



An Introduction to Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances with Laudato Si' by Farhana Mayer

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Bism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm wa'l-ḥamdu wa'l-shukru laHu bi-tamām.

In the Name of God, the All-Gracious, the Merciful, and to Him all thanks and praise.

Good afternoon or morning or evening to everyone wherever you are. Thank you very much for taking the time to join us for this launch. Thank you Fatimah and Severine for your kind words.

May I start by expressing my deep thanks to the Laudato Si' Research Institute, the Randeree Charitable Trust, the Spalding Trust and Mr Shafique Cockar without whose support *An Introduction to Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances with Laudato Si'* would not have been written. Particular thanks today to the LSRI and UNEP Environment Programme, for hosting this online launch.

(Slide 1) Since time is finely cut, I will turn now straight to the book, and to make matters easier we will show some slides on shared screen. What I have endeavoured to do in my study is to showcase something of the wealth of Qur'anic principles and verses that are potentially applicable to the socio-economic and environmental challenges we face. It is my hope this work will be of use to those engaged in addressing such issues within their own spheres of influence.

While the need for ecological awareness and positive action is self-evident, it is nonetheless, empowering to be able to relate that to our deepest beliefs. In his seminal book, *Signs on the Earth*, Fazlun Khalid encourages Muslims to articulate an ethical understanding of our relationship with the natural world and to create a knowledge-base which helps to tackle the immediate issues and provides motivation for long-term change in how humans conduct themselves.¹ My exposition of foundational Qur'anic ethical guidance and principles falls within this remit.

In addition, the profound resonances between Qur'anic perspectives and those of *Laudato Si'* has, from my very first reading of the encyclical, been deeply uplifting and encouraging. We are all very much on the same page as regards the topics brought up by Pope

¹ See Farhana Mayer, *Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances with Laudato Si'*, Laudato Si' Research Institute, 2023, p. 38 and the discussion there of Fazlun Khalid, *Signs on the Earth: Islam, Modernity and the Climate Crisis* (Markfield: Kube Publishing Ltd, 2019), pp. 149–150.

Francis. And therefore we can indeed hope to work closely together in addressing the concerns raised.

Today, I can allude to only some of the key points of my book, trusting hopefully that you either have already had a look at the book or will read it in the near future! There is a summative overview at the end of it to make things quicker.

Overview (Slide 2)

After introducing my key sources in my book, I have endeavoured to briefly present some of the salient features of the interlinked problems generated by human action, for instance, global warming, greenhouse gas emissions and the dubious practices of some big industries to supposedly cut down their emissions, climate injustices, the question of rights to land use, discrimination, exploitation and so on. Thereafter,

- A) I have briefly presented the views of *Laudato Si'* and leading Muslim faith-based scholars on the roots of the current crises.
- B) I have then expounded relevant Qur'anic principles which are pertinent to addressing ecological and environmental issues.
- C) Thirdly, I have shown how these principles and numerous other Qur'anic verses resonate with the themes of LS, and the strong commonground they furnish for interfaith partnerships in dealing with the relevant socio-ecological and environmental challenges we face.

A) Faith-based voices on roots of the ecological crisis

Catholic views as articulated in *Laudato Si'* (Slide 3)

Pope Francis addresses the 'human roots of the ecological crisis' in LS Chapter 3 and highlights the issue of a global technocratic paradigm (LS 106–114) and the negative impacts of modern anthropocentrism (LS 115–136). Noting the paradox of the latter, which prizes technical thought over reality, and views nature purely as raw material for human use (LS 115²), LS 118 points out also that there is 'a constant schizophrenia, wherein a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings'.

(Slide 4) Key Muslim Faith-based scholars

Like Pope Francis and some of his predecessors, the Muslim scholars I cited have for many a year raised the alarm on the negative impact of human pursuit of endless economic growth and profit no matter the cost. Addressing the philosophical roots of the Anthropocene, the Muslim authors situate these roots in two main paradigm shifts that took place in modern history.³

² LS 115 cites Romano Guardini's view that 'the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere "given", as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape' (Romano Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 63 (*The End of the Modern World*, 55), cited in LS 115, p. 86).

