



Islamic Ecotheology and the Anthropocene Challenge: Ethical Limits and Theological Possibilities

Dr **Sevcan Öztürk**, Faculty Member, Faculty of Theology, Social Sciences University of Ankara, Ankara, Turkey, sevcan.ozturk@asbu.edu.tr

This article critically examines the current state of Islamic ecotheology and argues that, while it has made valuable contributions to environmental thought, it remains largely confined within an ethical paradigm centered on moral responsibility. As a result, Islamic ecotheology has yet to develop a theologically grounded understanding capable of addressing the challenges of the Anthropocene. The article identifies three interrelated tendencies that shape the field today: (1) an anthropocentric orientation, in which the human being is framed through moral function rather than theological depth; (2) a responsibility-based functional anthropology that limits reflection on the human's ontological status within creation; and (3) an apologetic tone that tends to defend rather than critically expand the discourse, often remaining detached from the broader intellectual context of the Anthropocene. These tendencies, taken together, reveal the absence of a coherent theological anthropology capable of engaging the challenges of the Anthropocene. The article therefore calls for a shift of focus along two main dimensions. First, a shift in content: the construction of a theological anthropology that moves beyond functional categories of responsibility, and second, a shift in rhetoric: the adoption of a comparative method as an integral part of Islamic ecotheology.



Introduction

This article aims to identify the limitations of the current ethical framework of Islamic ecotheology, to justify why these should indeed be regarded as limitations, and to indicate possible pathways for the further development of the field. It should be noted that the aim of this article is not to reject ethics or deny the important role of environmental ethics in shaping Islamic environmental discourse. Rather, it argues that while ethical reflection is essential, approaching today's ecological challenges from a merely ethical perspective is insufficient for generating new ideas or engaging meaningfully with contemporary debates about the future of creation. It is hoped that recognizing this limitation will help resituate ethics within a broader theological framework.

In the past few decades, Muslim scholars have sought to formulate an Islamic view of nature, and of the human–nature relationship largely in response to growing ecological concerns. Beginning with pioneering figures like Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the 1960s and expanding through the works of scholars like S. Nomanul Haq, Mawil Izzi Dien, Ibrahim Özdemir, Fazlun Khalid, and others, this field has established important conceptual foundations. The various approaches presented by Muslim scholars in response to contemporary ecological issues can be classified as “Islamic ecotheology” a field that includes theological reflections seeking to articulate Islamic perspectives on the relationship between God, humanity, and the natural world in the context of contemporary ecological crisis.

Today, Islamic ecotheology constitutes a substantive body of scholarship with its own terminology and internal coherence. However, this article contends that while Islamic ecotheology has made important contributions, it remains largely shaped by an ethical framework grounded in an underdeveloped understanding of the human being. This has given rise to a functionalist view that defines the human being primarily in terms of moral responsibility. This ethical framework limits deeper theological reflections on the ontological status of the human being in relation to creation and the divine. As a result, Islamic ecotheology has yet to develop a theological account capable of addressing the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. The Anthropocene, a new geological epoch proposed in the early 2000s that is defined by human impact on Earth's systems, poses new challenges and questions for theological reflection, including within Islamic thought. The concept urges us to rethink not only human responsibility but also broader aspects of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. In other words, the Anthropocene has brought a paradigmatic shift in how we understand the relationship between human beings and the Earth. In its current form, as this article argues, Islamic environmental discourse is incapable of contributing to the overall theological task of reimagining the human–nature relationship in the Anthropocene.

More specifically, this article advances three claims:

1. Islamic ecotheology has been primarily shaped by an ethical framework focused on moral responsibility toward nature
2. this framework lacks a theologically grounded account of humanity and its ontological status within creation
3. consequently, Islamic ecotheology remains insufficiently equipped to address the deeper theological and anthropological questions raised by the Anthropocene.

It should be highlighted at this point that the field of Islamic ecotheology, as it has developed in international academic discourse, has been primarily shaped by a small number of contributors writing in English, whose works have developed its dominant conceptual vocabulary and general frameworks. While numerous scholars have written on Islamic environmental themes, sustained systematic engagement remains rare. Despite the growing body of literature, most contributions come from scholars who have authored only one or two articles on ecological themes, often without pursuing a comprehensive theological project. This fragmentation results in a scattered body of literature, marked by a lack of depth or continuity. As a result, it becomes particularly difficult to identify any figures who can be clearly entitled as ecotheologians in a sustained or systematic sense. This article primarily focuses on the works of scholars who have contributed to the field with a more sustained body of literature and played a central role in developing an Islamic ecotheological terminology, such as S. Nomanul Haq, Mawil Izzu Dien, Ibrahim Özdemir, and Fazlun Khalid. Other figures, such as Ziauddin Sardar and Parvez Manzoor, are referred to where they offer particularly significant contributions. Although Nasr was among the first to introduce ecological issues and concepts into Islamic thought with his foundational works, he arguably remains an exception rather than a representative example of Muslim ecotheological discourse. Unlike later Muslim environmentalists, Nasr's arguments include a theologically grounded anthropology that is embedded in his comprehensive metaphysical system. Because of this exceptional status, he is not the focus of this article, which examines the recurring themes and tendencies that shape the more representative body of Islamic environmental discourse. Although the reasons his metaphysical and anthropological direction has not been widely adopted within the mainstream discourse need further discussion, his perspectives remain essential for future constructive developments in the field.

