currents that have been and continue to flow, both in terms of materials, hermeneutical prisms, methodologies, and others (inherited corpus materials). This continuity is particularly evident in modern tafsir's attempts to assess classical tafsir, even when employing a critical lens. Indeed, assessing and deciding whether an interpretation is relevant for evaluation by modern approaches in its qualitative sense is not an easy task.<sup>57</sup> However, by delineating the contours of modern tafsir from terminological, epistemological, and genealogical standpoints, we can illuminate the hermeneutical strife of modern commentators concerning the concept of *khalifah* and its interplay with the anthropocentric imagination characteristic of Western modernity, which predominates in their interpretations.

### The Modern Khalifah

As previously explored, the imagination cultivated among modern Muslim scholars concerning the uniqueness, centrality, and authority of human beings is inextricably linked to, and is perpetually influenced by, the horizon of modernity. In this regard, the concept of human subjectivity occupies a central position and plays a decisive role in shaping the discursive and praxis horizons of the modern world.<sup>58</sup> Through meticulous examination of the giant works written by the pioneering thinkers of modern Western civilization—from Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, to Jurgen Habermas—it becomes evident that the empowerment of the individual—agency, consciousness, rationality, and free will of humans—as well as the foundation of modern institutions—democratic state, capitalist market, civil legal system, education, and technology—are profoundly determined by the notion of human subjectivity.

As an unavoidable consequence of the intensified encroachment of modernity into the Islamic world, modernist Muslim intellectuals are then required to formulate a new *weltanschauung* that draws from, alludes to, and is inspired by Islamic tradition. Concurrently, the construction of this worldview is expected to be able to address various salient issues and

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<sup>54</sup> Pieter. "Did Modernity End Polyvalence? Some Observations on Tolerance for Ambiguity in Sunni Tafsir." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 23, no. 1 (February 2021): 36–70. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2021.0450>.

<sup>55</sup> Johanna Pink, "Modern and Contemporary Interpretation of the Qur'an," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin and Jawid Mojaddedi (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 479–91.

<sup>56</sup> Walid A. Saleh. *The Formation of Classical Tafsir Tradition: The Qur'an Commentary of al-Tha'labi* (d. 427/1035). (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Johanna Pink, "Where Does Modernity Begin? Muhammad al-Shawkani and the Tradition of Tafsir," in *Tafsir and Islamic Intellectual History: Exploring the Bondaries of a Genre*, ed. Andreas Gorke and Johanna Pink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 323–60.

<sup>58</sup> cf. Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy: The Rise of Modern Philosophy*, III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); Roger Scruton, *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (London: Penguin Books, 1996).



problems posed by Western modernity. An interesting point that merits attention is the observation that the agents who initiated the modernization process in the Islamic world endeavored to preserve the Islamic discursive tradition and ensure the continuity of their theoretical and practical offerings with the past.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, asserting the continuity of tradition necessitates the consideration of its capacity to remain relevant in the midst of changing times through reevaluation, reconstruction, and recontextualization.<sup>60</sup>

One important thing to remember is that despite its criticism of Western colonial modernity and its advocacy for religious purification, the advocates of Islamic modernism employ the discursive apparatus of modern Western discourse in a manner that serves to present a more innovative and relevant concept of modern Islam.<sup>61</sup> At this juncture, the notion of human subjectivity, whether we acknowledge or not, exerts a pervasive force that impacts all facets of Muslim intellectual, cultural, social, political, and religious activities. In this context, the interpretive struggle of modern Muslim commentators on the concept of humankind and everything related to it will always be accompanied by a tool called modern subjectivity. Therefore, the objective of this section is to present, investigate, and discuss the interpretations of modern Muslim commentators regarding Qur'anic verses that address the issues of *istikhlāf*.

### *Makarim Shirazi*

Makarim Shirazi initiates his discourse on the concept of *khalīfah* in Q. 2:30 by contending that this verse provides a definitive explanation of man's existential status as God's vicegerent, accentuating his distinctive role as the leader, the government, and the controller of the universe.<sup>62</sup> Etymologically, the term "*khalīfah*" signifies representation of another (*al-nā'ib 'an al-ghair*). With respect to this matter, the Qur'anic commentators exhibit divergent views on who humans represent as *khalīfah*. These views encompass a range of possibilities, including angels, humans, or entities of a different kind that have inhabited the Earth before, as well as the generation of humans who succeed their predecessors. According to Makarim Shirazi, the true meaning of *khalīfah*, as shared by most scholarly authorities in the Islamic intellectual tradition, is man's status as God's representative and vicegerent on Earth. He expounds further on this notion, asserting that the fundamental import of this verse is to elucidate the divine intention of creating a celestial entity that serves as His representative, who carries the light's radiation of the Divine attributes, whose position is higher than that of the angels. Not only that, but the verse also makes explicit God's will for the Earth and everything in it to be under the rule and control of man (*taḥt taṣarruf ḥāza al-insān*).

The development of the *khalīfah*'s task as the ruler of the universe is predicated on a series of divine endowments and special provisions bestowed upon humanity, especially related to the epistemological capacity, which enables them to acquire the true comprehension of reality. Indeed, the profound understanding of the universe, the manifold secrets of existence, and their

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<sup>59</sup> Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5–6; Abdullah Saeed, *The Qur'an: An Introduction* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2008), 209.

<sup>60</sup> Safdar Ahmed, *Reform and Modernity in Islam: The Philosophical, Cultural and Political Discourses among Muslim Reformers* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 41–42.

<sup>61</sup> Farzin Vahdat, "Iranian Islamic Thinkers and Modernity," in *Mapping the Role of Intellectuals in Iranian Modern and Contemporary History*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 237–74.

<sup>62</sup> Nasir Makarim Syirazi, *Al-Aṣṣāl Fī Tafsīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*, I (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lamī li al-Maṭbū'āt, 2013).

distinct particularities represent the supreme pride (*mufakhhkharah kabīrah*) that humanity possesses.<sup>63</sup> In this case, the instruction of the names (*ta'lim al-asmā'*) to Prophet Adam served as a substantial sign of humanity's eligibility to supervise, command, and govern the cosmic reality. This event also marked the primary catalyst for the angels' prostration before him. After presenting the names before the angels who had previously objected to God's decision, Makarim Shirazi writes while quoting Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's interpretation of Q. 2:30, Prophet Adam then gained recognition from them who eventually realized that humanity was the most appropriate and competent creation of God in taking over the mandate of *istikhlāf* on His Earth.<sup>64</sup>

Makarim Shirazi then advances the argument that Prophet Adam and his descendants from humans are endowed with extraordinary epistemological capability (*qābiliyyah khāriqah*) to represent, recognize, understand, name, classify, and articulate the value and meaning of truth related to reality. Makarim Shirazi subsequently identifies such divine grace as *al-ta'lim al-takwīnī*. In addition to *al-ta'lim al-takwīnī*, God also endows humanity with *al-bayān*. Linking his description of the divine teaching of humanity to Q. 55:4, Makarim Shirazi posits that God bestows upon every human being the innate sufficiency and specificity to precisely understand and explain about reality.<sup>65</sup> In this regard, the truth presupposed in the epistemological process is correspondential truth, where the representation of ideas in the human mind is considered true to the extent that it corresponds to external reality. It is noteworthy that the capacity for knowing reality represents the fundamental distinction that sets humans apart from other creations, thereby rendering them deserving of the divine mandate concerning the caliphate.