³ See Mayer, *Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances*, pp. 35 ff.

(Slide 5) Philosophical roots of the current crisis

1. Broadly speaking, the first shift, engendered by scientific advances and philosophical reconfigurations, went from acknowledging a God and a life after death to a denial of God's existence, thereby excluding religion, spirituality, and the divine from human life.⁴ Consequently, all life was regarded as accidental, and the significance of human life was, in effect, limited to understanding this world and making the best of it.
2. With sanctity philosophically excised from human and earthly life, the change, as Ibrahim Özdemiir put it, from viewing nature as sacred to regarding it as having no intrinsic worth but only instrumental value was unsurprising.⁵

3. LS 82 notes, when nature is perceived 'solely as a source for profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society'; it also notes that the view that "'might is right" has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity'. I have touched on some of these in my book, for example, the historical atrocities and injustices of the slave trade and colonialism, and their continuing reverberations. As noted in my study, some Muslim activists (like Farhana Yamin) and scholars (like Mohammed Saidul Islam) and Prime Minister (Barbados) Mia Mottley locate climate injustices on the same trajectory as these historical injustices.⁶

(Slide 6: Q. 30:41; LS 6.82) Humanity has also done similar damage against the natural world. Q. 30:41 points out: 'Corruption has appeared on the land and in the sea because of what the hands of people have acquired [i.e., what people have done].'⁷ As an umbrella term, *fasād*, corruption, here covers the ideas of despoiling natural things, of pollution and suchlike, of being unjust, unethical and destructive. LS 6 also connects the 'deterioration of nature' closely 'to the culture which shapes human coexistence.' These passages indicate how the state of the natural world and human culture/actions are profoundly interrelated.

The same Qur'anic verse (30:41) goes on to tell us, in effect, that God has allowed this corruption to appear as a warning to people in the hope that we might learn the lesson, repent and return to better ways of living. Or as Pope Francis might say: That people might engage in ecological conversion; and follow 'the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace proposed by Jesus' (LS 82). More on all this shortly.

⁴ 'Enlightenment philosophers viewed revelation as a barrier to the development of thought and civilisation.' Khalid, *Signs on the Earth*, p. 15.

⁵ Ibrahim Özdemiir, 'Towards an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective', in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2003), pp. 4–5. Cf. LS 4 and *Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances*, Part 3.2.

⁶ Mayer, *Qur'anic Ecology and Resonances with Laudato Si'*, p. 47.

⁷ 'Corruption has appeared on the land and in the sea because of what the hands of people have acquired [i.e., what people have done]; [this has been allowed by God] so that He makes them taste some of what they have done, that they might return [to doing what is good]' (*ḡahara'l-fasādu fi'l-barri wa'l-baḡri bi-mā kasabat aydi'l-nāsi li-yudhīqahum ba'ḡa'lladhī 'amilū la'allāhum yarji'ūn*). (Q. 30:41).

B) Qur'anic Principles

Foundational Qur'anic ecological perspectives (Slide 7)

The Qur'anic ecological perspective may be said to be founded on the following scriptural viewpoints:

1. That creation, including humankind, are all no less than repositories of the revelatory 'signs of God' (*āyāt Allāh*), like the scriptural Book itself whose verses are also called 'signs of God' – hence the view of creation as a revelation like the Qur'an and consequently the sanctity of the natural world and of humanity too.
2. That the human being is a God-placed deputy on earth (*fi'l-ard khalīfah*; Q. 2:30) – hence the care-taking responsibilities of humankind towards the earth and all therein.
3. That there is an intimate connection between God, cosmos and humankind – hence, the understanding that our ways of living impact, and are impacted by, the rest of creation, and that this is all an integral part of our relationship with God Himself, our Creator.