This article is written from within contemporary Islamic theological discourse, adopting a critical and constructive perspective that remains open to dialogue with broader theological and interdisciplinary debates shaped by

the Anthropocene. Methodologically, this study employs a critical–theological approach grounded in Islamic sources and discourse analysis, aiming to identify the key themes, corresponding arguments, and rhetorical tendencies of Islamic ecotheology and evaluate their relevance for contemporary theological reflection. While the central claim is outlined early on, the argument develops inductively: by critically examining the foundational concepts and dominant ethical framings of Islamic ecotheology, the article demonstrates that the discourse remains largely confined within an ethical paradigm centered on moral responsibility. As mentioned, the aim is not to dismiss the ethical contributions of Islamic ecotheology. It is to argue that the Anthropocene calls for a deeper theological framework that extends the existing discourse and is grounded in theological anthropology. I use theological anthropology here in its widest and most inclusive sense, referring to theological accounts of the human being in relation to God and creation. Even a minimal yet systematic formulation of such an anthropology would represent a significant step forward for Islamic ecotheology. However, such a framework is still largely absent in contemporary Islamic environmental discourse.

To develop the arguments explained, the article proceeds in three steps: first, it offers a critical overview of the current state of Islamic ecotheology, identifying the key themes and concepts in the field. Second, it explores the limitations of the dominant ethical–functional framework of Islamic environmental discourse and its rhetorical tendencies in light of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Third, as a conclusion, it outlines possible directions and shifts for advancing Islamic ecotheology by building on its existing foundations while addressing current deficiencies within today’s broader intellectual and planetary context.

Key Concepts and Corresponding Arguments in Islamic Ecotheology

Environmental movements that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century raised questions about the origins of the ecological crisis. Although early discussions on environmental concerns did not explicitly draw on theological or religious frameworks, as explorations of the root causes of the crisis deepened, the need for theological engagement became increasingly apparent (Öztürk 2023, 17). Particularly after Lynn White’s (1967, 155) thesis arguing that the root causes of the ecological crisis are predominantly theological, a wave of scholarly engagement began to explore how religious worldviews have shaped human attitudes toward nature.

In parallel with the emergence of global environmental awareness, environmental concerns within Islamic thought were first raised in the 1960s through the work of Nasr. Nasr was among the earliest intellectuals to address environmental degradation as both a philosophical and theological issue. His lectures delivered at the University of Chicago in 1966, later published as *The*

Encounter of Man and Nature in 1968, marked a turning point in introducing contemporary environmental questions into Muslim scholarly discourse (Nasr 1968). However, for almost a decade after the publication of Nasr's lectures, environmental concerns did not seem to appear as a central theme in Islamic intellectual discussions. In the 1980s and early 1990s, discussions of an Islamic conception of nature and the human–nature relationship were often situated within the broader context of the dialogue between religion and science. This framing reflected efforts to reconcile Islamic metaphysical teachings with emerging ecological challenges from an epistemological perspective (Wersal 1995, 456–58).

This decade also witnessed the emergence of a Qur'anic terminology aimed at articulating the relationship between Islam and environmental issues. In addition to the leading works of Nasr, Parvez Manzoor (1984, 155–62) offered one of the earliest systematic attempts to articulate “some metaphysical and philosophic principles governing the environmental ethics of Islam.” His article can be considered one of the earliest attempts at developing a Qur'anic terminology for understanding the human–nature relationship. Another important voice in the development of Islamic ecological discourse during this period is Ziauddin Sardar (1985, 218–37), who contributed to the construction of an Islamic environmental vocabulary, particularly through his emphasis on epistemology and moral discourse. However, Sardar's scholarly interests led him more toward critiques of modernity and Western science and culture rather than a further theological or metaphysical engagement with ecological concerns. In the 1990s and the years that followed, prominent figures such as Fazlun Khalid, Mawil Izzi Dien, S. Nomanul Haq, and Ibrahim Özdemir contributed significantly to the emerging Islamic environmental discourse. All emphasized that addressing the ecological crisis requires the development of an ethical system rooted in the Qur'an. With this aim in mind, scholars began to develop and reinterpret Qur'anic concepts to articulate the value of nature and define the human–nature relationship within an Islamic worldview.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Islamic environmental discourse throughout this formative period was its development of a rich terminology and set of arguments, most of which are derived from the Qur'an. In this context, a key theological concept is *tawhīd* (divine unity), the Qur'anic expression that defines the oneness of God and the central pillar of Islam. While *tawhīd* is by no means unique to the ecotheological discourse, its reinterpretation in environmental thought serves to ground ecotheological discourse in a metaphysical vision of unity. This means that *tawhīd* is often used in Islamic environmental discourse to highlight the interconnectedness of all creation under God's sovereignty (Khalid 2002, 338; 2010, 710–11; 2017, 135; 2019, 163–64; Manzoor 1984, 155; Izzi Dien 2000, 72–74; Özdemir 2003, 4).

Alongside *tawhid*, several Qur'anic concepts articulate the role and meaning of nature. The concept of *āyāt* (signs) refers to natural phenomena as signs pointing to God's creative power. This concept is frequently used to describe the role of the natural world as directing the human being toward contemplation of God, His existence, and His divine attributes. Therefore, nature becomes a visible sign that points beyond itself, inviting reflection on the existence and attributes of God (Haq 2001b, 146; Khalid 2017, 133; Özdemir 2003, 9–10; Sardar 1985, 226; Izzi Dien 1997, 48). Another key Qur'anic concept explaining the meaning and role of nature is *mīzān* (balance). It is used to imply that all creation is created with an inherent harmony as a universal law of God, and that there is an immanent order and purpose in the creation (Khalid 2003, 316; 2017, 316; Özdemir 2003, 8–10). Finally, the concept of *fiṭra* describes the primordial nature of all creation and denotes the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation (Khalid 2017, 131; 2019, 164). Together, these concepts portray nature as part of a sacred system that is a balanced and pure manifestation of the divine and directs the attention of the human being toward God.

