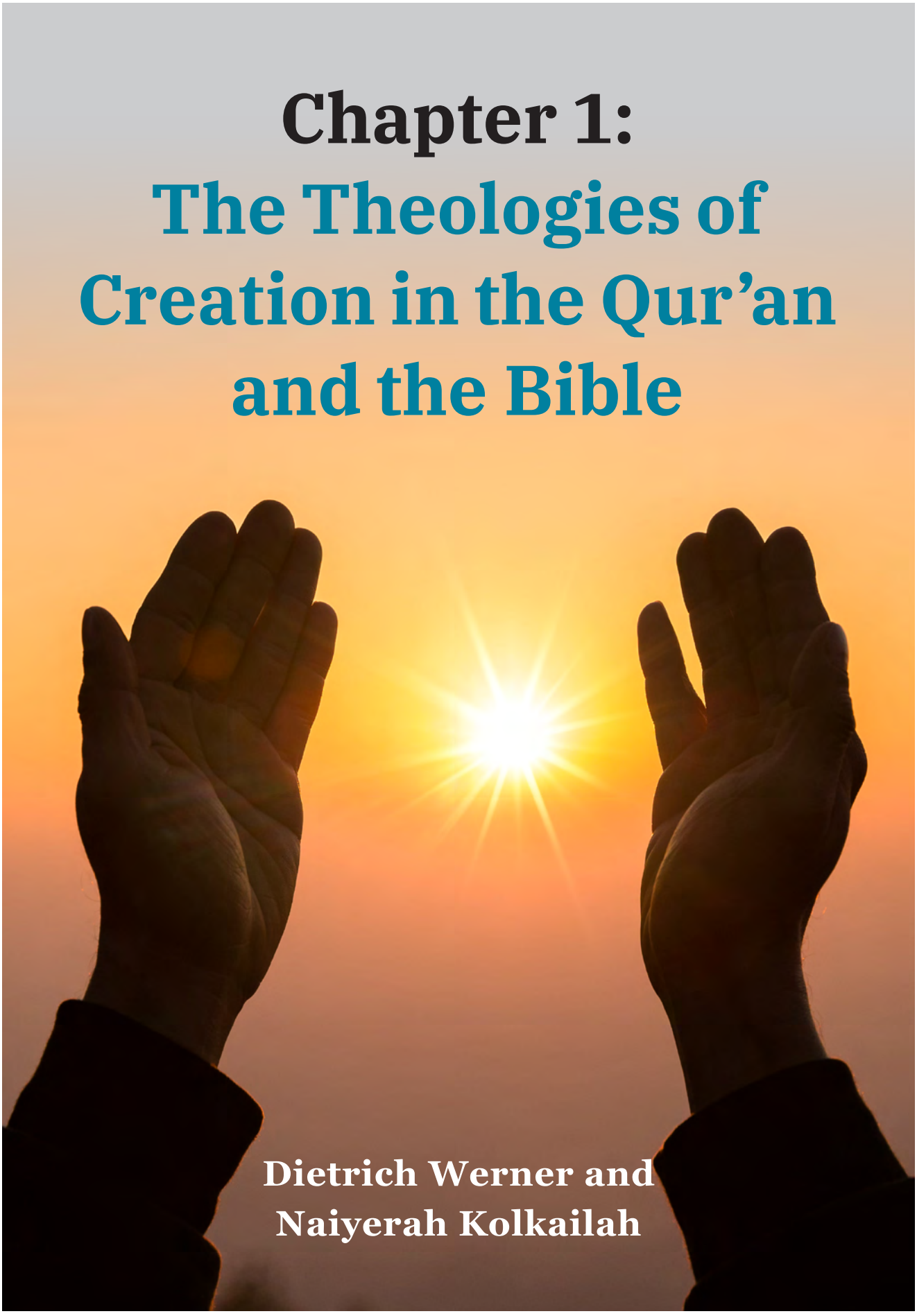
# Chapter 1:
# The Theologies of Creation in the Qur'an and the Bible



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# 1. Introduction

This chapter brings together key insights from both the Muslim and Christian traditions as the most important sources for understanding and deepening creation theology. It also aims to be a starting point for considering the practical implications of the social and environmental actions and commitments promoted by both traditions. Thus, the conceptual, systematic, ethical, and practical perspectives are intertwined.

Narratives and traditions of the theology of creation from the sacred texts of Abrahamic religions are shared between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, although some details differ in the Qur'anic account of creation. The fact that they share a common and fundamental belief that this world owes its existence and continuity not to itself, but to a transcendent and powerful, just and creative, merciful and immensely loving being known as "God the creator" can provide common ground for sharing in environmental stewardship and engagement in ecological sustainability. It is also promising to share more of the different, but often complementary, viewpoints which have developed in the theologies of creation in Christianity and Islam. As there is already a large and diverse range of publications on Christian and Muslim interpretations of the theology of creation (Andrianos et al. 2019; Conradie 2013; Aminrazavi 2001; Burrell 2008; Izzi Dien 2000; Mayer 2023; Llewellyn and Khalid 2024), this chapter endeavors to highlight selected features and central themes in recent Christian as well as Islamic theology. It addresses three questions: 1) What are the most important scriptural foundations/sources for understanding creation in Islam and Christianity, and what are the contexts of these foundational texts? 2) What is the relationship between humanity, nature, and animals in Islam's and Christianity's understanding of creation? 3) What are the theological foundations for a commitment to stewardship, creation care, and ecological transformation/healing of this world? The chapter concludes by exploring some grounds for Christian–Muslim collaboration, laying a common solid theological basis for a greater joint engagement for environmental care and making their witness and advocacy for global climate and environmental justice more visible.

# 2. Scriptural Foundations in the Islamic Tradition

## *2.1. Creation in the Qur'an*

Creation is a heavily recurrent theme in the Qur'an. Many of its chapters feature creation (*al-khalq*) at the macro and micro levels, both within the visible world and the world of the unseen (*al-ghayb*). In numerous "verses" (*āyāt*), the Qur'an affirms that God created everything in existence (e.g., 6:101), from the expanding universe, galaxies, and stars to the mountains, trees, and water from which He created every living thing (Qur'an 51:47, 37:6, 7:54, 16:81, 27:60, 21:30). Within the range of created beings, the Qur'an also speaks of God making magnificent angels with wings (Qur'an 35:1) and *jinn* from smokeless fire (Qur'an 15:27). In the Islamic tradition, *jinn* are a creation of God distinct from human beings. As with angels, they are generally invisible to most people in their original, natural form. Like human beings, *jinn* are created with free will and the choice to submit to God or disobey His command. As will be discussed in section 2.2, Satan is one of the *jinn* who transgressed against God and His command. The creation of the human being from earthly origins is mentioned throughout the Qur'an. The Qur'an affirms that God created the human being initially from dirt (Qur'an 30:20, 95:4, 35:11). Many other verses, *āyāt*, describe God creating human beings from other elements and origins like mud (e.g., 6:2, 32:7), clay (e.g., 55:14, 15:26), a sperm-drop (e.g.,

75:37, 80:18–19), and a clinging clot (96:2, 75:38). These various origins point to the humble beginnings of humanity as well as to the gradual phases of human creation and development (Qur'an 18:37, 22:5, 40:67).