(Slide 8, *Tawhīd*) According to the Islamic theological theory of *tawhīd* – which denotes unity, specifically divine unity – this cosmic interconnection is literally rooted in God Himself. I unpack this in the book in my discussion of *tawhīd* and of the divine names, 'The One' (*al-Aḥad*) and 'The Only' (*al-Wāḥid*). For now, I will simply reiterate Osman Bakar's observation that 'the necessary ecological inference from the idea of Divine Unity' is the ecological principle of 'the "Unicity of Nature" which conveys the ideas of interrelatedness, interdependence and unity', and that this is 'the most fundamental principle in Islamic ecology and environmental science.'⁸ Fazlun Khalid also describes *tawhīd* as the testimony to the unity of God, the unity of all creation, and the bedrock of Islam's holistic approach.⁹

The above definitions of *tawhīd* resonate profoundly with LS 89, which states 'as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect.'

Tawhīd, then, is the fulcrum-principle of Islamic ecological perspectives and a major connecting point with the Pope's teaching on integral ecology.

Qur'anic ethical principles / virtues (Slide 9)

Moving onto principles of ethical living, or virtues, moderation (*wasatīyah*), justice and equitability (*ʿadl, qisṭ*), and balance (*i'tidāl, mīzān*) are also features of both Qur'anic teachings and what Pope Francis calls for in LS: Justice towards other people, in particular the poor, and also those yet to be born, towards other living creatures and their rights to their natural habitats, and towards the earth itself; balance in our lifestyles, and in maintaining the existing natural physical equilibriums, as best we can given how much we have already disrupted these balances; moderation or temperance in the use of natural resources and in pursuit of

⁸ Osman Bakar, *Environmental Wisdom for Planet Earth: The Islamic Heritage, revised 2nd ed.* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya/Islamic Book Trust, 2022), pp. 23 and 25.

⁹ Khalid, *Signs on the Earth*, pp. 163–164.

economic progress – these are all advocated by both the Qur’an and LS as demonstrated in my study.

(Slide 10, Contentment with little) To give one example here, LS 222 draws attention to how ‘Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little’. This brings to mind the Islamic spiritual ideal of ‘contentment with little’ (*al-riqā’ bi’l-qalīl*). Fazlun Khalid and the other Muslim authors point out that one of the key precepts of Qur’anic ethics is to ‘act with moderation at all times’.¹⁰ As the antithesis of moderation, excessiveness (*isrāf*), and especially the desire to accumulate more and more (*takāthur*),¹¹ are strongly criticised, indeed roundly condemned, in the Qur’an, not least in chapter 102, which I discussed at some length.

Furthermore, LS 118 states that, ‘there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.’ My analysis of the Islamic divine names presents not only a theological portrait of God but also an anthropological portrait of humankind as well as an ethical framework.

Divine names as nature/character, and as a hermeneutical and ethical framework within which to situate our action (Slide 11)

The divine names derived from the Qur’an are a significant aspect of the Islamic tradition, as illustrated in my study. They enshrine principles and qualities which are descriptors of God’s nature and character; moreover, they are also found, in delimited manner, in our human nature too. Slide 11 provides a few pertinent examples of the Islamic Names of God:

Al-Rahmān (‘the All-Gracious’), *al-Hayy* (‘the Living’), *al-Aḥad* (the One), *al-Wāḥid* (the Only), *al-Khāliq* (‘the Creator’), *al-Raḥīm* (‘the Merciful’), *al-Rabb* (‘the Lord/Nurturer’), *al-Ḥaqq* (the Truth/Reality), *al-Wadūd* (the Deeply-Loving), *al-Ra’ūf* (‘the Compassionate’), *al-Laṭīf* (the Kind), *al-Muqīt* (the Nourisher), *al-Salām* (Peace), *al-Hādī* (the Guide), *al-Dayyān* (the Judge), *al-Barr* (the Righteous/the Good/the Dutiful), *al-Karīm* (the Generous), *al-‘Adl* (the Just, Justice), *al-Ḥāfiẓ* (‘the Protector’), *al-Muḥaymin* (‘the Guardian’), *al-Qayyūm* (‘the Preserving Sustainer’), *al-Muqsīt* (the Equitable), *al-Wāsī’* (the Comprehensive), *al-Muḥīt* (the All-Encompassing), *al-Rashīd* (the Rightly-Discerning, the Right-Guiding), *al-Shāfi’* (the Healer), *al-Muḥyi* (‘the Enlivener, the Revivifier’), *al-Mu’īd* (‘the Restorer’).