Among the key concepts that highlight the human dimension of the human–nature relationship is the Qur'anic concept of *khalīfa* (vicegerent). Muslim ecotheologians typically interpret vicegerency in terms of human responsibility: human beings uniquely hold the divinely ordained responsibility of environmental protection due to their special role as vicegerents of God on Earth (Özdemir 2008, 167–69; Khalid 2017, 10–11; 2019, 164–65; Izzi Dien 1990, 191; 2000, 74–79). In this framework, human beings, as God's vicegerents, are entrusted with the task of maintaining the balance embedded in creation and refraining from actions that disrupt this divinely ordained harmony (Izzi Dien 1990, 192; Haq 2001b, 147; Özdemir 2003, 13–14). Vicegerency is usually accompanied by the concept of *amāna* (trust), which emphasizes that the Earth and all it contains have been entrusted to humanity by God (Khalid 2019, 165). As Manzoor (1984, 156–57) explains the concept in light of the Qur'anic verses: “Man has, of his own accord, accepted nature as a trust (*amana*) and a theatre of his moral struggle. Heavens, earth and mountains refused to assume this responsibility, which man took upon himself voluntarily.” Muslim ecotheologians emphasize that the role of vicegerency does not imply domination over nature but rather signifies a position of responsibility grounded in moral and spiritual accountability. Since the role of the human being is “to preserve, protect, and promote their fellow creatures” (Izzi Dien 1990, 191–92), the human being is “the guardian in the role of the slave” of God (Khalid 2003, 317). Khalid (2017, 138) further writes on the role of *khalīfa* on Earth: “We are called to care for and manage the Earth in a way that conforms to God's purpose in Creation: it should be used for our benefit without causing harm to the other inhabitants of planet Earth, which are communities like ourselves . . . The relationship we have

with the natural world is not a right to do with as we please, but a responsibility that carries with it accountability.”

Two Qur’anic principles in Islamic environmental discourse are ‘*adl* (justice) and *ihsān* (beauty, kindness, excellence), which define the character of human behavior toward nature. As God’s vicegerent, the human being is expected to act in accordance with the principles of *adl* and *ihsan* in all interactions with creation (Khalid 2017, 11; 2019, 165; Izzī Dien 1990, 190; 1997, 49). Khalid (2017, 138–39) highlights this principle: “The discharge of our responsibilities should be tempered by justice and kindness with the intention always to do good. This is *ihsan*, doing what is pleasing to Allah.” In this framework, justice and kindness are not only ethical values but also theological imperatives that shape the human relationship with the natural world. The highest form of moral responsibility in this context is to act justly and beautifully in one’s engagement with creation.

The main themes and corresponding arguments of Islamic environmental discourse show that Islamic ecotheology integrates theological, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions, framing the human being as a responsible agent. The role of the human being in this framework is defined by divine trust, cosmic balance, and moral excellence. Therefore, the concept of the human being as *khalīfa*, entrusted with *amana* and guided by principles such as *adl* and *ihsan*, is central to Islamic ecotheological discourse. Yet these formulations often serve as both the starting point and the end point of the discussion. As a result, the human role is typically defined in ethical terms such as “responsibility” and “accountability” but rarely examined more deeply at the levels of theological anthropology or in terms of a metaphysically grounded ontology. The ontological foundations of responsibility therefore remain largely unexplored. An important exception is Nasr, who seeks to ground responsibility in a broader metaphysical foundation. However, his attempt remains an isolated case in the overall Islamic environmental discourse. The broader discourse is limited by its tendency to repeat earlier arguments, particularly regarding the human role. As a result, Islamic ecotheology remains largely confined to an ethical framework. This terminology and framework represent a meaningful contribution in the formation period; however, a closer examination reveals certain limitations in the way they are currently employed. Such limitations become more evident, particularly in the capacity of this ethical framework that defines Islamic ecological discourse to engage the existential and systemic challenges of the Anthropocene, where the human is not just a caretaker but the principal geological force reshaping the planet. Addressing these limitations is particularly essential if the field of Islamic ecotheology is to develop further. The task of the next section is to examine the shortcomings of this purely ethical paradigm in Islamic ecotheology in relation to contemporary planetary realities.

The Anthropocene Context and the Limits of Ethical Response

To understand the limits of a purely ethical response, it is necessary to situate the human being within the major phases of the history of life on Earth, which has been defined by successive geological epochs. These epochs have shaped the environmental conditions in which living beings have emerged and developed. The Holocene epoch, which began about 12,000 years ago, provided the stable climatic conditions that allowed human civilizations to flourish. In this epoch, human beings were subjects within nature (Monastersky 2015, 145). By contrast, the early twenty-first century has revealed that we are now living in a new geological epoch known as the Anthropocene. In contrast to the relatively stable conditions of the Holocene, the Anthropocene is characterized by the fact that human activity has become the dominant force shaping planetary systems, including climate regulation, biodiversity, and ocean chemistry (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010, 2228–31). As part of this shift, the Anthropocene has brought its own contexts and questions that challenge the traditional paradigms of the social sciences and humanities, as Clive Hamilton (2017, 85) rightly suggests. This particular case also applies to theology, understood as a discipline deeply engaged with the humanities. In what follows, I examine first the shift in how the human–nature relationship is being approached in light of the Anthropocene and the scientific knowledge that has emerged alongside it. Second, I question the extent to which Islamic ecotheology, in its current form, is adequately equipped to engage with the theological and anthropological questions raised by this new epoch. The broader aim is to demonstrate that a framework grounded solely in ethics fails to capture the full depth of the crisis we now face.

