

COP29 and the Sanctity of Nature

Water, Oceans, Rivers, and Energy in Light of Quranic Ecotheology

Nariman Gasimoğlu

Presided over by Azerbaijan—a constitutionally secular republic whose population is nominally Muslim (the majority is Shia, the minority is Sunni)—COP29 will be the most important and inclusive diplomatic event of 2024: the flagship annual conference of the most complex multilateral undertaking in the history of humanity. Although the conference’s central issue will be climate finance, several others will also have pride of place. Of these, most in one way or another will have something to do with water. As a country suffering from water scarcity whilst also being a keystone state in one of the world’s keystone regions, the Azerbaijani presidency of COP29 is well within its rights to emphasize the importance of the sanctity of nature and, within this theological framework, of the sanctity of water and the broader obligation of humanity to be a responsible steward of the natural environment.

It is within this context that we can explore this topic from a theological perspective of the host country’s dominant religious tradition. This is a vast and evidently sensitive subject, and this IDD Analytical Policy Paper makes no claim to address it in a comprehensive manner. Still, it is not one that policymakers should simply dismiss: taking seriously the Quranic text on this and other topics related to matters having to do with climate change can be salutary, indeed.

For instance, certain Quranic verses offer a perception that divine service, with obeying and worshipping God-being as its centerpiece, is not an act that only human beings are called upon to be engaged in: all creatures included in the universe, ranging from the smallest invisible ones to larger visible ones, are in a position to obey and praise God-being in their own way.

Nariman Gasimoğlu is Assistant Professor in the Humanities at ADA University. He has translated the Quran into Azerbaijani and is the author of scores of books and articles in the domain of religious studies in Azerbaijani, Russian, and English. All translations of the Quran into English, as well as the views and opinions expressed herein, are solely those of the author.

One of the reasons explaining this is that the Creator of the system to which all the material and spiritual creatures belong is the Most High, God himself. Insofar as God is the High Manager of a system regulating everything that happens in the universe, the activities performed by all His creatures constitute acts of observing His rules and laws, whether instinctively or deliberately, in obedience and worship of God-being. As the Quran reads: “Do you not see that to God prostrates everyone in the heavens and everyone on the Earth, and the sun and the moon and the stars, and the mountains and the trees, and the animals and many of the people” (22:18).

The philosophical context of various Quranic verses emphasizes that nature itself is also a source that confirms that God has no partner in creating the universe: nature itself should be accepted as an unwritten Holy Book of sorts and thus needs to be read and learned to help understand the greatness of God-being. In other words, nature itself is accorded divine status as a God-built guiding system on the path of divine perception.

One of the particular elements of this system is water. “We made every living thing of water,” reads the Quran (21:30). Among these “living things” are human beings. The relevant (and related) verse reads: “And it is He who has created [the] human being from water” (25:54). Moreover, the importance of water is conditioned by the Quran in its statement that water had existed even before the heavens and earth: “And it is He who has created the heavens and the earth in six days and his throne was on the water” (11:7).

Apart from references to water as one of the great signs meant to instill into the religious consciousness of believers the idea about God’s creative and governing activity regarding the universe, no less important—that which makes believers think of the sacredness of water—is that water has become an integral part of the daily ritual practices in ablution that Muslims are supposed to perform before their five-time daily prayers. They are also called upon to take note of a Quranic verse which reads, “God loves those who purify themselves” (9:108).

Indeed, Quranic ecotheology warns Muslims against wastefulness in using water when performing ablutions, which is regarded as a source of life and purity. In case there is no water to use for ablutions, believers are allowed to perform these with soil (including sand), following this Quranic verse: “if you cannot find water, betake yourselves to pure earth and wipe your faces and your hands therewith” (5:6). The Quranic permit to use pure soil for lack of water to perform this ritual means that believers are obliged to treat the soil—the earth, understood with and without capitalization—as respectfully as water.

