

God, Human, and Nature: Ecological Theocentrism and the Asset-Based Formation of Environmental Consciousness in an Islamic Boarding School

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Abstract: This article examines how ecotheological consciousness is formed within an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) through the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, and it corrects a conceptual error common in the Indonesian literature on Islamic ecology. That literature routinely describes the *tawhīdic* reframing of nature as a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. The description cannot be sustained: *khilāfa*, *amāna*, and *taskhīr* are structurally anthropocentric concepts, and ecocentrism, in the sense given to it by Naess and Rolston, denies precisely the privileged human standing that those concepts presuppose. What a *tawhīdic* reframing produces is not ecocentrism but ecological theocentrism nature possesses value not autonomously but because it is God's creation, His sign (*āya*), and a participant in a cosmic praise that human beings do not comprehend. The article argues that this is a distinct and defensible third position, irreducible to the Western anthropocentrism–ecocentrism dichotomy, and that recognising it resolves a contradiction that has quietly disabled much Indonesian ecotheological writing. Empirically, the study reports a participatory engagement conducted over four months (September–December 2025) at Pesantren Al-Faruq (Bandung), using the five-stage Appreciative Inquiry cycle in its correct sequence (Define, Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) as an instrument for surfacing the *pesantren's* existing theological and institutional assets. The findings indicate that ecological commitment is more readily mobilised when framed as an extension of *tawhīd* and *fiqh al-bīʿah* than when framed as an environmental obligation imported from outside; they also indicate that such commitment remains fragile, contested, and over a short engagement cannot be claimed as an institutionalised disposition.

Keywords: ecological theocentrism, *tawhīd*, *khilāfa*, *fiqh al-bīʿah*, asset-based community development.

1. Introduction

The claim that the ecological crisis is at root a spiritual crisis is now more than half a century old. Lynn White Jr. argued in 1967 that the roots of the modern ecological predicament lie in a religiously licensed anthropocentrism,¹ and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, writing at almost the same moment, located the same predicament in the desacralization of nature by a modern science

¹ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 7.

that had severed the cosmos from its metaphysical ground.² Nasr's prescription the resacralisation of nature through a recovery of what he calls *scientia sacra*³ has since become one of the most widely cited resources in Islamic environmental thought.⁴

Indonesian scholarship has taken up this inheritance with enthusiasm. A large body of work now argues that *tawhīd*, *khilāfa*, and *amāna* furnish the theological grounds for an Islamic environmental ethic, and that pesantren with their dense moral authority and their capacity to shape habits over years rather than hours are the natural institutional site for translating that ethic into practice. The present authors share this conviction. What they do not share is the description under which it is almost always advanced.

That description holds that a *tawhīdic* reframing of nature effects a shift *from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism*. The formulation is now near-universal in the Indonesian literature, and it is mistaken. Ecocentrism, in the sense established by Arne Naess and Holmes Rolston, denies that human beings occupy a privileged moral position within the biotic community; value inheres in ecosystems and their members independently of any relation to human purposes.⁵ But *khilāfa* is precisely a doctrine of privileged human standing: it appoints the human being as the bearer of a mandate over creation. *Amāna* designates a trust that only the human being was willing to accept, and *taskhīr* describes a subjection of the natural order to human use.⁶ One cannot arrive at ecocentrism by way of *khilāfa*. To claim otherwise is not a terminological infelicity; it is a category error, and it has consequences.

The consequences are visible in the literature itself, which frequently affirms in one paragraph that the human being is God's vicegerent, charged with governing the earth, and in the next that nature possesses 'autonomous moral standing' independent of human valuation. These two claims are incompatible, and the incompatibility is rarely noticed, still less argued. Meanwhile a serious critical literature has grown up around the *khilāfa* doctrine itself. Sarra Tlili has argued that anthropocentric ideas have been projected onto a Qur'an that does not support them, and that privileged status in the Qur'an turns on moral and religious uprightness rather than on species membership;⁷ Richard Foltz has questioned whether 'Islamic environmentalism' names a coherent tradition or a modern reconstruction;⁸ and

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1968), 11.

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam, the Contemporary Islamic World, and the Environmental Crisis," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C Foltz, Frederick M Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 85–105.

⁴ Sayyed Hosein Nasr, *Religion and The Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2–4.

⁵ Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973): 95–100; Holmes Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), chaps. 1–3.

⁶ Q. al-Baqara (2): 30 (*khilāfa*); Q. al-Aḥzāb (33): 72 (*amāna*); Q. al-Jāthiya (45): 13 (*taskhīr*).