Although humans have long impacted Earth's systems, the term "Anthropocene" was proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002) in early the 2000s to mark the unprecedented scale and speed of anthropogenic change. Since its introduction, the concept has become central in interdisciplinary efforts to understand the human role in Earth's system dynamics and the extensive implications of that role for planetary futures. It is important to note that the Anthropocene has not yet been formally recognized as a geological epoch within scientific bodies. Moreover, a range of alternative framings, such as the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, and Donna Haraway's (2015) more recent proposal of the Chthulucene have been introduced to highlight the social, political, economic, and multispecies dimensions of the current planetary condition. Therefore, in this article, "Anthropocene" is employed not as a precise stratigraphic term but as a conceptual and scientific recognition that captures the extraordinary scale of human impact on Earth's systems.

This article aims to highlight three characteristics of the Anthropocene based on definitions of the term. First, the concept of the Anthropocene highlights one certain issue with the human activities on Earth, namely, the cumulative impact of human activity on Earth's systems and the potentially

catastrophic outcomes of this impact. As Michael Northcott (2018) highlights, the fundamental scientific assertion behind the concept of the Anthropocene is that human interventions in the Earth's systems—such as the atmosphere, oceans, land, and species—have limits. If these limits are exceeded, humanity risks destabilizing the environmental conditions that sustain human life and history (Northcott 2018, 26). This insight helps clarify the evolving relationship between the long-standing planetary crisis identified by environmental thinkers since the 1960s and the more recent concept of the Anthropocene. While the Anthropocene cannot be reduced to the ecological crisis alone, it reveals that the crisis has entered a qualitatively new stage. In other words, the Anthropocene changes our comprehension of today's ecological situation (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 30).

Second, this stage may not be a temporary situation but an enduring condition. Hamilton's (2017, 43) formulation—"there is no going back to the Holocene"—highlights this clearly. For this reason, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz claim that calling the current ecological situation a "crisis" is problematic, as it implies a temporary problem we can eventually solve and move on from. However, the field of Earth system science shows that the Anthropocene is not a temporary process; it is "our new condition" (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 238). This raises questions about human power and control in contemporary environmental situations. It also implies limitations of the function and role of the human being and the human species in the future of the Earth (Hamilton et al. 2015, 5).

Third, and arising from the previous two points, the Anthropocene calls for a rethinking of the human–nature relationship and what it means to be human. There is broad consensus that the human being is the primary agent behind both the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene. In this sense, the crisis is not only environmental but also anthropological. It calls for urgent theological reflections on the relationship between humanity and nature, what it means to be human, and, as Ernst Conradie (2016, 2) puts it, "the place of humanity within the earth community." Yet the context in which we now address these reflections has been transformed by the Anthropocene. The scientific research it has inspired has brought about a paradigm shift in how the ecological crisis is understood, both in scale and in consequence. As Northcott rightly argues, the assertion that humanity is now living in the Anthropocene is not merely a historical or scientific claim. It also marks a shift away from "nineteenth-century ecological science and the related rise of environmentalism" (Northcott 2018, 22). In other words, the Anthropocene situation urges us to rethink both the natural world and the human being in a way that earlier paradigms did not essentially require, because it has shown that human beings are no longer just moral agents but also geological agents. This shift has profound implications for theology. The scale of human influence now forces theology to engage in a

multidimensional reflection that moves beyond moral categories toward deeper ontological, metaphysical, and theological engagement. This situation leads to a vital conclusion: any meaningful reflection on the ecological issues in the Anthropocene must interrogate not just what the human being ought to do but what the human being can do and what the human being is in relation to nature, creation, and the divine.

These arguments are supported by the broader intellectual context of the Anthropocene. In the Anthropocene, the contemporary intellectual landscape is marked by major shifts such as posthumanism, new materialism, transhumanism, critical Anthropocene studies, and evolutionary theory. Each of these is increasingly reshaping debates about what it means to be human, presenting new challenges and arguments with growing influence. This inevitably raises new questions regarding the role of the human being among all creatures. Without well-developed theological anthropologies, theological investigations that assign humanity a particular position risk not being able to actively engage with these shifts. Within this context, ethical principles play central roles in any reflection about the human–nature relationship. Alongside these recent debates, ethical reflection on the human–nature relationship has already developed into the field of environmental ethics, which revolves around two central questions: “What duties do humans have with respect to the environment, and why?” (Cochrane n.d.). In the context of the Anthropocene, the human being is not merely a moral agent but an ontological force shaping and transforming planetary systems, often without conscious intent or ethical deliberation. This raises questions about the capacity of environmental ethics to address such a reality. As Hamilton et al. (2015, 8) clearly note, the endeavor to contextualize such a huge event only through ethical considerations trivializes it, reducing it to merely another environmental issue. This claim does not diminish the value of environmental ethics but rather emphasizes that ethical principles should be revised in light of the specific conditions of the Anthropocene. As Markus Vogt (2018, 235) observes, the Anthropocene situation calls for an ethics that “not only formulates rules to protect aspects of nature . . . but also seeks to understand what it means to be human within natural and cultural contexts.” One certain point the Anthropocene has shown is that human beings may not be fully in control, “despite our impact on the planet’s present situation” (Henriksen 2023a, 319). All of this highlights that approaching the current critical environmental situation only through ethical categories risks overlooking the complexity of the human role and existence. Ethics tells us what the human being ought to do, but it often assumes a stable understanding of what the human being is. To reduce the role of the human being on Earth to a limited moral mode, such as steward, trustee, guardian, or caretaker, risks producing a mechanistic or merely functionalist anthropology that fails to capture the depth,

contradictions, and creative–destructive potential of the human condition, especially in the Anthropocene.