The Qur'an highlights biodiversity as a common feature between human and nonhuman creation. God created a range of species, hues, forms, and flavors of edible crops (Qur'an 13:4, 35:27) as well as varieties of crawling insects, walking animals (Qur'an 24:45), and even creatures unknown to humanity (Qur'an 16:8). People are also encouraged to recognize and reflect on the human diversity found in people's varying nations, languages, and colors (Qur'an 30:22, 49:13). The variety in creation featured throughout this book of guidance (Qur'an 2:2) continuously invites the human heart and mind on a spiritual journey with God and toward God. On this journey, what continues to elicit spiritual awe and contemplation (Qur'an 2:190–191) is not only the created entities themselves (e.g., a beautiful sunset, lush garden, or exquisite DNA double helix), but above all the infinite realm of divine qualities and creative powers that brought those marvelous creations into existence.

The primary theological purpose of Qur'anic descriptions of the cosmos, creation, or any natural phenomenon within the universe is to increase people's knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of God, the best of creators (Qur'an 23:14), and of what the Qur'an describes as His beautiful Names (7:180) and attributes (*ṣifāt*). With every description of nature and natural phenomenon in the Qur'an, the divine aim is for humanity to connect the visible beauty or qualities witnessed in creation to the Most Beautiful (*al-Jamīl*), Compassionate (*al-Raḥmān*), Creator (*al-Khāliq*), Originator (*al-Bāriʾ*), and Fashioner (*al-Muṣawwir*) who endowed creation with these apparent features and qualities. For example: "Have they not seen the birds above them, spreading and folding their wings? None holds them up except the Most Compassionate. Indeed, He is All-Seeing of everything" (Qur'an 67:19). Physics and aerodynamics may explain the mechanisms of flight, but the metaphysical aim of the Qur'an is to draw immediate attention to the gentle and merciful powers producing the optimal conditions and mechanisms for flight. One can then reflect on the implications of such divine mercy in enabling birds to soar, migrate, escape predators, or search for food for their young chicks.

## 2.2. Opposing Forces Within Creation

Among God's created forces and phenomena are evil and good (Qur'an 21:35, 113:1–2) as well as death and life, which are created to test humanity and determine who will act most righteously (Qur'an 67:2). The ultimate struggle for humanity, then, is resisting evil in all its internal and external manifestations (e.g., greed, envy, and arrogance) and inculcating goodness and divine Light within a sea of many darknesses (5:15–16). This cosmic struggle between evil and righteous forces traces back to a struggle with one of the *jinn*, Satan, who is referred to as Iblīs in the Qur'an (18:50). This creature was formerly obedient to God and, due to his fervent worship, earned an honorable, angelic status with God—despite not being an angel himself (Ibn Kathīr 2007, 130; Kassim 2007). Aside from differences in the physical nature of jinn and angels (as mentioned in section 2.1), Iblīs' transgression against God's command proves he is not a fallen angel, but a creation of the *jinn* who fell from God's grace. While some *jinn* have been spreading corruption on Earth even before the creation of Adam, other *jinn* follow the path of righteousness and have even believed in the message of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad (Qur'an 72:1–17).

When God created Adam with His divine hands and breathed His spirit into him, He commanded the angels and Iblīs to prostrate (out of respect) to Adam (Qur'an 15:29). While

the angels complied, Iblīs enviously refused and claimed superiority over Adam (Qur'an 2:34). When God questioned him, he boasted, "I am better than him. You created me from fire and You created him from clay" (Qur'an 7:12; 38:76). One could critique Iblīs' argument and demonstrate the superiority of cool, calm, and fertile ground over burning, raging, and volatile flames, but the glaring error Satan committed was not in his deductive reasoning. Rather, it was in exalting his rationality over the clear command of God. When God commands people not to kill (e.g., Qur'an 17:33) nor to corrupt the Earth (e.g., Qur'an 7:56), but some use racist or supremacist arguments to justify their destruction of indigenous cultures, livelihoods, and ecosystems—that is rebellion, thus, in its essence satanic.

In retribution for his transgression, God cursed Iblīs and expelled him from paradise (Qur'an 15:34–35). The struggle did not end there; out of enmity and vengeance, Satan vowed to deviate humanity—starting with Adam—and expel them from the eternal garden like him. God tells Adam and Eve (known as *Ḥawwa'* in the Islamic tradition) to reside in paradise and enjoy its provisions freely as they please, with the exception of one particular tree. He instructs them not to even approach this tree (Qur'an 2:35), lest temptation overcome them. Satan begins whispering to them with the goal of seducing them into disobedience and exposing their nudity. He deludes them into believing that God forbade their approach to this tree to prevent them from becoming angels or immortals. He even swears to them that he is a sincere advisor (Qur'an 20:120, 7:20–21). When they fall into temptation and eat from the tree, their nakedness is exposed and, in shame, they attempt to cover themselves with the foliage of paradise. The Qur'an, then, says: "Adam disobeyed his Lord and so lost his way" (Qur'an 20:121).

The forbidden tree may be taken as symbolically representing any creation we touch or access without a God-given right. If harvesting a forbidden tree is considered a sinful act in the story of Adam in paradise, then how much more transgressive is destroying indigenous people's lands and the natural habitats of diverse animals, or depleting natural resources for present and future generations? Repentance, forgiveness, and conversion (see chapter 3) are important themes in the Qur'anic narrative above. Regret overtakes Adam and Eve, and they admit to committing injustice against their own selves (Qur'an 7:23). After repenting and seeking God's forgiveness, God forgives them, but the immediate consequence they face is temporary expulsion from paradise. Adam is made to toil on Earth until he can return with Eve to paradise (Qur'an 20:117). This narrative is highlighted in the Qur'an as central until Judgment Day, to remind Adam's progeny to resist Satan's deceptive tactics so as not to face permanent expulsion from paradise in the hereafter and not to face eternal hell with Satan (Qur'an 7:18, 7:27). God, in His infinite mercy, provides humanity with a spiritual roadmap back to eternal bliss and peace in paradise.

## 3. Relationship Between Human and Nonhuman Creation in the Islamic Tradition

### *3.1. Unification of Creation and the Universe*

The relationship between humans, nature, and animals in Islam can be viewed through the lens of the most central and critical theological concept in the Qur'an: *tawḥīd*, or the indivisible Oneness of God (e.g., Qur'an 38:65; 112:1). This concept is considered a foundational eco-theological principle underpinning the Islamic worldview and its conception of nature (Llewellyn and Khalid 2024). *Tawḥīd* establishes a dualistic relationship between the Creator and the created (Ouis 1998; Ammar and Gray 2017). It affirms the unity of God as the Lord

(*rabb*), Sustainer (*qayyūm*), and Owner (*mālik*) of all living creatures while unifying all other beings in their createdness and submission to His divine order and natural laws (Izzi Dien 2000; Al-Qaradawi 2001; Haneef 2002; Llewellyn 2003; Johnston 2012; Mohamed 2016). *Tawḥīd* reinforces the unity, love, and interconnectedness between people and nature as creations of God that share many traits including their social structure as *'umam* or communities (Al-Qaradawi 2001; Al-Najjar 2008; Chittick 2012; Kamali 2015; Ammar and Gray 2017; Redwan 2018).[1] *Tawḥīd* not only has an effect on the perception of God and the relationship between people and nature, but also on how nature itself is viewed ontologically. One of the implications of *tawḥīd* is that nature holds inherent value because it is part of God's creation that glorifies and sings His praise, and is, thus, worthy of care and respect (Ba Kader et al. 1983; Bagader et al. 1994; Al-Qaradawi 2001; Özdemir 2003; Mohamed 2014; Redwan 2018).