The unique, authoritative, and superior status and position of humankind in the universe is also affirmed by Makarim Shirazi when interpreting Q. 6:165.<sup>66</sup> As the supreme creation of God, humans are not permitted to prostrate and worship all material entities in the universe, including but not limited to wood, stone, water, Earth, and fire. According to Makarim Shirazi, the act of venerating and deifying all aspects of the Earthly entities constitutes a profound disparagement of the exalted status of humanity as the *khalīfah* of God, a position that renders them inherently superior to all other creations. Conversely, the divine imperative asserts that human beings are obligated to assume leadership roles in global and societal matters. Indeed, this imperative also demands that humans adjudicate all matters on the world fairly and correctly, thus necessitating the establishment of a divine government that is organized based on *ḥaqq* values.

In Makarim Shirazi's view, the concept of *istikhlāf* implies that the conditions, movements, and orientation of the universe are, in essence, subordinate to humanity and determined by it. In this regard, the *khalīfah* mandate functions as a litmus test for humankind, a gauge with which to assess their capacity to embody the divine mind and will on Earth, ensuring that the entire creation is utilized for its intended purpose, or whether they will fall prey to the misuse of these abilities, manifesting in various forms of defect, decay, and injustice. According to Makarim Shirazi, the Qur'anic discourse posits that the value and quality of everyone can be ascertained through the provision of tests in life. Shirazi further argues that the Qur'an affirms human freedom positively in choosing the path of life, whether it is the path of happiness or the path of

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<sup>63</sup> Nasir Makarim Syirazi, *Al-Amṣal Fī Tafṣīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*, 112.

<sup>64</sup> Syirazi, *Al-Amṣal Fī Tafṣīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*, I, 111.

<sup>65</sup> Syirazi, *Al-Amṣal Fī Tafṣīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*, I, 114.

<sup>66</sup> Nasir Makarim Syirazi, *Al-Amṣal Fī Tafṣīr Kitābillah al-Munzal*, XI (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-A'lamī li al-Maṭbū'āt, 2013), 346.

suffering. Conversely, this affirmation is accompanied by a concomitant affirmation of the inevitability of moral responsibility, whereby all actions of each individual will be held accountable before God's court.<sup>67</sup> In the end, the implementation of *istikhlāf* as a test is poised to function as a spiritual mechanism that will ultimately facilitate humanity's attainment of the pinnacle and perfection of its existence.

It is apparent that Makarim Shirazi tends to view *khalīfah* as an exclusively anthropocentric primacy that is bestowed by God to humans in the context of domination over nonhuman entities. This self-projected superiority is further validated through the rationalistic argument of human's epistemological capability. This argument makes a logical leap that directly assumes human superiority through their rational capacity alone although the bestowment of rationality can be interpreted without being directly followed by the right to dominate others. Argued here, rational capability becomes the "cut" that separates humans from nonhumans, the dominator from the dominated. Unfortunately, this "cut" creates a logic of domination that ultimately validates the unchecked exploitation toward the nonhuman entities (all creation) in the modern industrialized world. Barad's view of *onto-ethico-epistemology* has warned that the way one understands reality co-constructs reality and the ethical stances within it. As Makarim Shirazi's interpretation *khalīfah* is riddled with the idea of rational superiority and domination, the nonhumans are then marginalized to the realm of inferiority and exploitation.

### *Mughniyyah*

Beginning his discussion of the *khalīfah* discourse in Q. 2:30, Mughniyyah writes, "The term of *khalīfah* signifies the Prophet Adam, regarded as the progenitor of humankind, and all subsequent humans who are descended from him across all eras and temporal realms."<sup>68</sup> One of the rationales for ascribing the property of *khalīfah* to humanity is that God entrusts humanity with His power and authority over the Earth. In this regard, the human species is equipped with the potential power to discern the numerous positive aspects of the world and derive benefit from them, thereby enhancing their lives. In addressing the concerns of the angels who objected to the creation of humankind, citing the potential for humanity to cause destruction and bloodshed on Earth, God provided a divine explanation. This explanation involved the revelation of a unique scientific capability that God had prepared for humankind; a capability that was unknown and not possessed by anyone, including the angels themselves.

A salient point that merits our elaboration is the assertion that, in Mughniyyah's conceptualization, the notion of knowledge is comprehended within the purview of a pragmatic framework. In essence, all scientific endeavors and outcomes must be directed towards the service of humanity. In a particular instance, Mughniyyah contends that despite the variances in discourse, methodology, postulates, paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and approaches, both science and religion are equally oriented towards serving the interests and well-being of humankind.<sup>69</sup> Based on these expositions, Mughniyyah then explicitly states that God did not create humankind to violate universal moral values, commit evil acts, and cause harm in the world. Instead, the divine wisdom declares that the fundamental purpose of human creation is

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<sup>67</sup> cf. Nasir Makarim Syirazi, *Silsilah Al-Durūs al-Dīniyyah Fī al-'Aqāid al-Islāmiyyah*, I (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Nūr, 1988).

<sup>68</sup> M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Tafsīr Al-Kāsyif*, I. (Beirut: Dār al-Anwār, n.d), 80–82.

<sup>69</sup> M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Al-Dīn Wa al-'Aql* (Mansyūrāt al-Riḍā, 2014), 275–76.

the acquisition of true knowledge about reality and the realization of ethical conduct based on that knowledge. In accordance with Makarim Shirazi's interpretation, Mughniyyah corroborates the notion that humans possess the essential competencies requisite for assuming the office of *khalifah*. Thus, thanks to his intellect and epistemological capacity, man becomes noble and honorable before God and above the universe.<sup>70</sup>

When elaborating on the meaning of Q. 6:165, Mughniyyah explains that God created the Earth, its composition, and its atmosphere, making it a suitable place for humanity to grow.<sup>71</sup> All entities on Earth are intended to serve human needs. In this regard, humans who occupy the position of God's vicegerent on Earth are equipped with the perfect qualifications and provisions (*al-mu'ahhalāt wa al-isti'dād al-kāmil*), namely epistemological and ethical capability, to utilize the Earth's goodness and blessings. These gifts are all closely related to the wise divine will regarding how humans should actualize their full potential. At this point, God then outlines a solid moral test for humanity to gauge whether people will be grateful for the Divine blessings and strive, based on their potentials and strengths, to realize the goodness of themselves and of their fellow human beings (*ṣāliḥ ikhwānihim min banī al-insān*). Based on the Imam's words, Mughniyyah concludes that the goal of all existence (*ghāyah akhīrah li hāẓa al-maujudāt*) is man as *khalifah*, for which everything in the universe was created.<sup>72</sup>

Mughniyyah's interpretation of *khalifah* has included the moral necessity of protecting the Earth, but is kept within the scope of an utilitarian and instrumentalist notion of environmental concern. Mughniyyah departs from the similar argument of intellectually validated anthropocentric superiority as Makarim Shirazi. With this departure, humankind's divinely granted intellectual and ethical capacity become the ultimate mode that allows environmentally moral actions. However, here the agency of the nonhuman entities is still largely ignored. The only capacity of agency being recognized here is the humans, while the nonhuman capacity to also actively influence humankind's life are reduced only to being the background within which humans act as the main figure. This interpretation produces a one-sided conception of *khalifah* that regards only human's moral agency. In contradiction, the Qur'an has recognized many cases of nonhuman agency which are undeniably moral, e.g.: Q. 17:44; Q. 24:41; Q. 34:10, cf. 21:79; Q. 41:11; etc. Thus, ignorance toward nonhuman agencies in understanding the concept of *khalifah* would omit a considerable amount of the Qur'an itself in considering its epistemological, ontological, and ethical implications.