Many *hadiths*—the collected sayings of the prophet Muhammad—provide details about how to perform ablutions, in what sequence various parts human body should be washed, and so on. Some of these sayings also indicate clearly that the water used for the ablution ritual should be completely pure, that is, it should not contain any other kind of liquid. Thus rainwater, running water, and water that is taken from wells, rivers, seas, and oceans is considered as being pure and thus suitable for use in ablutions.

The interesting point is that rivers, seas, and oceans are also viewed in Islamic ecotheology as sources to extract fresh water. For example, there are some verses in the Quran to which modern Muslim theology refers in the context of discussing the scientific context of the Quranic text: “Have you observed the water that you drink? Is it you who sent it down from the clouds or are We the sender?” (56:68-69). The passage’s first verse is viewed as meaning that God directs believers to ponder over the fresh water that human beings drink. Muslim ecotheologians conclude that the verse in question contains a reference to the idea of our planet’s water circulation process, which ultimately serves to extract fresh water from the salty water of the seas and oceans. This interpretation of the verse, combined with the scientific understanding of the water circulation process, says that salts in the seas and oceans protect the water at God’s will from being spoiled due to the actions of bacteria and the limited motion of water in seas and oceans. Then comes the role of sunrays to warm the water on the surface of these seas and oceans, followed by the actions of various winds to form clouds of fresh water and vapors out of this water surface.

In contradistinction to traditional scholars who are inclined to interpret the Quran in light of the historic exegetical traditions and the secondary written sources of Islam, a new generation of theologians emerging from within Islam make use of the linguistic flexibility of the Quranic text itself to offer ecological interpretations of the same text as part of a broader effort to bring environmental issues onto the agenda of religious values. For example, 25:50 starts with—if translated literally—the phrase “We have spent it,” or “put it into circulation” or “made it away” or “distributed it” or “detailed it” or “spelled it.” Then comes the phrase “amongst them in order that they may remember” or “get proper lessons.” The word “it” in many places in the Quran means “Him” or the “Holy Writ.” Many translators are inclined to translate this “it” as “the Quranic text,” as it seems quite logical to them that God might mean that “We have detailed the Quran amongst people so that they will remember or get proper lessons.” Moreover, in other verses, the Arabic word *sarrafna*—in the sense “we have detailed”—is paired up directly with the Quran itself. But this verse might need to be read in light of previous verses, where the talk is about God having created mankind firstly from water as He did with all living creatures, then having sent distilled rain (note: in everyday life, rain can be used as distilled water) and given life to nature, the “it” in this context can be understood to refer to water because the word “water” fits in with the context in which the Quran reads that “we have put it into circulation so that you remember.” And this, of course, raises the question: Remember what? One perfectly reasonable answer is that human beings should remember that they have been initially created from water, so please be respectful to nature..

Moreover, the Quranic verses that have to do with rivers certainly grant them a kind of quasi-divine status, as rivers appear to be one the main attributes of Paradise as described in the Quran in a figurative way with the purpose of instilling the idea of the importance of rivers as the main source of life into the religious conscience of believers. In the Quran, God teaches us not to forget that “it is He who spread out the earth, and

set thereon mountains standing firm, and rivers” (13:3). Similarly, another verse (27:61) reads thusly: “Who has made the earth firm to live in; made rivers in its midst? [...] Can there be another god besides Him?”

Rivers also should be seen as a tool of salvation in the eyes of believers, as the narrated story in the Quran of Moses indicates. As an infant, Moses escapes his impending death because his mother casts him into the river. The Quran reads at this point: “We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: ‘Suckle him, but when your heart fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve, for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our apostles’” (27:7). In another Quranic episode centered on Moses, salvation is reached by means of an ocean being split asunder across which the Children of Israel escape from Pharaoh (7:138).

The Quran repeatedly impresses on believers not to take rivers, seas, and oceans for granted but rather that they should see these sources of water as having been put in the service of humanity by God’s will. One verse reads: “And it is He who has subjected oceans that you eat thereof fresh tender meat and that you bring forth out of it ornaments to wear. And you see the ships plowing through it that you may seek of His Bounty and that you may be grateful” (16:14).