Islamic ecotheology, as it has emerged over the past few decades, has made important contributions, especially by foregrounding the ethical responsibility of human beings toward the environment through the two central questions of environmental ethics mentioned. The responses to these questions are strikingly consistent: the duty of the human being is to protect nature and preserve its inherent balance because human beings are the vicegerents of God on Earth. However, this consistency also makes it clear that the field remains largely confined within environmental ethics, which limits its further philosophical, theological, metaphysical, and anthropological scope. As the analysis of key concepts and arguments in the previous section reveals, there are several recurring patterns in how nature, humanity, and their relationship are theologically framed. While these concepts, such as *ayat*, *khalifa*, and *amana*, are drawn from rich Qur’anic and classical sources, their contemporary use tends to reflect certain thematic tendencies in its concerns, tone, and focus.

To better understand the limitations of the ethical framework that defines the present state of Islamic ecotheology, this article examines both the content and tone of current Islamic environmental discourse. I identify three tendencies of Muslim scholars shaping the field that have come to define Islamic ecotheology today. Each of these tendencies reflects, in different ways, the ethical orientation that currently shapes the field, and each raises critical questions about the capacity of Islamic ecotheology to engage the deeper challenges of the Anthropocene. The first and second tendencies, namely anthropocentric orientation and responsibility-based functionalist anthropology are content driven, concerned with how the human being and nature are conceptualized. The third, namely, apologetic tone, is tonal, shaping how the discourse positions itself rhetorically and theologically. While each has its own dynamic, all are shaped, either directly or indirectly, by the dominant ethical framework that currently defines much of Islamic ecotheology.

Anthropocentric Orientation

A characteristic feature of Islamic ecotheology is its anthropocentric orientation, that is, a human-centered focus evident in its theological framings and interpretations of the human–nature relationship. Returning to the previous section, we see that the central concern of Islamic environmental discourse is not God or human beings as such but rather the moral imperative to care for nature due to its inherent value. While nature may appear central, nearly all key concepts are defined in direct or indirect relation to the human being. The human being, as God’s only vicegerent on Earth, is charged with not disturbing, and even maintaining, the balance inherent in nature. Nature,

as signs of God, becomes meaningful only when observed by the human. In the words of Izzi Dien (1997, 48), “the creation of this earth and all its natural resources . . . serves to develop human awareness and understanding of this creator.” Even *tawhid*, while theologically focused on divine unity, is typically mobilized in this context to emphasize human relationality with the rest of creation. So, despite the theoretically strong theocentric elements emphasizing that all creatures belong to God and are for God, Islamic environmental discourse is anthropocentric in practice. The problem with this scheme is not that Islamic environmental discourse places the human being at the center of its conceptual structure but that it says surprisingly little about what it means to be human. In other words, it emphasizes the human to such an extent that it ought to offer a more developed theological anthropology, yet it does not. We encounter what might be called an “anthropology without anthropology”: the discourse revolves around the human yet lacks a coherent vision of the human beyond their moral function.

An example of this orientation can be found in the discussions of creation as signs of God. As Khalid highlights, the term “nature” does not appear in the Qur’an in the way we use it today. Instead, the Qur’an speaks of creation (*khalaq*), a term that encompasses all created beings. All of creation is described as a sign of God in the Qur’an (Khalid 2002, 334). From this perspective, the exploration of nature is not separate from the exploration of the human being; both are integral to a theological engagement with the signs of God. This means the human being, as part of creation and as a sign in their own right, is not merely an observer but also a place of divine disclosure. However, it is important to note that, within Islamic ecotheological debates, the concept of *ayat* is almost exclusively applied to nature. The idea that the human being, as part of creation, is also a sign of God is generally overlooked in the discussions. As one of the exceptions, Özdemir (2003, 11) notes that “every individual creature or being has its own ontological existence as a sign of God . . . Therefore, every creature deserves attention and consideration for its relation to the Divine.” Even here, however, the focus remains on the actions of “attention and consideration,” which are unique to the human being, rather than on the human being as a sign of God. There are exceptions that emphasize the human being as part of nature, thus “participating as an integral element in the overall ecological balance” (Haq 2001b, 157). However, this perspective is not widely reflected in the broader Islamic ecotheological discussions, as they are rarely developed further. Yet in most Islamic ecotheological texts, the human appears primarily as a responsible observer, not as an ontologically situated, active, and limited creature embedded in creation. The human being is an observer, a contemplator, who is responsible for keeping the balance that inherently exists in all creatures. This approach results in two possible risks in terms of the human–nature relationship. First, it reduces the human role to functions such as

guardian without a relevant theological anthropology questioning of what these functions theologically or metaphysically imply, explored further in the next section. By dismissing these dimensions, Islamic ecotheology unconsciously supports the illusion of human control.

Putting the human being in the position of mere observer also risks producing a functional view of nature. Although the Islamic environmental discourse resists such a view, the apparent emphasis on nature as a sign of God may result in a view in which nature's role is limited to pointing to God. The common use of *ayat* is particularly problematic in this regard because, as already noted, it seems to function only when nature is observed by the human being. At this point, it is important to recall two Qur'anic insights about the natural world. First, the creation narratives clearly show that the Earth and its inhabitants existed before the emergence of humanity (e.g., Qur'an 41:9–12). Second, the Qur'an implies that creation possesses agency independent of human perception, affirming that all beings praise God in their own ways (e.g., Qur'an 17:44; 24:41). However, such ontological insights are generally overlooked in contemporary Islamic environmental discourse, and even when they are acknowledged, they are usually reframed in ethical terms. For instance, Izzi Dien (1990, 190) observes that “the component parts of nature are entities in continuous praise of their Creator. Humans may not be able to understand the form or nature of this praise, but the fact that the Qur'an describes it is an additional reason for environmental preservation.” Here, the Qur'anic vision of creation's independent praise is interpreted as an ethical imperative; that is, the praise of the natural world becomes another reason for environmental preservation. Such approaches risk reducing nature to an instrumental role and the human being to a passive observer. A more coherent approach must seek perspectives that recognize the integrity of the natural world in relation to the wider community of creation.