### Hamka

Hamka commences his examination of the concept of *khalifah* by meticulously delineating the multifaceted connotations of the term through the intratextuality method. The term "*khalifah*" is understood to encompass a variety of meanings. Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge that *khalifah* is the successor of the Prophet Muhammad in government affairs. Secondly, the term "*khalifah*" is understood to signify "God's successor" in establishing the government and implementing His laws on Earth, as documented in Q. 38:26. Thirdly, based on Q. 10:14, *khalifah* also means the descendants of humans who replace their ancestors or parents. Finally, the term "*khalifah*" is

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<sup>70</sup> M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Ma'ālim al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyyah: Naẓarāt Fī al-Taṣawwuf Wa al-Karāmāt* (Beirut: Dār wa Maktabah al-Hilāl, 1982), 241; M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Falsafāt Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Jawād, 1993), 733.

<sup>71</sup> M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Tafsīr Al-Kāsyif*. I. (Beirut: Dār al-Anwār, n.d.), 295.

<sup>72</sup> M. Jawad Mughniyyah, *Falsafāt Islāmiyyah*. Beirut: Dār al-Jawād, 1993.

defined as “all humans who exist on Earth” (Q. 27:62).<sup>73</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the term “*khalīfah*” reveals that its core concepts encompass the notions of successor and duty bearer. It is God’s successor in the sense that God elevates man’s status and appoints him as His successor to carry out the Divine commands, which, for Hamka, is the substantial meaning of Q. 2:30. In this context, the divine mandate of *istikhlāf* bestowed upon humankind establishes humankind as the ruler and regulator of the universe, endowed with the capacity to unveil the divine secrets ensconced within it.<sup>74</sup>

One of the most fundamental divine endowments bestowed upon humanity is reason. According to Hamka, human rationality serves as the primary catalyst and main force for comprehending the fundamental truths of existence, as well as the intricacies that govern life itself. This rationality then enables individuals to effectively organize and manage the world.<sup>75</sup> Also, because of this rationality, humankind has a distinctive and superior quality and position above angels, animals, plants, and all other entities of divine creation. In this regard, Hamka writes explicitly, “Humans are nobler, more excellent, and higher than other creatures (created by God).” Such nobility, primacy, and elevation can be observed in the fact that God created the universe and its contents and established them as creatures under human authority, jurisdiction, and rule.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the tenets of all divine religions are fundamentally oriented towards the human existential condition. When interpreting Q. 6:165, Hamka notes that the Divine will requires humans to maximize the utilization of their intellect to prosper the Earth and develop an advanced, cultured, orderly, and just human civilization.<sup>77</sup>

In this regard, the decision of God to teach names to Prophet Adam can be regarded as a metaphorical narrative, suggesting that God bestows such a unique gift upon humankind. Considering this narrative, Hamka postulates the existence and essence of science in relation to humanity, asserting that humans, armed with the epistemological instruments at their disposal, possess the capacity to accurately comprehend the nature of reality. Linking his interpretation with Q. 97:4 and 17:70, Hamka expounds that humans, armed with reason and knowledge, ascend to a position of eminence among God’s creations, thereby garnering profound respect from the divine.<sup>78</sup> It is no exaggeration to articulate that the fundamental requirement to assume the most honorable position as *khalīfah*, according to Hamka, is reason and knowledge.<sup>79</sup> In his final analysis, Hamka arrives at the conclusion that the verse on *istikhlāf* functions as a memento for humankind, urging them to maintain their belief in and gratitude for God’s gift, which elevates them above the universe.

Hamka’s interpretation of *khalīfah* follows the previously mentioned anthropocentric logic that deduce superiority and domination (“management” in Hamka’s term) only from humans’ rational capacity. Here it is important to highlight that the idea of “managing” capacity is

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<sup>73</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, IV, I (Singapura: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd Singapura, 2001), 158–59.

<sup>74</sup> Amrullah, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, I, 162.

<sup>75</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Falsafah Hidup* (Jakarta: Republika, 2020).

<sup>76</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Iman Dan Amal Shaleh* (Jakarta: PT Pustaka Panjimas, 1984), 103; Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Pandangan Hidup Muslim* (Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1992), 262.

<sup>77</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Tafsir Al-Azhar*, IV, III (Singapura: Pustaka Nasional Pte Ltd Singapura, 2001), 2304.

<sup>78</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Studi Islam* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2020).

<sup>79</sup> Haji Abdulmalik Abdulkarim Amrullah, *Dari Hati Ke Hati* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2017).



fundamentally based on the idea of marginalizing nonhuman entities to only becoming inert objects to be controlled and managed. It is important to note that the same argument has been used repeatedly by the modern industrialized world to exploit nature. Merchant has argued against this presumption of a dead and inert nature<sup>80</sup> that needs to be “managed” by the rationally superior humans. In another case, Nasr has also warned against this presumption of supremacy that ignores the spiritual value of nature,<sup>81</sup> which is reduced to “manageable objects” in Hamka’s interpretation. This argument once again ignores the capacity of nonhuman entities to active participation in co-creating reality, in co-constituting what *khalīfah* means as an intra-actively emergent phenomenon. Instead, humankind is put as the only subject there is, which falls into the trap of individual metaphysics that separates the active influence of nonhuman entities in producing the “human” itself. This can be argued as a recognizably colonial point of view, which ignores other agencies besides themselves. The term “management” then operates as a theological point for the bureaucratic rationality of industrial modernity, smuggling colonial and domination logic into Qur’anic exegesis.