The Qur'anic depiction of nature and natural phenomena as God's signs (*āyāt Allāhi*) points to the significant spiritual status of nature. Many parallels can be drawn between the revealed verses of the Qur'an (also termed *āyāt*) and the countless signs in creation (e.g., Qur'an 30:20–25) with which God also communicates (Al-Qaradawi 2001; Ramadan 2009; Baharuddin 2011; Khalid 2017). As a counterpart to the Qur'an, the revealed "book" of the universe is divinely authored for humanity to "read" and its wonders are designed to be amenable to human understanding and contemplation (Özdemir 2003; Ramadan 2009; Brockopp 2012; Mohamed 2016). Both revelations are also considered necessary to guide people as nature elucidates the meanings of the Qur'an, while the Qur'an provides a spiritual and theological framework for understanding and appreciating God's natural wonders (Izzi Dien 2000). The idea of nature constituting God's signs holds important spiritual relevance for socio-environmental relations. Protecting living creatures, communities, and natural habitats from harm or destruction not only holds ecological significance; it also aids in fulfilling a religious theocentric objective by preserving the integrity of the natural environment through which people find God and come to recognize His unity, power, and mercy (Izzi Dien 2003; Kolkailah 2023a).

## *3.2 Serviceability of Creation for Humanity*

*Taskhīr* is an important Qur'anic concept in the Islamic environmental discourse. This concept can be variably translated as serviceability, amenability, malleability, subjection, subjugation, and adaptation. In numerous verses, *āyāt* (e.g., 31:20, 45:12–13, 14:32, and 16:12), the Qur'an indicates that God has subjugated (*sakhkhara*) everything in the heavens and Earth, and subjugated for humanity (*sakhkhara lakum*) specific creations (e.g., the sun, moon, stars, ocean, rivers) and natural phenomena (e.g., day and night). Some Muslim scholars and environmentalists expand upon this concept specifically because it can be misused to support ideas of human beings' dominion or control over nonhuman creation (Ouis 1998). Muslim scholars refute these dominion-associated connotations by arguing that this serviceability or usefulness is granted to humans to enable them to fulfill their role of worshiping God, which is a higher end that unites them with other creatures (Setia 2007, as cited in Hancock 2018). Others say this serviceability is afforded to human beings because they are divinely appointed *khulafā'* or successors/stewards on Earth (as will be discussed below), and they are bound

1. Other shared traits among living creatures include their earthly origin, chemical composition, requiring sleep or rest, producing organic waste, and undergoing change (through growth, development, death, and decay). These traits can be juxtaposed with the divine essence that is completely unchanging, does not produce waste or have the same earthly origin or chemical composition, and does not undergo change or require rest or sleep (Qur'an 2:255).

by God's laws in the way they interact with or manage Earth's bounties in order to fulfill this responsibility (Nasr 1993; Ouis 1998; Baharuddin 2011).

The *āyāt* of *taskhīr* also reveal God's ability to subjugate things in order to make them serviceable to humans, which demonstrates humans' limitations and lack of self-sufficiency while establishing God's superiority, dominion, and absolute authority over His creation (Tlili 2012). Many verses about *taskhīr* remind people to reflect and give thanks to God, so the purpose of recounting the creations that God made serviceable to them is not to establish people's superiority, but to highlight God's mercy and compassion, and remind people to inculcate humility, contemplation, and gratitude (Al-Qaradawi 2001; Ouis 1998; Tlili 2012). If people continue to be ungrateful, though, God has the power to subjugate creation (e.g., the wind [Qur'an 69:6–7], birds [Qur'an 105:3–5], or other creatures [Qur'an 7:133]) against and not for people, which also supports the idea of human beings not having ultimate authority over nonhuman creation (Tlili 2012). In addition, human beings are not the only beneficiaries of *taskhīr*; nature also possesses value for other creatures (Llewellyn 2003). However, God emphasizes in the Qur'an the concept of *taskhīr* as related to humans because this book is a message directed to human beings and its guidance is relevant specifically to their lived experience (Izzi Dien 2000; Tlili 2012; Mohamed 2016).

### *3.3. Fulfilling the Ontological Role of Khalīfah*

One of the most important topics in contemporary Islamic environmental discourses relates to the role of human beings on Earth and the status they occupy within the broader web of life. The central concept in this discourse is *khilāfah*, which is derived from the Arabic trilateral root (*kh-l-f*) and mentioned in various forms in multiple Qur'anic verses (e.g., 2:30, 27:62, 57:7). Although this concept is sometimes referred to as vicegerency, many Muslim environmentalists prefer translating it as stewardship due to the colonial implications and dominion connotations of the former. The concept of *khilāfah* establishes the ethical imperative and God-given responsibility for humans to care for the environment, maintain its balance, and protect living communities (Al-Qaradawi 2001; Redwan 2018; Azizan and Wahid 2012). Most scholars apply the concept of *khilāfah* to human beings—not to any other known species or sentient beings—who are qualified to fill this position (Izzi Dien 2000; Llewellyn 2003; Khalid 2017).

In Qur'an 2:30, God explicitly says, "I am placing a *khalīfah* on Earth." When the angels asked—not out of objection but humble curiosity based on past observation—if God will place on Earth those who will "spread corruption and spill blood," God responded: "I know that which you do not." Despite people being capable of violating God's laws in destructive ways, God's decision to make them stewards on Earth demonstrates (some) human beings' ability to respect the boundaries God has established as well as human beings' potential for doing good, promoting justice (*'adl*), and engaging in the rectification (*iṣlāḥ*) of moral ills and transgressions against God's creatures (Llewellyn 2003; Baharuddin 2011).

Some scholars insist on adopting only the literal meaning of *khilāfah* (succession) in verse 2:30, not the implied responsibility to care for the rest of creation (Tlili 2012). Others maintain that the Qur'an's general reference to the human being as *khalīfah* (e.g., 2:30) or to people as *khulafā'* (plural of *khalīfah*; Qur'an 27:62) implies trusteeship or representation of God, not merely succession (Haneef 2002; Hancock 2018). Although the literal meaning of the root word *khalafa* and its various derivatives apply with respect to individuals or generations succeeding or replacing one another over time (e.g., Qur'an 7:74, 7:129, 7:142), other scholars argue that the Qur'anic usage of the phrase *istikhlāf* (or making people *khulafā'*) designates

them as God's deputies or representatives without negating His presence, ultimate authority, and active role on Earth (Izzi Dien 2000).