The important thing here is that Muslim ecotheologians also criticize approaches that make a distinction between the natural world and humanity. Khalid (2017, 131) criticizes that “we have become observers of the life-experience we are integral to and have formed an imaginary subject/object dichotomy between ourselves and the natural world.” However, without moving this critique toward a theological anthropology, Islamic ecotheology risks repeating the dichotomies it seeks to overcome. Therefore, the issue here is not with the shortcomings of individual Muslim ecotheologians but with the broader gaps in the field itself, which has yet to develop a theological account of the human being capable of overcoming these dichotomies.

This brings us to the second content-level characteristic: the dominance of a responsibility-based functionalist anthropology, which defines the human being primarily in terms of what they ought to do rather than what they are in relation to God and creation.

Responsibility-Based Functional Anthropology

Another characteristic feature of contemporary Islamic environmental discourse is that questions regarding the ontological or metaphysical basis of vicegerency remain largely unaddressed. This is strongly connected with another issue in Islamic ecotheology: its arguments and discussions tend to be repetitive and circular, indicating that Islamic ecotheology remains largely confined within the limits of environmental ethics. This ethical framework has served to raise awareness and shape early discourse, as I highlighted earlier. However, it is not adequately equipped to engage with the complexities of the Anthropocene, an epoch defined not only by environmental crisis but also by fundamental shifts in how humanity understands itself and its place in the order of creation.

One of the key limitations of this ethical framework is that the human being is almost exclusively defined in terms of responsibility. Returning to the previous section, the mainstream assumption is that all creation is interconnected, and the human being must act as its custodian. As Özdemir (2003, 28) highlights, “human beings, though at the top of creation, are only members of the community of nature.” Yet this assumption and others mentioned earlier raise critical questions: What does it mean to say that the human being is a part of nature? What does it mean to be a member of creation while being at the top of it? How do we understand interdependence within a theological anthropology? Explaining such questions solely through a functional lens where the human being is an observer, a guardian, or a balance-keeper is insufficient in the Anthropocene due to the reasons explained.

Current discourse tends to focus on moral prescriptions and duties toward nature without engaging deeply with the broader theological and anthropological dimensions that underline the human–nature relationship in Islamic thought. While classical exegetical traditions show considerable diversity, contemporary Muslim ecotheologians choose to interpret *khalifa* primarily in ethical–functional terms. As Chauki Lazhar (2023) clearly shows, the Qur’anic concept of *khalifa* has been interpreted along divergent lines, either as the human being’s representation of divine command or as succession within creation itself. He actually argues that “the majority of contemporary Muslim intellectuals have reduced the concept of vicegerency, as a human existential function” (Lazhar 2023, 100). This existential–functional interpretation has mostly focused on “building and populating the earth . . . and the utilisation of its resources” (Lazhar 2023, 100). In contrast, Muslim ecotheologians have reoriented this interpretation toward a clearly ethical understanding based on responsibility and moral accountability that rejects any notion of human domination over the rest of creation. While this makes Muslim ecotheologians distinctive in their approaches, the underlying framework remains functional and thus continues to lack a deeper theological foundation. The gap, then, should not be attributed

to individual Muslim ecotheologians but to the overall intellectual conditions within which Islamic ecotheology has so far developed.

As a result of the limitations caused by its current framework, Islamic ecotheological thought struggles to address key issues in a way that is relevant to the contemporary planetary crisis. These key issues include diverse questions regarding human nature, such as human uniqueness and distinctiveness, as well as various dimensions of the relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine. The widespread use of the concept of vicegerent exemplifies this. Although it occupies a central place in Islamic ecological ethics, it is often left undefined or reduced to a broad sense of responsibility without unpacking its metaphysical, theological, or even existential implications. At this point, it is important to again highlight Nasr as a notable exception regarding this issue. Although being problematic at some points, his environmental thought takes human responsibility as its center, developing his understanding of vicegerency around it on metaphysical ground (for a study examining Nasr's theological anthropology in an ecotheological context, see Öztürk 2026.). However, the mainstream environmental discourse is unable to develop a theologically comprehensive and strong approach to responsibility. In short, environmental ethics within Islamic ecotheological discourse puts particular emphasis on the concept of vicegerent, which is defined in terms of the functionality and responsibility of the human being toward nature yet does not include a theologically robust understanding of it.

Apologetic Tone

The dominant ethical framework in Islamic ecological discourse is reflected not only in its conceptual content but also in the apologetic tone that often characterizes the writings of the scholars in the field. Such tendencies become particularly clear in their selection of language, where specific word choices reveal an effort to defend the ecological relevance of Islam rather than develop a constructive theological perspective. A vivid example of this can be found in S. Nomanul Haq's (2001a, 111) statements:

Among the three grand monotheistic faiths, Islam has been spared the onus of explaining any scriptural imperatives for humanity to “subdue” the earth and seek to establish “dominion” over the natural environment—an onus that has exercised and troubled many a sage in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

Similarly, Parvez Manzoor (1984, 150) states:

It is my conviction that within the context of environmental debate, the Islamic viewpoint has not only been unduly neglected but that Islamic traditions and

values provide a very effective and comprehensive answer to the absurdities of our environmental situation.