### Qutb

Qutb precedes his explication of the concept of *khalīfah* with a discussion of the general discourse of the set of verses Q. 2:30-39.<sup>82</sup> According to him, the metanarrative presented in these verses speaks to the existence, status, and function of human beings in relation to life and the reality of the universe. The discussion on the mandate of *istikhlāf* specifically highlights the notion that God bestowed a gift upon humanity by creating the world and all that is in it, with the objective of fulfilling humanity’s needs and ensuring its well-being. As distinctively posited by Qutb, “He is a vicegerent on this Earth, given dominion over all it contains, for it has been made subservient to him even before he himself existed.”<sup>83</sup> In this case, human beings are distinguished by their unique capacity to exercise dominion over the universe and to be responsible for the implementation of divine values and intentions in it. Consequently, the phrase “I am appointing a vicegerent on Earth (Q. 2:30)” signifies that God intended Adam and his descendants to inhabit, govern, and rule the world.<sup>84</sup>

To fulfill *istikhlāf*’s task, God provides substantial provisions for humankind in the form of tools and means of knowledge. These provisions qualify humanity for *istikhlāf* and enable them to realize the divine mission as God’s vicegerent in the cosmic reality. In this regard, Qutb writes, “God has given man the great secret of knowledge and cognition, as well as the ability to assign names to persons and objects which serve as symbols denoting whatever they are assigned to, even though they are no more than sounds and words.” The ability to identify and name objects has had the most significant impact on human life on Earth.<sup>85</sup> It is an accurate assertion to state

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<sup>80</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and The Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

<sup>81</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> Sayyid Qutb. *Basic Principles of the Islamic Worldview*. Translated by Rami David. (New Jersey: Islamic Publications International, 2006).

<sup>83</sup> Sayyid Qutb. *In the Shade of the Qur’an: English Translation of Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān*. Edited and translated by Adil Salahi. I. (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2006), 141.

<sup>84</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an: English Translation of Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān*, ed. and trans. Adil Salahi, I (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2006), 54.

<sup>85</sup> Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an: English Translation of Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān*, I, 51.

that human knowledge and intellect are the essence of the *khalifah*. As Qutb explicitly articulates, “The Islamic concept, in fact, assigns vicegerency in the universe, within the context of the Divine paradigm, to the human mind and to human knowledge.”<sup>86</sup>

According to Qutb, the concept of humankind as God’s *khalifah*, or “agent,” presupposes that God has handed over the entirety of the universe, including all its affairs, events, and destinies, to humankind. In this regard, humans, who are endowed with the necessary latent skills in the form of epistemological capacity, are also equipped with the power and free will to use, develop, and transform all the energy and resources on Earth in the light of divine will and wisdom. At this juncture, human beings also occupy a distinctive and prominent position in the cosmic system and have been bestowed a high honor from God, as long as they carry out the divine mandate with full responsibility.<sup>87</sup> Qutb then posits explicitly that Islam places a high and honorable valuation on human beings, their role on Earth, and their exalted position in the universe. This phenomenon is evident not only in the divine declaration of humankind as the vicegerent of God on Earth, but also in the symbolic gesture of the divine command to the angels to prostrate themselves before Prophet Adam.

Basing his arguments with this divine declaration, Qutb then outlines a number of important ideas that are relevant to man’s ontological position and his relationship with the universe.<sup>88</sup> The initial assertion posits that humankind reigns supreme over the Earth, a domain in which all elements have been forged by a supreme deity for the benefit and satisfaction of humankind. This is intertwined with the elevation of human status above other forms of existence, as well as the prohibition against humiliation or subjugation for the sake of material achievement. In summary, all material entities are subordinate to human beings and exist to serve as instruments that enhance the quality of humanity. Furthermore, occupying the highest existential role above all of God’s creations, humans have the capacity to determine, direct and control all other creatures in the world. An interesting point that needs to be stated is that in his interpretive engagement with Q. 2:30, Qutb also offers a sharp critique of modern materialism, which posits that humans are equivalent to material reality.

“The Qur’ānic view of man as a vicegerent on Earth accords him a distinguished status and a central position in the divine world order ... All these (material) phenomena are evidently designed, and are made to interact and converge, to serve the purpose of sustaining life on Earth and to assist man in fulfilling the purpose of his existence on it. This view of man is easily distinguished from, and vastly superior to, the feeble and negative role assigned to him by materialistic philosophies.”<sup>89</sup>

Qutb demonstrates that the pursuit of material prosperity and advancement has precipitated a pernicious decline in human liberty, dignity, and virtuous values. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to the foundational tenets of modern materialism, a doctrine that, from Qutb’s perspective, disavows the existence of a divine entity while concurrently

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<sup>86</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an: English Translation of Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān*. Edited and translated by Adil Salahi. I. (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2006), 71-72.

<sup>87</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Al-Islām Wa Musykilāt al-Hadārah* (Kairo: Dār al-Syurūq, 1992), 46.

<sup>88</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones: Ma’alim Fīl-Tareeq*. Edited and translated by A.B. al-Mehri. (Birmingham: Maktabah Booksellers and Publishers, 2006).

<sup>89</sup> Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an: English Translation of Fī Zīlāl al-Qur’ān*, I, 56.

endeavoring to expunge spiritual-religious values from human existence.<sup>90</sup> In contrast, the Islamic worldview places significant emphasis on noble values such as religious faith, eternal truths, and universal ethics, and encourages humanity to comprehend and emulate these principles. It is imperative to point out that Qutb does not in any way despise, disregard, or reject material production and development in life, given that material reality constitutes the foundation for the perpetuation of the human *khalīfah*. In fact, Qutb still considers all material entities in the world as deserving of consideration in supporting the fulfilment of humanity's greater duty and purpose as God's vicegerent.<sup>91</sup> However, the fundamental tenet that occupies a position of paramount importance in Qutb's hermeneutical elaboration is the notion that material entities, by their very nature, are merely instruments, means, and servants for humanity. Also, these material entities do not ascend to a status that eclipses or supersedes the essence of human beings, as *khalīfah*, who are superior to them all.

The patterns identified in the four commentaries—epistemological privileging of human reason, instrumentalization of nature, and practical ignorance of nonhuman agency—can now be read as concrete theological instantiations of the philosophical configurations outlined earlier. Their consistent elevation of human knowledge and will over the rest of creation enact precisely the modern subject that Vahdat describes: an autonomous centre of meaning that confronts the world as an object to be represented, managed, and improved. At the same time, their portrayal of nature as a mere object of *taskhīr* and benefit reproduces the agential cuts that Barad problematises humans are constituted as the primary, if not exclusive, locus of meaningful agency, while the Qur'anic affirmations of nonhuman submission, praise, and response are domesticated, marginalised, or left underdeveloped. In this light, the anthropocentrism, dualism, and individual metaphysics traced in these commentaries are not merely ethical shortcomings; they are theologically mediated expressions of a broader ontological failure.

More specifically, the exegetes' hermeneutical engagement Shirazi's elevation of human epistemic capacity as a unique divine grace, Mughniyyah's sharpening of a dualistic separation between spiritual essence and material reality, Hamka's framing of the universe as an instrument for human civilization, and Qutb's assignment of cosmic dominion to the human mind embody the tripartite philosophical failures at the heart of our critique.<sup>92</sup> Argumentatively, these patterns stabilize a Cartesian cut that isolates human rationality as superior and veils the intra-active agencies of nonhuman creation, thereby perpetuating ecological objectification.<sup>93</sup> Philosophically, such readings sit uneasily with the Qur'anic depiction of a cosmos in which all beings are entangled in submission and glorification (e.g. Q. 2:116; 17:44; 22:18). This tension underscores the need for a diffractive rereading of *khalīfah* and *taskhīr* one that reveals these failures not as doctrinal inevitabilities, but as modern constructions that can be reconfigured through a relational, eco-theological lens.