Despite differing opinions on the interpretation of the word *khalīfah* and its variant forms in the Qur'an, the idea that human beings are entrusted with caring for the Earth and God's creation is corroborated by other Qur'anic concepts like trusteeship (*i'timāniyyah*) or trialing people (*balā'*, Qur'an 6:165, 67:2) to determine how they will act. The concept of trusteeship stems from the related concept of trust (*amānah*). As the Qur'an explains (33:72), this trust was offered to but rejected by the heavens, the Earth, and the mountains—and humanity eventually shouldered it. According to Qur'anic exegetes, the *amānah* refers to having "the awareness of God and his ordinances, the application of the duties expected by this ordinance, and bearing both the reward and the punishment" (Izzi Dien 2000, 77). Other prophetic narratives (*aḥadīth*) convey or corroborate the meaning of *khilāfah* as stewardship. One *ḥadīth* emphasizes the responsibility and accountability dimensions of *khilāfah*, stating: "The world is sweet and green, and verily God has established you as a *khalīfah* in it in order to see how you act" (Muslim 2015, Book 49, #2742). Another *ḥadīth* describes people as shepherds who are accountable for how they treat those entrusted to their care (Muslim 2015, Book 20, #4496).

Some scholars and environmentalists embrace a clear anthropocentric perspective—albeit with conditions—and argue that within the Islamic worldview, human beings occupy the highest and most noble position of God's creation on Earth (Özdemir 2003; Foltz 2006; Abdul-Matin 2010; Al-Najjar 2004). Some posit that the role of *khilāfah* privileges humans compared to other creatures (Keshani 2010; Abou El Fadl 2017) and believe that "humans are honored and celebrated because they are God-like, capable of doing God-like things" (Abou El Fadl 2017, 12). Qur'anic studies scholar Joseph Lumbard shares a similar perspective (Kolkailah 2023b, 206–207). Many contemporary Muslim scholars and environmentalists agree that human beings are honored and dignified creations of God, but maintain that their role of *khilāfah* does not make them privileged or superior to other creatures, nor does it give them the license to dominate, exploit the Earth, and greedily or arrogantly usurp its resources (Hamed 1993; Llewellyn 2003; Özdemir 2003; Mohamed 2016; Ammar and Gray 2017; Llewellyn and Khalid 2024).[2] Some Muslim writers express the conditions for the role of *khilāfah* through the concept of usufruct, which entails that humans have the right to enjoy God's provisions and to use the Earth's natural resources to achieve higher spiritual and ethical aims, but on the condition that they do not waste, deplete, or destroy these bounties and resources in the process (Mohamed 2014, 2016; Ammar and Gray, 2017).

The role of *khilāfah*, many argue, is tempered by the concept of *'ubūdiyyah*, meaning (humble) slavehood (also sometimes translated as 'servanthood'; see chapter 2), and a state of worshipful devotion. It is derived from the Arabic trilateral root (*'-b-d*), which has the primary meanings of to serve, to worship, to be devoted to; the word for worship, 'ibādah, comes from the same root (Lane 1984). The Arabic phrase *'abbada'l-ṭarīq* means "to level or flatten the road" (for traffic). If the Islamic conception of 'ibādah refers to service or worship, then it entails the humbling of hearts, minds, and bodies to make them amenable to devotional adoration and worship free of any resistance to the ultimate Master. Although some may associate slavehood with exploitative human practices, as demonstrated in the transatlantic slave trade, for example, the Islamic framing of a master–slave relationship with God centers

2. Scholars provide many reasons for the honored status of human beings, including God breathing His spirit into Adam, commanding the angels to prostrate out of respect to him, and granting him knowledge which even the angels were not given.

humans' subservience and beholdenness to God for everything. *'Ubūdiyyah*, then, conjures in people their shared state of submission with the rest of God's creation and reminds them of their accountability before God on Judgment Day (Izzi Dien 2003; Al-Qaradawi 2001; Haneef 2002; Llewellyn 2003; Özdemir 2003; Baharuddin 2011; Chittick 2012; Ammar and Gray 2017; Kolkailah 2023b, 202).

Some scholars and environmentalists believe that the most dangerous thing to the natural environment is human beings having the power of authority to manipulate the natural environment at will, while refusing to accept servitude before God (Izzi Dien 2000; Nasr 1997, as cited by Mohamed 2016). Failing to surrender to God's will can make human beings not only unable to fulfil the role of stewardship, but it can also convert them into agents of corruption who destroy the creatures entrusted to their care (Chittick 2012). Many believe that faithfulness to humanity's God-given role of *khalīfah* requires respecting the commands and directives of the Divine Master and Owner of the Earth (Hamed 1993; Izzi Dien 2000; Al-Qaradawi 2001; Haneef 2002; Özdemir 2003; Kepplinger 2020). Respecting God's laws is described as living "in harmony with God," which is believed to be the only way to find harmony with God's creation and establish peace, equity, and balance on Earth (Chittick 2012).

Mending humanity's relationship with God is a prerequisite to rectifying our relationship with nature. The Qur'an speaks of an innate disposition or *fiṭrah* (Qur'an 30:30), which points people's inner compass toward a higher power and to basic moral norms. This natural disposition can become tarnished with sin or heedlessness and require inner spiritual purification. The process of inner purification (*tazkiyah*) is essential to restoring the innate disposition that inclines us toward God and to reforming humanity's relationship with the natural world. Characterizing oneself by God's Names (Mayer 2023) is essential to inculcating noble traits and beautifying one's heart and character (*khuluq*) with divine qualities. The words *khalq* (creation) and *khuluq* (character) share a trilateral root alluding to their shared meaning; virtuous character is an internal state that precedes virtuous deeds, actions, or behaviors. This internal, virtuous state can, then, produce virtuous actions. As scholars of the Sufi tradition (e.g., Al-Ghazāli n.d.) explain, nurturing and cultivating good character within can make praiseworthy traits become second nature to us. These virtuous traits (e.g., compassion, patience, humility, and gentleness) can become so ingrained in us that they become intrinsic to who we *are*, not just what we *do*. The Qur'an itself praises Muhammad for being in such an exalted state of character (68:4). When asked about her husband's character, the Prophet's wife Aisha said, "His character was the Qur'an." In other words, his disposition and the core values that shaped his inner being mirrored the very values praised and encouraged throughout the Qur'an. This Qur'anic—and at once prophetic—character is precisely what the Qur'an invites people to cultivate within.

Through an integral ecology lens, we see the state of nature acutely reflecting the internal spiritual state of humanity as a collective. More polluted hearts yield a more polluted world. Conversely, when hearts are purified of toxic traits (e.g., arrogance, greed, and gluttony) and beautified with noble divine traits (e.g., mercy, temperance, and compassion), nature is given the opportunity to detoxify and breathe, heal, recover, and regenerate. The Qur'anic discourse on creation—with its emphasis on appreciating God's Oneness, creative powers, and numerous signs in nature—can help Muslim scholars develop a spiritual framework for providing a good life (*ḥayāh ṭayyibah*) for living communities that safeguards their homes and habitats, and actualizes their right to exist, procreate, thrive, and travel freely through the earth, skies, and seas following the paths God set out for them (Qur'an 16:69).

According to a prophetic tradition, angels surround those who read and study the Qur'an, and these people also become recipients of divine mercy and tranquility (Muslim 2015, Book 48, #2699). Ideally, those who seek to understand and implement God's words exude God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and righteous action toward creation. Conversely, if people neglect God's guidance and pollute the natural environment, one wonders how deprived they would be of angels' peaceful presence as well as God's mercy. Nature pleads (Qur'an 27:18) and actively responds to our spiritual states as it constantly glorifies God (Qur'an 17:44). Yet among humans, it is only hearts that are spiritually alive and purified that can act as spiritual witnesses to nature's calls of distress.