With all these services offered to believers by God’s will, believers are effectually commanded not to forget that it is God Himself who has the unshared right of property over all of creation: “His is whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth; and most surely God is the Self-sufficient, the Praised” (22:64). Therefore, the moral and ethical content of benefiting from the property belonging to God provides for the respectful treatment of nature, as human beings should never see the environment as a source for their selfish satisfaction; rather, they should avoid squandering its resources as they seek to meet their increasing needs.

God cautions against the squandering of natural resources also because there are some preset limits for the restoration processes of nature, which are regulated by divine rules to be applied to losses the environment can undergo. Thus, the Quran indicates that God holds human beings responsible for maintaining the Earth’s ecological balance. This applies, the text informs us, particularly to human beings: unlike other creatures created by God, human beings are the only ones that are left free to think and act on their own; they and they alone are endowed with the status of being God’s “successor” on earth—hence, only humanity is held responsible for the wellbeing of the planet.

Indeed, it is the conduct of human beings—whether as individuals or as a species—which determines whether they get punished or blessed: “And He it is Who has made you successors in the land and raised some of you above others by grades, that He might try you by what He has given you; surely your Lord is quick to requite, and He is most

surely the Forgiving, the Merciful” (6:165). Of course, Islam teaches that God is capable of resuscitating whatever He has once created, in the sense that He has the ability to recompense for any losses. And, of course, this may happen at His own will, for “He is most surely the Forgiving, the Merciful.” (7:167). But the same verse also indicates that there is a risk for human beings to be requited for wrongdoings, for “most surely your Lord is quick to requite.”

Now, obviously, the natural environment was much less harmed by human hands than at the time in which the Quran was sent upon the prophet Muhammed centuries ago. However, as the Quran applies to all times, surely its message of restraining us from deeds of violence against the environment still applies. Consider this verse: “Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return” (30:41). These words, which are written in a sort of eternal present form, indicate that a turn to repentance can at any time be awakened or felt by those who damage nature.

By way of conclusion, we can also refer to another aspect of the COP process in which reference to the Quranic text may be salutary: the political commitment to restrict global warming to reduce CO₂ emissions. One way to do this is, the Parties have said in the [decision text](#) agreed at last year’s COP28 in Dubai, is to shift away from fossil fuels as sources of energy for the world economy. In the relevant portion of the document, the Parties called upon themselves to “contribute [...], in a nationally determined manner, taking into account the Paris Agreement and their different national circumstances, pathways and approaches [to transition] away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science” (II.A.28(d)).

As it happens, the ecotheological potential of the Quranic text also embraces the notion of energy: modern Islamic theology views God-being as a High Source of Unlimited Energy. It considers that whatever motions and movements happen in the skies and the earth (even our bodily movements) are governed by a source of energy coming from its main source: God. This energy is, of course, more than energy as understood by the COP process. But it also includes this aspect. The Quranic term here is “spirit,” which is understood to be part of the whole included in God Himself. There is a Quranic verse that reads, “They ask you concerning the Spirit. Say: “The Spirit is one from works [or orders] of my Lord. And of knowledge you have been given only a little” (17:85). Another Quranic verse referenced by modern Islamic theologians to indicate that God Himself is a High Energy Source reads: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His light is as a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a brilliant star lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would also glow forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon

light! God guides to His light whom He wills” (24:35). The point that can be from these verses is that in searching for God’s bounty, humanity is called on by Quranic logic to take into consideration the holiness of energy itself and to think of not squandering it in a destructive way to the detriment of God’s creation.

Believers are offered to seek the Grace and Mercy of God in their earthly lives. The agreement for countries to *contribute pathways and approaches to transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly, and equitable manner* in favor of potentially sustainable alternatives like wind and solar can be expressed in religious terminology as seeking the Grace and Mercy of God, which is viewed in the Quran as a manifestation of creative High Spirit or High Energy. These renewable sources can thus be viewed as blessed alternatives in light of God having built the sun and its splendor (91:1), the story of how God made the wind obedient to Solomon (21:81; 34:12) and the verse that reads, “Among His Signs is this that He sends the winds as heralds of Glad Tidings, giving you a taste of His Grace and Mercy.” (30:46).