## Toward an Eco-Relational Khalīfah

### *Anthropocentrism, Theological Dualism, and Veiled Agency Identified*

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<sup>90</sup> cf. Qutb, *Al-Islām Wa Musykilāt al-Ḥadārah*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones: Ma'alim Fi'l-Tareeq*, ed. and trans. A.B. al-Mehri (Birmingham: Maktabah Booksellers and Publishers, 2006), 109.

<sup>92</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*.

<sup>93</sup> Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and The Scientific Revolution*.

Through this exploration, the patterns of anthropocentrism, cartesian dualism, and individual metaphysics are readily apparent within each of these modern Qur'anic commentators. These patterns manifest in three problems that further highlight their conceptually problematic notions of reality. Firstly, one of the most destructive assumptions of humans about themselves is the hubristic overstatement of their significance among other creations. This kind of overweening affirmation seeks, on the one hand, to place humanity at the center of the universe, while, on the other hand, affirming the marginality of all other existence.<sup>94</sup> This phenomenon, known as anthropocentrism, is widely regarded as the most significant contributing factor to ecological disasters.<sup>95</sup> When interpreting the Qur'anic *khalīfah* in light of modern subjectivity, the four commentators that we have described evidently seek to establish human superiority over the rest of the divine creation, as well as their functionality in serving human interests. As a manifestation of anthropocentrism that has taken form as a new ontology,<sup>96</sup> the interpretations of modern exegetes that are heavily influenced by the idea of human subjectivity and autonomy blatantly render all nonhuman creatures on Earth as inferior objects whose existence is merely instrumental to meeting human needs. Barad precisely disrupts this metaphysics by rejecting the assumption of discrete, pre-existing entities. From an agential realist perspective, "the human" and "the nonhuman" do not stand as separate ontological categories that enter relations after the fact; rather, they emerge through intra-active material relations. Thus, anthropocentrism is not merely a moral fault but a fundamental misreading of reality, importing a Cartesian grammar of independent subjects and inert objects where the Qur'an itself depicts a relational and participatory cosmos.

Secondly, following this hubris of the anthropocentric tendency, these modern Qur'anic commentators tend to ignore the agency of other creations as inert objects. Recalling Merchant's critique of modern tendency to view the Earth as a dead object, free to be conquered by humans, the modern understanding of *khalīfah* will inevitably lead to the destruction and severance of relationship between all creations. In contrast, this ignorance to the agency of creations has been challenged by the Qur'an itself. In addition to affirming that God created everything truthfully or for a divine purpose/*bi al-ḥaqq* (Q. 6:73; 29:44; 39:5; 44:39; 45:22), as well as caring for and ensuring the survival of His creations on Earth (Q. 11:6), the Qur'an positively affirms that agency is not exclusive to human beings. This is because God has given agential capabilities to all His creations to testify to God's greatness. In this regard, the Muslim scriptures definitely affirm that all of creation, both in the celestial realms and on the terrestrial sphere, is considered "obedient/*qānītūn*" to God (Q. 2:116), and "submits/*aslama*" to Him (Q. 3:83), "glorifies/*yusabbih*" His greatness (Q. 17:44), and "bowing themselves before God in prostration, full of humility/*sujjadan lillāhi wa hum ḡākīrūn*" (Q. 16:48). Moreover, Q. 22:18 evidently underscores the prostration of the sun, moon, stars, mountains, plants, and animals. These Qur'anic presentations of mountains, stars, plants, and animals as praising and submitting is not merely rhetorical instrument, but a material-discursive recognition of agency distributed across creation. In Baradian terms, agency is not an attribute but an ongoing doing, a diffractive performance of

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<sup>94</sup> Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>95</sup> Paul Taylor, *Respect for Nature: A Theory of Environmental Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>96</sup> Melinda Benson, "New Materialism: An Ontology for the Anthropocene," *Natural Resources Journal* 59, no. 2 (January 2019): 251.

creation witnessing God. These verses affirm an intra-active cosmology, where human ethical subjectivity is co-constituted by nonhuman enactments of devotion.

Lastly, this ignorance toward the agency of other creation leads to the destructive instrumentalization of nature and nonhuman agents to serve only the interests of humankind. The destructive instrumentalization of anthropocentrism's ontology concerning nonhuman agents in the Earth, as Jane Bennet so poignantly outlines, then becomes the principal ammunition that fuels the flames of human arrogance while simultaneously stimulating their hallucinatory fantasies of dominating and exploiting the nonhuman creators.<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, this anthropocentric ignorance in assuming humans as the only being whose interest is being served by God clearly contradicts the Qur'anic narrative which stated that God creates the universe for the sake of all creations, not only for humanity. The Qur'an repeatedly depicts creation as existing in states of balance and mutual dependency, emphasizing that humans are entangled participants, not external managers. In Barad's terms, this implies a shift from responsibility as top-down moral decision (anthropocentric ethics) to *response-ability*, an ethical practice emerging from the very dynamics of *spacetime-mattering*, where human choices reconfigure the relational field of creation itself.

"He set down the Earth for His creatures, with its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain, its fragrant plants (Q. 55:10-12)."

These three patterns of modern interpretation within the Islamic discourse results in an understanding of *khalīfah* that is unfitting to the imperative need of Islamic ecological awareness and sensitivity. Moreover, the products of modern Qur'anic interpretation that are characterized by an anthropocentric, dualistic, and exceptionalist bias contradict and are not in alignment with the Qur'an's onto-axiological vision, which emphasizes ecological harmony, conformity, and tranquility. Therefore, a relational understanding of the *khalīfah* is urgently needed. In the context of the current ecological crises, God does not only admonish and deliver punishment to humans who have inflicted destruction to their environment, but God is also calling humans to be aware of the inextricable relationship between themselves (humans) and all other creations on Earth, including the land and the sea. As already stated obviously in Q. 7:55-56, "Call on your Lord humbly and privately—He does not like those who transgress His bounds: *do not corrupt the Earth after it has been set right*—call on Him fearing and hoping. *The mercy of God is close to those who do good.*"

In the aforementioned verse, the Qur'an unequivocally prohibits humanity from causing corruption through disobedience, injustice, and unethical behaviour, that may inflict disproportion and misery upon the cosmic reality, which God has created according to a state of balance and justice for the benefit of all creation.<sup>98</sup> Explaining this verse in the light of Islamic jurisprudential theory, Fakhruddin al-Razi asserts that the prohibition is absolute, thereby implying that all that results in suffering and damage is deemed unlawful according to divine