# 4. Scriptural Foundations in the Christian Tradition

## *4.1. Biblical Accounts of Creation*

In the Hebrew Bible, there are two versions of creation stories from different contexts: the Jahwist creation narrative (Gen 2:4b–25), which is probably the older version (possibly written 900 BC, in an agrarian context), and the priestly narrative (Gen 1:1–2:4), which is the later version (possibly written 550 BC in the context of Babylonic exile or during the post-exile period, in a more urban context). The topic of creation is a pervasive theme across the entire Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). It reoccurs in all its scriptural layers as well as in the Greek New Testament. It appears not only in the book of Genesis, but also in the Book of Psalms, the Prophets, the Wisdom literature, and the preachings of Jesus and in his parables, later also in the letters of the Apostle Paul and other apostolic literature (Brown 2022; Werner 2024). That there are two different versions of the creation accounts in the first book of the Bible underlines the characteristic feature that the belief in God as creator of all always finds its different expressions in different cultural traditions and historical contexts. Therefore, it can attract diverse human images, metaphors, and forms while basically confessing the same content of faith in the creator God: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps 24:1). The fundamental biblical belief that humankind is embedded in a complex web of living relationships between biological, organic, and inorganic beings, relationships which owe their existence to God who remains the owner, sustainer, and renewer of energy for all that is alive, has gained increased relevance in the last century in which climate change and biodiversity loss have reminded humanity of its fragility and interwovenness within the community of all creatures.

The different contextual flavors and significance of creation stories come out clearly in the two accounts. The priestly creation account depicts the whole of the cosmos and its creation as a methodologically structured series of events. There is no gradual process of unfolding, but a sovereign God acting creatively in deeds and words, calling into existence, dividing, making, naming, seeing, and blessing. "Repeated seven times is God's approbation ('God saw that it was good'), which concludes nearly every single act (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), culminating in the pronouncement 'very good' to cover creation as a whole (Gen 1:31)" (Brown 2022, para 1.2.) The whole of creation proceeds in a series of separations: separations of light from darkness, day from night, the "waters above" from the "waters below," and the land from the waters. The culmination of creation on the last day is not the creation of humankind (which is on day six), but the day of rest (day seven), the universal Sabbath during which God enjoys the beauty and goodness of his creation. Thus, creation in its totality is an ordered, beautiful, intrinsically good and creative dynamic reality, as the land and the water have

the potential to bring forth life themselves (1:11, 20, 24). Sun and moon are demythologized (marking a difference from Babylonian religious traditions) and not declared deities with divine power in themselves. However, they regulate the change of night and day and thus have a divine function to contribute to the well-being of the whole of creation. According to critical historical exegesis, the very structure of the priestly—also called "cosmic"—account resembles the threefold ancient structure of the Solomonic temple, thus providing grounding for the conviction that the liturgical reading of the creation account corresponds to the structure of the Solomonic temple. This also implies that the whole created cosmos needs to be seen as God's holy temple and has its life and legitimate existence only as long as it serves the glory of God and worships the beauty of his love for creation.

The second creation narrative, also known as the "garden account," starts with the barren land, not with complete cosmic emptiness. It is less interested in the temporal dimension than in the spatial dimension of creation. The emphasis is on man being created from the earth: Gen 2:7:

> "the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Holy Bible 1973). "The *'ādām* ('human one') is made not in the *imago Dei* (image of God) but in the *imago terrae*, in the image of the earth, as it were. Humanity's identity is bound to the ground by a remarkable Hebrew wordplay: the *'ādām* comes from the 'dust' or topsoil of the *'ădāmâ* ('ground'), which makes humanity a 'groundling.'" (Brown 2022, section 2.2.)

The human species is mandated to serve and to cultivate the Earth (Gen 2:5), thus there is a close dependency between the human and the land, and an ethics of the soil is a core area of Christian eco-theology (Werner and Heincke 2022). Another dependency is created in the relation between men and women. As Brown (2022) writes, "With the creation of the woman, the man now takes on a dual identity: he remains kin to the ground in his humanity as he has become kin to the woman in his gendered identity. No subordination pertains in the garden. Life in the garden is one of fruitful work, abundance, and mutual companionship. In the garden, there is no fear or shame, even before God."

The biblical narratives, however, reflect not just an ideal state of beginnings in the time before history. They also reflect the reality of sin, i.e., the broken web of relationships within creation (discussed in greater detail in chapter 3). Both creation narratives of Gen 1 and 2 have to be read together with the flood narratives (Gen 6–9), which reflect the consequences of broken relationships of responsibility and subsequent destruction within creation. Only after a miraculous rescue journey with Noah's Ark does the series of extended creation narratives end by accounting for the renewal of the covenant (in Gen 8). The flood narratives contain some fundamental teachings about human existence.

"They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations." (Francis 2015, No 66)

While this has distorted and disfigured the human mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28) and to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15), the three fundamental ecological

relationships still continue despite the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature having become conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17–19).

These ancient narratives not only provide insights into both the threats to and fragility of creation, but also reveal biblical faith with its promise of the continuity of creation and God's faithfulness in the midst of its destruction. The message of God's faithfulness takes on a special meaning in the current ecological crisis and also in controversies with a minority of climate change deniers still existing in some countries.[3]

Biblical traditions of understanding creation have also been enriched by early eco-theological conceptualizations in the writings of the early Desert Fathers (Chryssavgis and Foltz 2013) in the Patristic period and related orthodox theologies (Chryssavgis 2019), as well as in mystics such as Hildegard von Bingen and Francis of Assisi, and monastic traditions (Torvend 2023). Much of what is unfolding in the ecumenical movement today is about recollecting and reinterpreting insights from these sources of creation theologies (Edwards 2017).

### *4.2. The Modern Ecumenical Movement and Its Significance for the Emergence of Eco-Theology*

The modern ecumenical movement is an important context for reformulating a new understanding of humans' responsibilities within creation. The movement has its roots in the world missionary conference in 1910 in Edinburgh and its attempt to overcome fragmentation within the different denominational families within World Christianity. The conference sought to formulate key features of a common understanding of the role of Christian faith in the modern world. Established in Geneva in 1948, the World Council of Churches (WCC), with its more than 360 member churches, has played a key role in allowing the specific viewpoints of different types of Christianity to bring in their insights on creation theology and enrich each other (Werner 2022). Though not an institutional member of the WCC, the Roman Catholic Church has also contributed significantly and prominently to the rediscovery of the theology of creation since the Second Vatican Council, particularly with a new reflection on the role of the *imago dei* as a foundation for a new theology of Christian ecological stewardship and integral anthropology (Vatican. International Theological Commission 2002).