Section 2b.vi of my study¹² expounds the divine designations very much as a paradigm of ethical principles for humankind to emulate and as an overarching framework within which to situate ecological wisdom. My study highlights how the ontological threads that permeate all of creation, including the human being, are the very same that run through Qur’anic ecology; and these are, the very qualities of God, enshrined in His names.

For instance, I relate the divine names to the Qur’anic term *fiṭrah* (meaning ‘nature/character/natural disposition’), found in the Qur’anic phrase, ‘the nature/character of

¹⁰ Fazlun Khalid, ‘Islam and the Environment: Ethics and Practice, an Assessment’, *Religion Compass* 4, no. 11 (2010), p. 709.

¹¹ Elsaid M. Badawi and M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), p. 799.

¹² Mayer, *Qur’anic Ecology and Resonances with Laudato Si’*, p. 60 ff.

God according to which He has made humanity' (*fiṭrat Allāh allatī faṭara'l-nāsa 'alayhā*; Q. 30:30). I explain how the concept of the *fiṭrah* may feasibly be understood as a reference to the divine characteristics. I won't repeat that here today, it's detailed in the book, but I would like to add a bit more about it.

(Slide 12 Divine names as endowment.) The divine endowment has placed within humans access to the divine qualities and characteristics. So the latter are 'present' in humankind in a potential state, awaiting actualisation. In Islamic scholastic theology, the Sunni Ash'arite school spoke of empowerment for an act as occurring simultaneously with the act itself: this was termed *al-istiṭā'ah ma'a'l-fi'l* or 'capability with the act'. Taking that and applying it to the potential and actualisation of divine qualities in humans, this would mean that we actualise a latent attribute at the very instant that we do something that evokes that particular quality. The metaphor which springs to my mind is that of a musical instrument like a keyboard, a piano or organ: it is only when you strike a key that you hear its particular note.

The silent keyboard of divine qualities is what God has endowed humans with. What music it produces is down to what we choose to do and which qualities we bring into action. This is relatable to LS 115 notes: 'Man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.'

Earlier I noted the Qur'anic viewpoint of creation being revelatory signs of God like the Qur'an itself is. Within the scripture, the contextual material is related, one way or another, back to God through the divine names, which punctuate the text, and, in my view, the Divine Names have a hermeneutical impact within the scripture. Similarly I put to you now, that within the wider revelation of creation, the qualities enshrined in the divine names have a dynamic role that connects the earthly or physical context back to God, and we humans ourselves are directly instrumental in manifesting this existential exegesis. Exegesis (*tafsīr*) is not just about how we comprehend the scripture or the world; it is above all about how we live.

When we conduct ourselves in harmony with the divine qualities, not only do we evoke those divine energies into action in the world, we also reconnect the world back to God through the very same acts. It is a simultaneous process of infusion and re-fusion. And the keys for this are in our hands. That is why we need an increased qualitative regeneration in human conduct,¹³ a regeneration whereby we consciously re-align our actions, with the divine, time and again, individually and collectively.

(Slide 13, Divine names as ethical scales) Linked to this is my proposal that the divine qualities, objectively understood, are the ultimate ethical scales on which Muslims should weigh up decisions and actions¹⁴ – and by extension, the same goes for anyone else who agrees with the principles/virtues enshrined in the divine names.

Among the divine characteristics, *raḥmah* – which incorporates the meanings of mercy, compassion, beneficence, doing good even to one who does not deserve it – *raḥmah* has a particularly significant position.¹⁵ Like the Name of God Allāh itself, *raḥmah*, includes both gentleness and strength, forgiveness and justice, majesty and magnanimity. This

¹³ Ibid., Conclusion, Part 4c.

¹⁴ Ibid., Part 2b.vi, p. 61.

¹⁵ Ibid., Part 1b.ii.

resonates with LS 73 which states that: ‘God’s infinite power does not lead us to flee his fatherly tenderness, because in him affection and strength are joined’ (LS 73).