The apologetic tone in these examples is evident particularly in the choice of wordings, such as “spared the onus,” “unduly neglected,” and “provide a very effective and comprehensive answer.” This tone also characterizes the broader message of several Muslim thinkers. Their work often emphasizes that Islam presents a systematic view of nature capable of addressing environmental challenges, implying that Islamic principles alone are sufficient and that no further theological development is necessary. An example of this defensive approach can be found in Izzi Dien’s article “Islam and Environment: Theory and Practice.” He writes: “This paper maintains that Islam may offer valid grounds to resolve not only the environmental problem but also the water distribution problem which is strongly associated with” (Izzi Dien 1997, 55). The solution, according to Izzi Dien (1997, 56), is to return to the original sources of Islam: “The proposed solution is to go back to the traditional Islamic relationship between humans and the earth, and between humans and the other elements of the ecosystem and perhaps most essentially between humans themselves.” The external defensive approach is complemented by an internal critique. A significant part of the rhetoric of Islamic environmental discourse is the self-critical tendency of Muslim environmentalists, although it is not as dominant as the defensive stance. The primary argument is that Islam possesses all the solutions for the contemporary ecological circumstances, yet Muslims fail at practicing authentic Islamic teachings and principles. This ends in a conflict between what Islam is and how Muslims live. Regarding the conflict between the genuine Islamic ecological teachings and the practices of Muslims, Ziauddin Sardar (1985, 220) writes: “What concerns a growing number of Western scholars is the clear dichotomy between our behaviour and life-styles, including the behaviour and life-styles of most Muslim societies, and what ecology teaches us.” Khalid (2017, 131) highlights a gap between Islamic textual traditions and contemporary Muslim practice, stating that “[t]he textual tradition in Islam is deep and profound, but current Muslim practice is shallow.” These statements are important to define the main characteristics and context of early and modern Islamic ecotheological discourse.

The early development of both Christian and Islamic ecotheological discourse can be better understood against the backdrop of White’s seminal essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis.” White’s claim that contemporary ecological problems stem from theological traditions was the main factor that prompted the emergence of ecotheological perspectives. In Christian ecotheology, the earliest responses presented a distinctly apologetic tone, seeking to defend theology by arguing that the problem lay not in Christianity itself but in distorted interpretations of it (for more information about the

emergence of Christian ecological discourse, see Conradie 2006, 9–92). Within this context, the apologetic stance of Muslim ecotheologians becomes clearer: while Christian thinkers sought to show that Christianity entails not ecological destruction but rather its opposite, Muslim voices emphasized that Islam had been excluded from these debates and that its perspectives on nature deserved recognition. This dynamic helps explain the apologetic tone that marks much of the early Islamic discourse. Such discussions can be situated within the broader context of Abrahamic responses to claims that the roots of the ecological crisis are fundamentally theological. They reflect a broader pattern in early Islamic ecotheological discourse to defend Islam's ecological legacy, often by distancing it from perceived theological flaws in other Abrahamic traditions.

The rhetorical pattern of Islamic ecotheology, combining apologetics with self-critique, played a formative role in early Islamic environmental discourse. It helped establish the relevance of Islamic thought within global environmental discussions and construct a valuable ethical vocabulary. This shows that an apologetic stance can serve a valuable function: it affirms identity and grounds discourse in tradition. However, while such a tone was perhaps necessary in the formative stages of the field, especially in asserting the relevance of Islamic teachings in global environmental discourse, it also risks restricting Islamic ecotheology to a self-referential and defensive mode. This can make the field appear limited, repetitive, or more concerned with justification than innovation. If it becomes the dominant mode of engagement, it may prevent open dialogue and critical appropriation of insights from other traditions or disciplines. Such an approach now shows its limitations in the context of the Anthropocene. Islamic ecotheology in its current form seems more like “nineteenth century ecological science and related rise of environmentalism,” as in the words of Northcott (2018, 22). In a time of fundamental ontological and epistemological shifts, the ecological crisis demands more than defense or self-critique; it calls for critical theological and anthropological reimagination. In the Anthropocene, which demands theological rethinking across boundaries, such a closed position is no longer sufficient. What is needed is an approach that is confident in its foundations but also open to reimaging, as well as contributing to shared planetary concerns through comparative, dialogical, and theologically constructive engagements.

While this article focuses on the most systematic voices in Islamic ecotheology, their role in defining the field's parameters makes the dominance of ethical frameworks particularly visible. This framework persists in the most recent contributions. While it is not possible to review all the recent work in the field, it is fair to mention a few examples. The dominant ethical framework can be seen in works such as Mohammad Fazlhashemi's (2025, 25–40) chapter “Islamic Ecotheology” published by a well-known academic, which remains largely situated within the established paradigm of Islamic environmental ethics. While

the chapter engages Islamic environmental concepts and arguments through Nasr's thought, it does not move beyond the existing framework or significantly advance the discourse. A similar pattern is evident in Mohammad Yaseen Gada's (2024) volume *Islam and Environmental Ethics* published by another prestigious academic press. Although the book offers one of the most systematic and comprehensive overviews of the field to date, its contribution lies primarily in synthesizing existing approaches. It is important to note that these works do not explicitly claim to offer theological responses to the Anthropocene. Yet their framing continues to reinforce the impression that Islamic environmental discourse is largely confined within an ethical structure that limits its ability to deepen or broaden its scope of inquiry and engagement. Recent contributions, such as Zuleyha Keskin and Mehmet Ozalp's (2020, 119–34) "An Islamic Approach to Environmental Protection and Ecologically Sustainable Peace in the Age of the Anthropocene," acknowledge the Anthropocene context but largely focus on the ethical paradigm by grounding ecological responsibility in Qur'anic justice and balance. Their framing leaves the human being as a taken-for-granted category rather than one in need of reimagination in light of the Anthropocene. They center human responsibility without examining the theological anthropology that would make such responsibility coherent or meaningful. While valuable, such approaches illustrate the persistence of ethical framings and the lack of deeper theological–anthropological engagement. Perhaps even more concerning is the structural limitation of the field: not only does Islamic ecotheology remain underdeveloped as a discipline, it also suffers from a shortage of scholars who identify primarily as Muslim ecotheologians rather than environmentalists drawing on Islamic sources.