One could argue that, in its 2,000 years of history, Christianity has only a comparatively short history of 50 years of explicit eco-theology in the narrow sense of the word, that is, an organized and reflective dialogue between natural sciences (earth system sciences), environmental studies and theologies of creation (Werner 2024). It was during the Evanston assembly in 1954 that the topic of creation was put on the agenda of the WCC (Hall 2002). The growing concern for the environmental crisis and the related crisis of technological modernity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the Club of Rome warning that unlimited growth is not possible on a limited planet (Meadows et al. 1972), as well as the beginning of UN environmental conferences (United Nations 1972; Handl 1992), influenced the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical debates served as a catalyst to bring ecological concerns to the global theological agenda. Early pioneers in the ecumenical movement like Joseph Sittler (Theology for Earth), the debates after the WCC assemblies in New Delhi (1961) and Uppsala

3. An older controversy concerning different viewpoints on creation hermeneutics has lost significance in most current Christian contexts: The traditional divide between creationists and evolutionists which played some role in the 19th and early 20th century (after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859), particularly in some smaller segments of Christianity in the US, is currently less significant today for World Christianity as a whole. For the vast majority of Christians today, scientific evolutionary research perspectives on the history of the cosmos and faithful religious interpretations of narratives of creation and their mythological elements do not exclude and contradict, but complement and enrich each other.

(1968) on "God in Nature and History," and increased dialogue with orthodox theological traditions played a major role in a new eco-theological awareness. Patriarch Bartholomew from the Ecumenical Patriarchate played a particular role in encouraging joint eco-theological reflections among all Christian traditions and initiating a liturgical "Season of Creation" from September 1 to October 4, the day of the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America 2009; Chryssavgis 2011).

The ecumenical movement facilitated and encouraged a critical rethinking of certain streams of thought within Christianity which had emphasized the violent dominion of *Homo sapiens* over the Earth and its living beings. This goes back to the periods of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when the appearance of modern technology, natural sciences, and industrialization had a conceptual impact also within Christianity. The ambivalent nature of a narrowed anthropocentric interpretation of creation and an isolated understanding primarily of Gen 1:28 and its consequences was highlighted by a provocative article written by American scholar Lynn White in 1967. He argued that it is Christian theology as such which has contributed to a dominion-centered theology of creation with its one-sided interpretation of biblical images and sources. According to White, this justified the modern expansion of technological civilization as part of the continuation of the mandate to humanity to exercise dominion over this Earth (White 1967; Amery 1972). Lynn White even argued that Christianity itself had become one of the major roots of the contemporary environmental crisis. Two arguments were essential for him:

1) The Bible asserts man's dominion over nature and establishes anthropocentrism;
2) Christianity makes a distinction between man (formed in God's image) and the rest of creation, which has no "soul" or "reason" and is thus inferior.

Lynn White's core thesis that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (White 1967, 1205) received continued critical reflection and fresh eco-theological responses from eco-theological pioneers in international ecumenical dialogues, such as Günter Altner (1975), Jürgen Moltmann (1985), Christoph Stückelberger (1997), and Lukas Vischer (2001) within Protestant circles. Orthodox pioneers (Chryssavgis 2019) and major Roman Catholic voices followed, culminating in a new eco-theological paradigm of the ecumenical movement expressed during the WCC assembly in Canberra in 1991. This was the first assembly with its entire theme dedicated to the topic of creation ("Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole of Creation") (Canberra Report 1991). The assembly also highlighted for the first time the significance of non-Western indigenous traditions and postcolonial movements in churches for deepening the understanding of theologies of creation (Kyung 2009). The voices of this new eco-theological sensitization have culminated in the Magna Carta of Christian environmental ethics and spirituality, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Pope Francis 2015). *Laudato Si'* refers to the key concept of "integrity of creation," which had been formulated at the WCC assembly in Seoul in 1991. "Integrity of creation" brings together the inherent dimensions of wholeness, interconnectedness and interdependence which mark the whole of the created cosmos (WCC 2005). It emphasizes the inseparable interconnection between the social dimension (peace with justice), the ecological dimension (ecological sustainability), and the spiritual dimension (self-renewing energy of creation) of God's presence within creation:

> We affirm that the world, as God's handiwork, has its own inherent integrity; that land, waters, air, forests, mountains, and all creatures, including humanity, are "good" in God's sight. The integrity of creation has a social aspect, which we recognize as peace with justice, and an ecological aspect, which we recognize in the self-renewing, sustainable character of natural ecosystems. We affirm that the land belongs to God. Human use of land and waters should release the earth to replenish regularly its life-giving power, protecting its integrity and providing spaces for its creatures.[4]

Based on this overarching new concept and the related enlarged understanding of a tripolar concept of justice within and for creation—interspecies, intragenerational, and intergenerational justice (Rockström et al. 2023; Earth Commission 2024)—the ecumenical movement pleaded for a broader mainstreaming of eco-theological orientations in the whole of Christianity. In 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, an ecumenical meeting took place at the Volos Academy in Greece and formulated a "Manifesto for an Ecological Reformation of Christianity" (Manifesto Ecological Reformation 2017). It argued that an ecological reformation is imperative for *all* Christian traditions in the 21st century. According to the Manifesto, this ecological reformation implied a twofold critique, "namely both a deeper Christian critique of the root causes of ecological destruction and an ecological critique of forms of Christianity which have not recognized the ecological dimensions of the gospel" (Manifesto Ecological Reformation 2017).

Both the WCC call for an ecological reformation of Christianity as well as the passionate plea of the Vatican against a consumerist throwaway society and a "despotic anthropocentrism" (Pope Francis 2015, § 68; § 29) can be seen as setting a new and more committed tone for ecological engagement in World Christianity. Both can also be seen as a definite response to the challenges formulated by Lynn White in 1967. There is no space here to spell out in more detail the concrete fruits and practical aspects of this ecological reformation. Suffice it to say that this ecological reformation movement has impacted almost all dimensions of local Christian lifestyle, such as a) a deeper realization of the ecological significance of the Our Father, the daily prayer of all Christians, and an understanding of the Lord's Prayer as meditating the gifts of creation ("give us our daily bread") as well as an act conforming to the ecological will of God ("on earth as it is in heaven"); b) a deeper realization of the ecological significance of the Eucharist as sharing the gifts of creation and celebrating the incarnated presence of God, with the bread and wine as symbols of the goodness of creation ("Fruit of the vine and work of human hands, it will become our spiritual drink…,") (Lutherans Restoring Creation n.d.); c) the publication of the first truly ecumenical encyclopedia of contextual eco-theological perspectives from all major continents (Beros et al. 2023); d) an ecologically enlarged Annual Liturgical Calendar which now regularly includes a "Season of Creation" as a period for eco-spirituality and prayer (Season of Creation 2024).

4. This text is from the 10 Affirmations from WCC Seoul Convocation on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (Affirmation No 7) from March 1990 and is also quoted in the Laudato Si Movement's website: https://www.laudatosi.org/laudato-si/ecumenical/justice-peace-and-the-care-of-creation/.