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<sup>97</sup> Jane Bennet. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>98</sup> cf. Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, ed. 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Maujūd and 'Alī Muḥammad, IV (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1993), 313; 'Alī al-Faḍl ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṭabrāsī, *Majma' al-Bayān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān*, IV (Beirut: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 2006), 203–4; Abū 'Abbās Muḥammad Ibn 'Ajībah, *Al-Baḥr al-Madīd Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur'ān al-Majīd*, ed. A. Abdullah al-Qursyī, II (Cairo: al-Duktūr Ḥasan 'Abbās Zakīy, 1999), 224.



law.<sup>99</sup> In an analogous fashion, Q. 30:41 warned humankind that “Corruption has flourished on land and sea as a result of people’s actions and *He will make them taste the consequences of some of their own actions* so that they may turn back.” In Baradian ontology, actions do not simply affect pre-existing objects but reconfigure the world’s ongoing unfolding. Q. 30:41 articulates a similar logic: corruption spreads because human actions intra-actively transform the conditions of existence across land and sea. According to the verse, God punishes humans as divine retribution for their negative, exploitative, and destructive misdeeds by instigating instability in the universe that will result in sorrow, hardship, devastation, and even the destruction of the cycle of life.<sup>100</sup> When understood as a preventive warning, this verse exhorts humanity to prioritize ecological balance by avoiding the abusive conducts towards the Earth and its inhabitants, emphasizing that such amoral actions will inevitably lead to disastrous consequences.<sup>101</sup>

Barad shows that the very modern structure of tafsir categories is metaphysically inadequate to the Qur’an’s own ontology. A deeper issue underscoring these tendencies is that the very interpretive frameworks employed by modern exegetes are themselves structured by a metaphysics of discrete, pre-existing entities that privileges human subjectivity as the sole locus of reason and ethical agency. Karen Barad’s agential realism exposes this metaphysical architecture as fundamentally flawed. Rather than conceiving humans and nonhumans as separate, self-contained substances that subsequently enter relations, Barad insists that all beings emerge through intra-action, a process in which entities are co-constituted within material-discursive practices. When modern tafsir presupposes that “humanity” is a stable category positioned over and against “nature,” it imports a Cartesian grammar that is alien to the Qur’an’s own relational ontology. In this sense, the problem is not only what these commentators conclude about *khalīfah*, but the methodological premises through which they can reach only those conclusions. By interpreting the Qur’an through an epistemology of pre-given subjects and passive objects, modern tafsir remains metaphysically inadequate to the cosmology the Qur’an itself performs in which agency, praise, obedience, and moral becoming emerge within entangled fields of creation rather than from the autonomous decisions of isolated human actors.

### *Rethinking Khalīfah and Taskhīr after Agential Realism*

To respond to the three-fold problem of the modern understanding of the *khalīfah*, this section will propose an alternative interpretation of Qur’anic *khalīfah* by shifting away from individual metaphysics to relational metaphysics; from Cartesian dualism toward entanglement; and from an anthropocentric ontology toward a posthuman, intra-active one. The interpretation of *khalīfah* will be radically reconfigured, from which its implications are directed toward a more ecologically empathic understanding of human beings in relation with all nonhuman creation.

First, *khalīfah* is not a possession of the human self, but a phenomenon that emerges from intra-active embeddedness in a divine relational network. Humans are not appointed “over” or “instead of” other creation, but “within” creation, as part of an ongoing material-discursive entanglement. Understood this way, the concept of *khalīfah* is no longer trapped within the idea

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<sup>99</sup> M. Fakhruddin al-Razi. *Tafsīr Al-Fakhr al-Rāzī al-Musytahir Bi al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr Wa Maḥātīḥ al-Ghaib*. I. XIV. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1981

<sup>100</sup> Abū Ja’far al-Ṭūsī, *Al-Tibyān Fī Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān*, IX (Qom: Mu’assasah al-Nasyr al-Islāmī, 2019), 520–21.

<sup>101</sup> M. Faḍl al-Kāshani, *Al-Ṣāfi Fī al-Tafsīr Al-Qur’ān*, ed. M. al-Husaini al-Amini, X (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1998), 504.

of pre-existing, independent human subjects. Instead of understanding humans as individual entities that are independent of other creation, a relational understanding recognizes co-constitution as the defining condition of creaturely life. Qur'anic cosmology itself affirms this: the creation of human existence is materially contingent upon dust (Q. 3:52; 30:20; 40:67; 45:11), clay (Q. 23:12; 6:2; 32:7; 37:11), potters' clay (Q. 55:14), fermented clay (Q. 44:14), water (Q. 21:30), and so forth.<sup>102</sup> Understood this way, humans cannot be defined outside their intra-action with God, Earth, and other creatures. The whole creation participates in mutual constitution, where one creature is defined through its relations with others.<sup>103</sup> Therefore, *khalifah* is not a statement of superiority and serfdom, it is a proclamation of inseparability and interdependent responsibility.

Second, our understanding of *khalifah* must be detached from its Cartesian legacy that separates humans from the rest of creation based on rationality. This dualistic agential cut—where only humans are thinking beings with agency while nature is passive, irrational, and inert—creates an onto-epistemological split between subject and object, between human and nonhuman, between mind and matter. Yet, the Qur'anic cosmology rejects such division. As previously stated, the Qur'anic narrative portrays the entirety of divine creation, human and nonhumans submitting, worshiping, and prostrating themselves before God, thereby affirming their distributed agency. It is noteworthy that the Qur'an also relates that all of God's creatures pray, based on "knowledge" and in their own unique way, to God (Q. 24:41). Furthermore, Q. 41:11 posits that all of God's creation is endowed with a will of some kind. It would not be an overstatement when Sarra Tlili aptly asserts, "the Qur'an ascribes to nonhuman more agency than humans are typically able to perceive in them, including emotions, knowledge, and the ability to make choices."<sup>104</sup> These expositions demonstrate how the Qur'an never grants exclusive rational agency to humans, nor does it portray nature as dead or devoid of meaning. Thus, the concept of *khalifah* does not point to human superiority based on rational autonomy, but to entangled participation in moral and spiritual responsibilities to God.

Third, *khalifah* must be reimagined as a distributed, intra-active role shared across all creation. Conventional interpretations assume that humans alone bear the right and burden of *khalifah* stewardship because supposedly they alone hold moral and rational superiority. However, by rejecting the Cartesian apparatus that partitions reality into rational and irrational entities, this claim collapses. Creation is not structured by hierarchies of worth, but by woven patterns of glorification and submission that permeate all levels of existence. The forest and mountain, the rivers and sea, animals and trees, together with humans, have a divine purpose without requiring human mediation. The idea that only humans "represent" God on Earth is a discursive illusion generated by a modern epistemology of control. A non-anthropocentric understanding of *khalifah* is not about authority, but about shared agency. Humans do not "hold" stewardship alone; they enact stewardship with other creations. It is a divine calling to participate in the universal intra-actions of care, responsiveness, and reciprocity among all creation.

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<sup>102</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, "Cosmology," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, I (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2001), 446.

<sup>103</sup> cf. Mawil Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2000).