In this context, it is worth highlighting two recent works that have the potential to carry Islamic environmental discourse forward. The first is Ingrid Mattson's "Rethinking Islam and Animism: Connecting with the Community of Created Beings." In her work, Mattson (2024) shifts the discussion from ethics to ontology and relationality by highlighting the need to understand the human being not only as an ethical agent but also as ontologically embedded creature. The second is Marita Furehaug's (2022) "Apocalypticism in Islamic Environmental Thought: The Anthropocene as a Theological Concept," which introduces apocalyptic discourse into Islamic environmental thought. This move is particularly important because apocalyptic discourse can deepen and enrich Islamic ecotheology by expanding its scope beyond an ethical–functional anthropology to include questions of ontology and eschatology. However, such attempts remain very few in number, highlighting the need for more systematic efforts to move Islamic ecotheology beyond its ethical framework.

As argued earlier, the Anthropocene requires a rethinking of not only the natural world but the human being. Islamic environmental discourse has made important progress in articulating a view of nature that is scripturally grounded

and coherent. However, what is now needed is a more theologically rich and anthropologically adjusted discourse that engages more deeply with the complex conditions of our time.

Conclusion: Toward a New Paradigm in Islamic Ecotheology

This article has shown that Islamic ecotheology, while making important contributions, remains confined within an ethical paradigm due to three interrelated tendencies. First, the human being is placed at the center, most often framed through the concept of vicegerency, yet without a developed theological anthropology that explains what humanity is beyond its functions. Second, the field relies on an ethical–functional approach, equating the human role almost exclusively with responsibility. The categories it is based on lack theological depth and prove inadequate in the Anthropocene, where humanity acts not only as a moral agent but also as a geological force transforming the planet. Third, the discourse often maintains the apologetical language of its formative period, repeating familiar motifs without engaging more deeply with contemporary intellectual debates such as posthumanism, new materialism, evolutionary theory, and even Christian ecotheology. These three tendencies, taken together, explain why Islamic ecotheology remains largely limited to environmental ethics and highlight the need for a richer theological anthropology capable of addressing the complexity of the human condition in the Anthropocene.

I suggest that Islamic ecotheology urgently needs a shift of focus. In light of the tendencies outlined, this shift should take place along two main dimensions. First, a shift in content: the construction of a theological anthropology that moves beyond functional categories of responsibility and develops a stronger account of the human being in relation to God and creation. This includes rethinking the concept of vicegerency, or, in a broader sense, a stewardship model in light of Anthropocene science, moving beyond the fixed accounts of the human and assumptions of human control. Second, a shift in rhetoric: the adoption of a comparative method as an integral part of Islamic ecotheology. Such a method enables Islamic ecotheology to engage more deeply with contemporary theological and philosophical debates while moving beyond the apologetical language of its formative period. This includes entering into conversations with the most recent philosophical and theological debates on issues such as human uniqueness and distinctiveness, anthropocentrism, interconnectedness, agency, and relationality. Particularly important at this point is an engagement with Christian ecotheological themes. Christian ecotheology has developed a sustained body of literature on the theological dimensions of ecology through critical engagement with contemporary intellectual movements. This makes it a valuable conversation partner for Islamic ecotheology, offering both parallels and contrasts that can enrich its own development. Such engagement also enhances the intellectual depth and constructive influence of Islamic ecological

discourse within broader ecotheological debates. Unless Islamic ecotheology develops a coherent theological anthropology and engages with recent debates on the human role within creation, it cannot speak meaningfully to the moral, metaphysical, and intellectual challenges of the Anthropocene. This shift will allow Islamic ecotheology to participate more effectively in broader ecotheological and posthuman debates and contribute meaningfully to global conversations about the role of humanity on Earth.

The relationship between ecology and anthropology in the Anthropocene is intrinsically mutual. Today's ecological conditions require the redefinition of anthropology, while anthropological reflection can no longer continue without reference to ecological crisis. In other words, today's environmental conditions do not merely constitute a context for theological anthropology but are an integral part of it. As Jan-Olav Henriksen (2023b, 5) rightly argues, theological anthropology must address "the challenges to human agency posed by the Anthropocene in ways that observe the different contexts." Since the Anthropocene is defined by the human impact on Earth's systems, today's ecological realities are inseparable from the questions of human nature and agency.

This critique should not be read as a rejection of environmental ethics or the contributions Islamic ecotheology has already made. The concern lies in the dominance of an ethical framework that has constrained the development of a deeper theological anthropology. Ethics remains necessary, but it is not sufficient for addressing the ontological and theological questions posed by the Anthropocene. Rather, this critique is a call to expand the discourse to place ethics within a broader theological vision that includes a robust, relational understanding of the human being within creation. Today's ecological crisis, I suggest, calls for a new theology of the human being, and such a theology will transform how we do ecotheology.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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