# 5. Relationship Between Human and Nonhuman Creation in the Christian Tradition

## *5.2. Overcoming a "Despotic Anthropocentrism"*

*Laudato Si'* sees overcoming a "despotic anthropocentrism" (Pope Francis 2015) as the core task for the whole of Christianity. According to recent ecumenical eco-theological debates, "despotic anthropocentrism" is caused by reading Gen 1:28 without taking into consideration the equally valid context and meaning of Gen 2:15. The garden account emphasizes the creation of Adam according to the *imago terrae* (adama); the priestly account emphasizes the creation of humans according to the *imago dei* (image of the divine king—however, not to be understood as an absolute monarch, but as a caretaker and steward, a wise servant with a concern for justice for all). The understanding of Gen 1:28 therefore needs to be put in balance with the understanding of the role of humankind in Gen 2:15: we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical tradition tells humans to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). "Tilling" refers to cultivating, ploughing, or working, while "keeping" means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature (Faith and Order 2022). It thus keeps in central focus "that human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, have been entrusted with the task of caring for and cultivating the earthly garden" (Gen 1:26–27; 2:15). To "cultivate and care" involves protecting biodiversity and cultural traditions. The rich variety in creation forms an integral whole—all is interdependent. The social and ecological aspects of the *dominium terrae* need to always be taken into consideration and kept together. Solidarity with suffering creation and solidarity with the poor are not in opposition to each other, but are two sides of the same coin, just as justice for creation and justice within creation are mutually dependent. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the Earth and ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. One practical example where this understanding of the role of stewardship and care for creation plays out is the commitment of churches in Germany to an ecological transition and sustainable transformation of agriculture and tight ecological standards for the leasing of church lands for agricultural purposes (EKD 2004).

## *5.2. The Noahic Covenant and Its Relevance for the Relationship Between Humanity and Animals*

The special significance of the Noahic covenant for understanding the whole of creation has recently been rediscovered. Because human beings exist only because all other creatures already exist before them, God has a covenant with the whole of the Earth, not just with humans. The narrative of the Great Flood ends solemnly with the following (Gen 9:9–11):

> Behold, I now establish My covenant with you and your descendants after you, and *with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth*—every living thing that came out of the ark. And I establish My covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth. (Holy Bible 1973)

In this covenant, the role of human beings is not to act as mediator between God and the rest of creation. This covenant of uninterrupted faithfulness and continuity for the very functioning of creation is valid without humankind. The Covenant is with the whole Earth, but includes humankind and certainly also animals. This is an immense word of comfort within the current predicaments of an unprecedented climate crisis. The rainbow serves as a sign of this uninterrupted faithfulness of God the Creator to his creation on all the Earth.

This also has profound implications for animal ethics. Although there are no developed and systematized animal ethics in the Hebrew Bible, it is interesting to note that animals are not absent in salvation history—they are an indispensable part within God's covenant with the Earth (Kappes 2023). There is a rich biblical witness on appropriate attitudes of humans toward animals, which was investigated by a national commission of Protestant churches in Germany (EKD) working on animal ethics, the future of nutrition, and livestock industries (EKD 2020).

The biblical tradition retains the delicate knowledge that meat consumption by human beings is only part of the late Noahic covenant between God and humankind *after* the Flood, but *not a part of the original goodness and peaceful order of creation*. Meat consumption is, after all, an expression of the violent thoughts and actions that entered creation through the Flood and the first fratricide. A *concession for meat consumption is given only after the Flood* (Gen 9:3), while both the first and the second creation accounts point to a *vegetarian diet*, based on plants, fruit, crops and grains, and nuts and pulses (Gen 1:29; Gen 2:16) which were assigned to human beings. This means that there is a tradition of avoiding, or at least reducing, the violence of killing animals in certain periods in biblical and church history. This biblical tradition is still remembered—and also widely practiced—in the earliest forms of Christianity which still exist, particularly in the fasting traditions of Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christianity.[5] Practical examples include a renewed embrace of the tradition of fasting in German Protestant and Catholic churches (EKD 2021), as well as in Islam (Akca 2024; see also chapter 4 in this volume).

## 6. Theological Foundations of Stewardship and Creation Care

### *6.1. Who Is the Crown of Creation?*

As discussed above, a distorted anthropocentric interpretation of the creation narrative falsely viewed humankind as the crown of creation. As the WCC Faith and Order Study forcefully stated in 2022:

> "At times, a misguided anthropocentrism—that is, a view that places human beings at the centre of created reality—has led to the attitude that humans are free to do with nature whatever they want. While it is true that the Bible affirms the special place of human beings within creation, giving them the role of naming the other creatures and caring for the garden of creation, this position should not be misinterpreted as a license to exploit or destroy nature. Domination and mastery must give way to interrelation and care. This ecological reorientation may require a change in mentality and the cultivation of virtues such as humility, temperance,

5. To this day, the Ethiopian orthodox church tradition in its fasting regiment knows 180 mandatory fasting days for laypeople and up to 252 days for clergy and the particularly observant.

> justice, mercy, and love, which lead Christians to recognize that the goal of creation is the glory of God, not the glory of human beings." (WCC 2022)

Seen from this perspective, humanity is not the "crown of creation" in the biblical creation account. Rather, the crown is the Sabbath, i.e., the celebration of the beauty of creation and of rest and peace for all. How to find rest for human beings and for the Earth today is a fundamental psycho-ecological question in a period when humankind has overstretched the capacities both of the Earth and of its own psycho-social system, with an exhaustion crisis looming in many places. The ecumenical discourse has learned again from the biblical tradition: in the order of the Sabbath all are included, humans and animals, friends and strangers, free people and slaves. The Sabbath provides an interruption from the bondage of labor, hardship, and stress to bring rest and relaxation, recovery, and a welcome interruption to routine: "But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns" (Exodus 20:10).

Therefore, the current global ecological crisis is essentially analyzed as a desperate cry of the "land to have a year of rest" (Leviticus 25:5) (Andrianos et al. 2019).[6] This year of rest can be understood as an interruption of the cycles of exploitation and violence against nature. According to the ancient traditions of Israel, the land has the right every seventh year to celebrate the Sabbath of the Lord (Leviticus 25:4), which is renewing and restoring its own life-giving abilities, its fertility, and its energies to co-create other life. The Sabbath is therefore the cornerstone of a theology of the land, and is key to healthier principles of agroecology. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has urged governments to move toward a system of agriculture which is less poisonous and dependent on the use of pesticides, and more regenerative in terms of protecting the thin layers of fertile humus soil on the planet Earth (FAO 2021). If humanity denies the land a Sabbath, suppresses the rest of the Earth, and violates the land by constant overfertilization and lack of periods of rest, the quality of the land and its fertile character will be damaged or even completely destroyed (Leviticus 26:33).

Not respecting God's laws and Sabbath regulations of rest for land, animals, and human servants has consequences for which not only humans but also the whole of creation will pay a high price, as some Old Testament prophets have warned. The prophet Jeremiah denounced the damage wrought by his people: "Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through?" (Jer 9:12). And the prophet Hosea observed: "Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish: together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hos 4:3).

As the above sections have shown, there has been a widespread global process of "greening Christianity" in the past three decades, with the recovery of the biblical concepts of care for creation, stewardship, suffering of creation, and compassion for the protection of plants, forests, and animals and their habitats. There is a significant ecological reappropriation of biblical texts as well as key theological concepts of the Christian faith far beyond a superficial "greenwashing of religions" or a "spiritual usurpation or instrumentalization of the global ecological movement." The "earthing of Christian faith" and the "greening of churches" has irrevocably started and is in full swing (Beros et al. 2023). Agro-ecology and an ecological

6. The plea for a global period of ecological rest, i.e., halting the vicious circles of uninterrupted exploitation and extension of human civilizations into the wilderness, was the core message of the Wuppertal Call "Kairos for Creation—Confessing Hope for the Earth" (Andrianos et al. 2019).

ethics of the soil (humus) are examples of this deeper eco-theological reflection (Werner and Heincke 2022; Whelan 2024).