(Slide 14, Divine *rahmah*, divine love) Q. chapter 6, verses 12¹⁶ and 54¹⁷ contain the following phrase as part of a description of God: ‘He has inscribed mercy upon Himself/ His soul’ (*kataba ‘alā nafsiHi’l-rahmah*). This implies that at some imponderable moment, God chose to make *rahmah* His default mode of being and action, by inscribing it upon Himself as a profoundly intrinsic and primary obligation – with the implication that we too should do the same. *Rahmah* is as the central divine quality on which the scales of the divine names are suspended. As the pivot of the scales, *rahmah* is also the very balance that we are seeking to achieve by weighing up whatever other qualities may pertain in any given situation. That is why I say in the study, when *rahmah* is given its proper place in our evaluations of our actions, then everything else will fall into good balance.

Relating God’s *rahmah* to Christian concepts of divine love, I will cite LS 77: ‘God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things.’ It is also, like *rahmah*, both the pivot and the balance to be achieved.

C) Resonances and Common Ground (Slide 15)

Finally, to recap some resonances and common ground between Qur’anic perspectives and Laudato Si’.

An emphasis on universal divine love/mercy and on tender care, are common to both texts. The interconnectedness between all creation and between creation and God, are affirmed in both faith traditions. The tripartite constitution of the human being as a creature who brings together spirit, will/character, and physical earthly elements, as well as an understanding of human accountability, are also common to both the Qur’anic and LS perspectives. As is the acknowledgement of the natural world as a ‘book’ of God, worthy of love and respect and through which we come to know God. Both perspectives call us to live a life of ecological sensitivity and virtue; to live temperate and altruistic lives.

Both the Catholic social teaching in LS and the Islamic tradition voice similar concerns about the economic paradigms that dominate today and which have fed into our critical situation (e.g., LS 49; Q. 59:7; 2:177). Both traditions respond by calling for a review of these paradigms, and by evoking justice for those alive today and those yet to be born; care for the poor and in need; moderation; and a loving, respectful concern for our common home, which we hold is a sacred gift.

This is all part of our ecological conversion or *tawbah* whereby we acknowledge the damage done by humans on earth, and turn back to more harmonious and balanced ways of

¹⁶ ‘Say, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth? Say, to God, He has inscribed mercy upon Himself/ His soul; He will certainly gather you together to the indubitable day of resurrection; those who have spoilt/lost themselves/their souls, they do not believe.’ (*Qul, li-man mā fi’l-samawāti wa’l-arḍ. Qul li’lLāhi kataba ‘alā nafsiHi’l-rahmah; la-yajma’annakum ilā yawmi’l-qiyāmati lā rayba fīhi; alladhīna khasirū anfusihim fa-hum lā yu’minūn*), Q. 6:12. (See also *Qur’anic Ecology and Resonances*, p. 21.)

¹⁷ ‘When those who believe in Our signs come to you, say, peace be upon you, your Lord has inscribed mercy upon Himself, that if anyone has done a bad thing unknowingly then repents (*tāba*) thereafter and makes amends (*aṣlahā*), verily, God is All-Forgiving (*ghafūr*), Merciful (*rahīm*)’, Q. 6:54. (See also *Qur’anic Ecology and Resonances*, p. 95.)

living which achieve, in the words of LS 218, ‘reconciliation with creation’ and which reconnect the world to God its Caring Creator.

Concluding comment

Concerning ecological conversion – which is yet another significant overlap between the Pope’s message and that of Islamic ecology – LS 219 states: ‘The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.’

Some years ago, I saw through my own work and that of very many others, how interfaith partnerships contributed so strongly to building community cohesion. Today, on a global scale, interfaith partnerships are again growing into a powerful platform for joint action to address damage done, to make changes within ourselves and within the world, and to help restore, regenerate and preserve God’s earth, its balances and its resources for future generations.

I end with the prayer that we will do so all as pleases the Lord of the Heavens and the Earth, the Lord of the Worlds. So help us God; *Āmīn*.

Thank you.