<sup>104</sup> Sarra Tlili, "Qur'anic Creation: Anthropocentric Readings and Ecocentric Possibilities." In *The Routledge Companion to the Qur'an*, edited by George Archer, Maria M. Dakake, and Daniel A. Madigan, 135–44. Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2022.

When this paper describes *khalīfah* as a “distributed role shared across creation,” it does not negate the specificity of the human mandate in Q. 2:30; rather, it diffractively re-reads that mandate in relational terms. The Qur’anic narrative of God announcing the appointment of a *khalīfah fī al-ard* presupposes an already responsive earth populated by beings who glorify and obey (Q. 17:44; 22:18). Humans are therefore not installed as vicegerents over a dead, mute nature, but invited into an office within an ongoing, multi-species economy of worship. From the perspective of agential realism, *khalīfah* names not an ontological essence that humans possess, but a situated intra-active participation in a field of agencies through which divine *rahmah* and *taskhīr* are actualised. This proposal does not discard the classical association of *khalīfah* with vicegerency or successorship; it reconfigures the apparatus through which such vicegerency is understood. Instead of authorising unilateral dominion, *khalīfah* is recast as a relational office in which human practices must be attuned to the praise, obedience, and flourishing of the more-than-human world.

The concept of *taskhīr* (Q. 14:32–33; 16:12–14) is crucial in this reconceptualization. Classical and modern exegetes often invoke *taskhīr* to ground human dominion, reading the world as “made subservient” to humankind in a mode of ontological subordination that reinforces an image of nature as raw material placed under human rule; in the four commentaries analysed here, this reading is repeatedly ratified, stabilising a Cartesian cut between active human subjects and passive nonhuman objects. Argumentatively, such a misreading constitutes a material-discursive practice that perpetuates dualistic exploitation. An eco-relational interpretation informed by agential realism, by contrast, can reread *taskhīr* as describing functional entanglement within a divinely ordered ecology: celestial bodies, animals, plants, and elements are “conscripted” into a network that makes human life possible, yet this conscription does not erase their own modes of agency, response, and obedience to God.<sup>105</sup> On this view, reimagining *khalīfah* necessarily entails reimagining *taskhīr*: not as hierarchical subservience but as a grammar of mutual intra-action in which nonhuman agencies *intra-act* with humanity in ethical sustenance, and in which human actions are accountable to the dignity, vulnerabilities, and worship of nonhuman creatures. This transformation aligns *taskhīr* with *tawhīd*’s logic of unity, fostering an eco-theological ethic of entangled care that honours creation’s intrinsic value beyond mere instrumental utility.

### *Rahmah li al-Ālamin and Tawhīd as Eco-Theological Principles*

Through this exploration, it becomes clear that the term *khalīfah fī al-ard* should not be understood as the proclamation of human superiority *on the Earth*. Instead, it refers to the inextricable intra-active entanglement of Earth and the *khalīfah*, where neither Earth nor human emerges as a pre-given agent but as co-constituted through ongoing material-discursive relations. At this juncture, the Earth constitutes the *khalīfah* as much as the *khalīfah* constitutes the Earth. In accordance with this assertion, the Qur’an advocates for a relational agency that is manifested through entangled changes emerging from relational agency, rather than agency understood as an isolated human possession prior to relation.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, life is then characterized by

<sup>105</sup> Mawil Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2000); Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur’an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Asmaa El Maaroufi, “Animals as Agents? A Qur’anic View,” in *Routledge Handbook of Islamic Ritual and Practice*, ed. Oliver Leaman (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2022), 425–36.

material-discursive entanglements that configure multiple kinds of agencies (e.g. human, animal, vegetal, microbial, and geological) as participants in world-making processes.<sup>107</sup> Humanity's fate in these networks is closely bound up with, and determined by, the nonhuman creations.<sup>108</sup> Understood through this relational sense, *khalīfah* is not trapped within the narrow confines of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism. Also, it recognizes the co-constitutive relation between all creation.

The *khalīfah* is thus an enactment of *rahmah li al-'alamīn*, not as a static honour possessed by humans, but as an ongoing ethical performance that responds to the needs of all creation. Prophet Muhammad was sent not only to guide humans, but to bring mercy to all worlds (*al-'alamīn*). As already stated in Q. 21:107, "It was only as a mercy that We sent you [Prophet] to all people." According to this passage, the primary purpose for sending the Prophet Muhammad is to bring happiness and realize the goodness and benefit of life for all divine creations.<sup>109</sup> It is imperative to point out that, from a Qur'anic perspective, God's grace is all-encompassing (Q. 6:147; 40:7). In this regard, the Qur'an evidently asserts that the realization of Divine grace envelops not only the divine will and actions (Q. 30:50), but also the constitutive participation of multiple divine agencies in a diffractive pattern of causes, effects, and responses (Q. 25:48; 28:73; 30:46). In this way, the concept of *rahmah* should not be understood as a human possession but a divine orientation expressed through response-ability, in Barad's sense: an ethico-onto-epistemological accountability within an already entangled world. It is imperative to acknowledge that the Qur'an also suggests that divine grace is inextricably linked to the performance of virtuous ethical deeds (Q. 7:56; 45:30). Furthermore, God's grace is said to be analogous to divine retribution for sinners who engage in various unethical acts, thereby suggesting that such actions are incongruent with the concept of *rahmah* (Q. 6:147). Thus, the relational *khalīfah* participates in this enactment of *rahmah* not by ruling irresponsibly over creation, but by ethically preserving, responding, and co-sustaining *rahmah* for all creation.

While this paper has highlighted *rahmah li al-'alamīn* as a relational orientation toward all worlds, *tawhīd* must be brought to the centre as the theological core of an eco-relational ethics. If *tawhīd* affirms the oneness of God as the sole source of being, agency, and value, then any configuration of the world that absolutises human agency over against the rest of creation risks functioning as a subtle form of *shirk*: it attributes to humankind a quasi-divine sovereignty vis-à-vis a silenced nature.<sup>110</sup> From a relational perspective, *tawhīd* underwrites the fundamental interconnectedness of all creatures before God; humans, animals, plants, and landscapes are

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<sup>107</sup> cf. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> Mohammad Fazlhashemi, "Islamic Ecotheology," in *Intersections of Religion, Education, and a Sustainable World*, ed. Sally Windsor and Olof Franck (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 25–40.

<sup>109</sup> cf. Abū al-Khair 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad al-Baiḍāwī, *Anwār Al-Tanzīl Wa Asrār al-Ta'wīl*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān, IV (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāṭ al-'Arabī, n.d.), 62; Abī Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āyī Al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abdullah ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, XVI (Kairo: Dār Hijr, 2001), 439.

<sup>110</sup> Ibrahim Ozdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3–37; Mohammad Fazlhashemi, "Islamic Ecotheology," in *Intersections of Religion, Education, and a Sustainable World*, ed. Sally Windsor and Olof Franck (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025), 25–40.

differentiated, yet never ontologically severed, participants in a single divine address.<sup>111</sup> Anthropocentric dualism is therefore not only ecologically disastrous; it is a failure of unity, a practical denial of the very oneness it professes to uphold.