### *6.2. Christ, Creation, and the Spirit – the Relevance of a Trinitarian Understanding of God Both for Suffering Creation and for Humankind*

According to the Christian understanding of creation, it is significant that the beginning is not revoked by the salvation at the end of time. In the biblical tradition, "The Spirit will be poured out on all flesh" (all the living; Joel 2:28–29), it will renew the fruitfulness and the creativity of the earth. This earth is not replaced, the first creation is not revoked, but it is renewed and transformed. The prophet Isaiah (Is 32:15–16) tells us: "The Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field." Thus, the coming of the Messiah is described in categories with ecological relevance (Is 45:8; Is 4:2). It is in the same line that Christ is described in the New Testament as the cosmo-creator who has reconciled and co-created the whole world (cosmos) with God, not just humanity (2 Cor 5:19), nor just the church (Col 1:16)—this was later taken up by the Greek bishop of Lugdunum, today Lyon, St. Irenaeus, in the second century, who spoke of the "recapitulation of all things in Christ." This decentering of ecclesial pride and self-centeredness also has far-reaching implications for interfaith dialogue. God has an interest in the reconciliation of the whole world, a passion for the healing and mending of the whole of creation. The Trinitarian understanding of creation in the New Testament has several implications:

a) Paul's letter to the Romans spells out the conviction that in creation God himself is present in mysterious ways as he is God who has become incarnate in Christ: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom 8:22). God is not an entity distant and remote from the suffering Earth, he is present in the midst of it. In the ecological suffering of animals, plants, insects, forests, and rivers, God himself[7] is suffering and groaning so as to bring his creation to full life and undisturbed beauty again. Where humans are deliberately harming the Earth and the integrity of creation, they also inflict harm on God himself, who still is meant to say to the entirety and to every aspect of creation: "God *saw* everything that *He* had made, and behold, it was very *good*" (Gen 1:31).

b) In Paul's letter to the Colossians, the reconciliation in Christ which is part of God's mystery and sacramental presence in the world has cosmological dimensions: "Christ is the firstborn of all creation … through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:15). This means that not only every individual in relation to Christ can become a foretaste and mirror of the transforming energies of the new creation, it also implies that in any human suffering, Christ himself suffers, as he is with those suffering, fully identified with their humanity as well as drawing them to God. Thus, no suffering on Earth is theologically insignificant and forgotten. We need to be attentive to the sufferings of animals, plants, trees, forests as well as that of any human being, as all of them constitute part of the cosmological reality and presence of the triune God (Creator), Christ and the Spirit, suffering, longing for freedom, and groaning in this world together.

c) Finally, because Christianity knows God in three distinct, though inseparable and interconnected dimensions, the Spirit acts as charismatic reality calling together God's

7. We refer to God as "himself" bearing in mind that God is beyond the gender-divide, and includes both male and female aspects of love, mercy and justice.

intercultural church as well as providing energy, hope, and resilience for all those who share in the suffering of creation. It is also related to the work of the Spirit that those powers and principalities which have created chaos and destruction will have no final say and power anymore. As Paul's letter to the Ephesians states: "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:12). All adverse and destructive powers are believed to be dismantled and disempowered (Col 1:15–20) by Christ coming in the power of the Spirit. Christ inaugurates the new creation and presents its beginning. As mentioned earlier, this is not identical to the restitution or repetition of the first creation, but entails the dynamic fulfilment and transformation of all existing creation toward peace and justice. The overcoming of any pain, death, and all forms of violence (Revelation 21:1–3) with the renewal of creation through the Spirit is what enables the final full presence of God within his creation (1 Cor 15:28). The key message is that the powers of destruction, violence, and death, which sometimes seem to dominate in human history, will have no final say and eternal validity. They will crumble and disappear. Therefore, even in the midst of despair, the (Christian) faith keeps firm to the belief that a different world is possible.

## 7. Conclusion: Solid Grounds for Christian–Muslim Collaboration

Over the past several decades, both Muslim and Christian scholars have sought to elucidate scriptural teachings to promote a restorative relationship with nature and animals and emphasize compassionate care, stewardship, and protection of plants, animals, and natural habitats. With the significant milestone publications of *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015) and *Al-Mizan* (Llewellyn and Khalid 2024), opportunities abound for comparative and collaborative work that builds on resonant teachings in both traditions. However, the dramatic intensity and global spread and depth of the current ecological crisis also indicate the insufficiency of existing theologies of creation, and accelerate the urgency of eco-theological reflection from both Muslim and Christian religious traditions to adequately address current global ecological threats.

The Christian and Muslim perspectives shared in this chapter demonstrate how both theologies provide foundational principles and teachings for environmental stewardship and cultivating a transformative relationship with God's creation. In both traditions, God is perceived as the ultimate creator, owner, and sustainer of the universe. Environmental degradation within His domain is a stark reflection and byproduct of disharmony with God and a sinful departure from a Godly path. Distorted interpretations of human beings' God-given power and authority on Earth have led to despotic abuses of power that betray humanity's spiritual and ontological role of serving God and His creation. A restoration of humanity's fractured relationship with God and with nature requires a renewed commitment to respecting God's laws and planetary boundaries and recognizing the interconnected well-being of humanity and the rest of creation.

There are at least four different thematic areas where this chapter sees good grounds for more collaboration and a deepening of eco-theological perspectives between Christianity and Islam, namely, a) understanding more deeply the concepts of *ecological stewardship and trusteeship* (*khilāfah and i'timāniyyah*) as they pertain to environmental responsibility; b) discerning the notion of a *spiritual ecological transformation,* or the spiritual framework

for providing a good life (*ḥayāh ṭayyibah*), as a foundation for an alternative character formation to ground environmentally sound behavior; c) deepening the value and *ecological significance of spiritually rectifying practices, including fasting and prayer,* as a contribution to healthy lifestyles and respect for nature, as fasting is both known in early and contemporary Christianity as well as in Islam (Qur'an 2:183); d) exploring more common grounds in *religious orientations for animal ethics and current discourses on animal rights* as both Christianity and Islam have strong traditions of demonstrating kind and compassionate treatment toward animals.

Collaborative approaches in these four thematic areas can deepen eco-theological reflection and highlight the many practical implications and ways of honoring, or betraying, divine responsibility toward God and the natural world. The theological and spiritual frameworks described above can be used, for example, to interrogate anthropogenic deviations from these foundations. These deviations, which lead to environmental devastations as witnessed in extreme weather events, toxic air, water and soil pollution, habitat fragmentation and loss, and biodiversity loss, can be explored further on a spiritual level. This includes a deeper examination of the consequences of sinful traits (e.g., greed, arrogance, and gluttony) and of the neglect of religious imperatives related to spiritual purification, a deeper fostering of virtuous traits (e.g., justice, humility, compassion, mercy, and temperance), and a deeper engagement in devotional practices that serve to restore harmony with God and the rest of creation.

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