An agential realist ontoepistemology helps to transform *tawhīd* from an abstract affirmation of monotheism into a dynamic principle of entanglement, in which all beings participate in God's sustenance and praise. On this view, dominion conceived as unilateral control appears as a distortion of cosmic harmony rather than its fulfilment. The Qur'anic imagery of universal glorification, in which "there is nothing but that it glorifies Him with praise" (Q. 17:44), gestures toward a community of worship that exceeds human boundaries. Reconceiving *khalīfah* as eco-relational is, in this sense, an attempt to live *tawhīd* as an anti-dualistic, anti-idolatrous principle: stewardship is reimagined as participation in, and responsibility toward, the mutual glorification of all creatures. In aligning *khalīfah* with *tawhīd*'s ethical imperative, this framework directly contests modern anthropocentric dualisms and fortifies the theological core of the argument against ecological fragmentation.

In this sense, how we understand the *ummah* should also be reinterpreted. In its conventional comprehension, the concept of *ummah* is understood only as a phenomenon exclusive to human beings. Oppositely, relational understanding of *khalīfah* will firstly assert that all of divine creations are ontologically equal as the manifestation of God's signs.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, these divine signs, be it human or nonhuman beings, are participating constitutively in the dynamics and trajectory of the universe. In accordance with the point, the Q. 6:38 views all beings on Earth as *ummah*, in a communal relationship together with the humans. Additionally, Q. 17:44, 59:24, 61:1, 62:1, and 64:1 also state that everything on Earth, together with humans, are exalting God. These Qur'anic passages propose a participatory relationship between divine creation and God<sup>113</sup> and indicate that all existences other than human beings are, borrowing Heideggerian terminology, *mitsein*/being-with humans and constitutive agents for their existence<sup>114</sup> or in Barad's terms, the intra-acting participants whose very capacities for agency and existence emerge through their entanglements.

In this context, the universe and all divine creations can be considered, as Christian theologian Sallie McFague eloquently termed them, "God's Body," signifying the establishment of an intimate, reciprocal, and ethical relationship between God and His creation.<sup>115</sup> The affirmation of dynamic relationality between God, nonhuman existence, and humanity implies that the concept of *ummah* is a cosmic community that encompasses all the relationships connecting all of God's creation. This idea of understanding the *ummah* as human-exclusive then

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<sup>111</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1993); Fazlun M. Khalid, *Signs on the Earth: Islam, Modernity, and the Climate Crisis* (Leicestershire: Kube Publishing, 2019).

<sup>112</sup> Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thoughts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Ibrahim Ozdemir, *The Ethical Dimension of Human Attitude Towards Nature: A Muslim Perspective* (Istanbul: İnsan Publications, 2008).

<sup>113</sup> Ibrahim Ozdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3–37.

<sup>114</sup> cf. Asmaa El Maaroufi, "Towards an Ethic of Being-With. An Islamic-Phenomenological Perspective on Human-Animal Encounters," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 6, no. 1 (February 2022): 81–93, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340078>.

<sup>115</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).



is transformed along with the concept of *khalīfah*. A relational *khalīfah* is not a status that is given to humans, but a condition sustained through response-ability, where humans are called to attune ethically to the entanglements already constituting life. Here the *ummah* includes not only humans but also all nonhuman creations on Earth including animals, ecosystems, lakes and rivers, the microbes and even the planetary system that sustains life. With this understanding, *ummah* is not only a sociological category, but a material-discursive entanglement of all divine creations, a diffractive pattern of relations that constitutes a cosmic community that comes as a direct logical consequence of an ecologically relational *khalīfah fī al-ard*.

## 6. Conclusion

The article has demonstrated that the modern Qur'an commentaries is tethered to anthropocentric, dualistic, and individualistic presumptions of subjectivity that reproduce a metaphysical failure. These presumptions then create the current ecological catastrophe and expose the destruction of cosmic reality. By privileging human rationality, separating humans ontologically from nature, and isolating human subjectivity, the modern interpretations of *khalīfah* consequently have sacralized human dominance at the expense of desacralizing other parts of creation.

With the rise of ecological awareness, humanity's long-standing faith in the anthropocentric idea which asserts haughtily that there is one scale to rule the universe, the human one, is shaking <sup>116</sup>. It should be acknowledged that while this form of awareness has emerged, developed, and disseminated rapidly throughout diverse regions of the Islamic world, the anthropocentric metaphysical identification of humans as *khalīfah* persists as a predominant notion in the writings of Muslim scholars <sup>117</sup>. Contrary to these onto-theological stances, our discussion has sensitively proposed a reconstruction of the concept of *khalīfah* that is grounded in posthumanist and relational metaphysics. This reinterpretation does not only offer a reinterpretation of the concept of *khalīfah* stewardship, because it also changes the way we understand the nature of Qur'anic reality itself through a relational perspective. In this relational perspective, *khalīfah* is not a title of human arbitrary sovereignty, but a mode of relational entanglement. It is not a role that is granted to us because of our claimed exceptional rationality, but from our deep ethical connection with Earth and all other creatures.

From this exposition, the ecological crisis is not only a secondary concern for Muslims, but it is a direct consequence of a flawed theological metaphysics. Therefore, the turn to a relational *khalīfah* is urgently demanding us to rethink key Islamic concepts, such as *ummah*, *rahmah*, and even *tauḥīd*, to construct a relationally based Islamic ecotheology. In this reconfiguration, *rahmah li al-'alamīn* is no longer a static essence of the Prophet or of Islam, but a cosmic

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<sup>116</sup> Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>117</sup> cf. Zainal Abidin Bagir and Najiyah Martiam, "Islam: Norms and Practices," in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2017), 79–87; Zuleyha Keskin and Mehmet Ozalp, "An Islamic Approach to Environmental Protection and Ecologically Sustainable Peace in the Age of the Anthropocene," in *Towards a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace: Navigating the Great Transition*, ed. Joseph Camilleri and Deborah Guess (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 119–34; Fachruddin Majeri Mangunjaya, "Developing Environmental Awareness and Conservation Through Islamic Teaching," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 2011): 36–49, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etq067>; Soumaya Pernilla Ouis, "Islamic Ecotheology Based on the Qur'an," *Islamic Studies* 37, no. 2 (1998): 151–81.

responsibility that is performed by all creation. Islamic ecotheology then must move beyond critical appraisal of Western modernity to reconstruct Islam's own metaphysical framework, disentangling it from the logic of domination and human exceptionalism derived from the Western humanism. Moreover, the discourse of Islamic ecotheology should strive to elucidate the dialectical intertwining of metaphysics and ethics, while highlighting the rarely recognized fact that the fundamental purpose of metaphysical construction and theological discourse is moral edification and spiritual refinement. Consequently, the contentious dichotomy between facts and values that persisted over centuries within traditional metaphysical and theological discourse will be transcended. Thus, living in the era of planetary crisis, *khalīfah fī al-ard* must be reclaimed not as human dominative rule over the Earth, but as human responsible participation within the Earth's sacred processes of life.

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