⁷ Sarra Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 8–9, 252–53. Tlili argues that 'anthropocentric ideas have been (and continue to be) projected on to the Qur'an' (8), and that privileged status in the Qur'an is contingent upon moral and religious uprightness rather than species membership (252).

⁸ Richard C Foltz, "Is There an Islamic Environmentalism?," *Environmental Ethics* 22, no. 1 (2000): 63–72.

İbrahim Özdemir has grounded environmental ethics in *tawhīd* while declining the ecocentric label.⁹ Indonesian ecotheological writing has largely proceeded without engaging any of this.

This article therefore has a conceptual objective and an empirical one. The conceptual objective is to replace the ecocentric description with what we call ecological theocentrism: the position that nature has value neither because it serves human ends (anthropocentrism) nor because it is valuable in and of itself (ecocentrism), but because it is God's creation, His sign, and a participant in a cosmic praise that does not depend on human recognition. This is a genuine third position. It preserves the human being's distinctive responsibility which ecocentrism cannot while denying the human being the ultimate authority overvalue that anthropocentrism grants.

The empirical objective is to ask how such a theocentrism can be *formed*, rather than merely asserted, within a pesantren. Here the study uses Asset-Based Community Development, an approach formulated by John Kretzmann and John McKnight in explicit opposition to needs-based intervention.¹⁰ The choice requires justification, because ABCD is not a neutral instrument: Mary MacLeod and Akwugo Emejulu have argued that it can shade into the exculpation of the state, telling communities to mobilise their own assets when what they require is structural redress.¹¹ That criticism has particular force where state intervention in the Citarum basin has consumed very substantial public resources to limited effect.¹² We take it seriously and return to it below.

The article asks three questions. First, what conceptual framework most accurately describes the *tawhīdic* reframing of the God–human–nature relation, and what follows from adopting it? Second, what ecotheological and institutional assets does the pesantren already possess, and how are they surfaced? Third, what can and, equally important, what cannot be claimed about the formation of ecological consciousness based on a short participatory engagement? The contribution is accordingly twofold: a conceptual correction that we believe applies well beyond the present case, and an empirical account that is deliberately modest about what it has established.

2. Method

This is a qualitative study combining conceptual analysis with a participatory field engagement. The two components answer different questions and are assessed by different

⁹ Ibrahim Ozdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from Qur'anic Perspective," in *Research Seminar "Religion and Ecology"* (Yogyakarta, 2005) 3-37.

¹⁰ John McKnight and John Kretzmann, *Building Communities from the inside out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1993), 1-11, 25-47.

¹¹ Mary MacLeod and Akwugo Emejulu, "Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland," *Journal of Community Practice* 22, no. 4 (2014): 430-50.

¹² Dinas Lingkungan Hidup (DLH) Provinsi Jawa Barat, Indeks Kualitas Air (IKA) for the Upper Citarum watershed: 43.8, classified as 'moderately polluted' (*cemar sedang*). The 2015 Pekanbaru air-quality figures used in an earlier draft were sourced to a secondary article in *ḥadīth* studies and have been removed.

criteria, and it is worth saying so explicitly, since the earlier literature in this area has tended to blur them.

The conceptual component proceeds by textual and philosophical analysis of the Qur'anic vocabulary of *āya*, *tasbīh*, *khilāfa*, *amāna*, and *taskhūr*, read alongside the secondary literature in Islamic environmental ethics (Nasr, Özdemir, Foltz, Tlili, Izzi Dien) and in Western environmental philosophy (Naess, Rolston). Its criterion of success is conceptual: internal consistency, fidelity to the texts, and the capacity to resolve a contradiction that the existing framing generates.

The field component follows the Appreciative Inquiry cycle, and here a correction is necessary. Appreciative Inquiry was formulated by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva as a four-stage cycle Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny.¹³ The five-stage variant adds Define as the first stage: the determination of the affirmative topic before asset discovery begins.¹⁴ A number of Indonesian applications, including an earlier version of the present study, have placed Define fourth, between Design and Destiny, and glossed it as the setting of action commitments. That is not Define; it is a redescription of Design. The present study uses the correct sequence: Define – Discovery – Dream – Design – Destiny. ABCD supplies the underlying logic of asset identification, used as Kretzmann and McKnight formulated it: an inventory of the capacities, associations, and institutions a community already holds, rather than a catalogue of its deficits.¹⁵

The site is Pesantren Al-Faruq, selected purposively for its location within the Citarum catchment, the presence of pre-existing though unsystematised ecological practices, and the willingness of its leadership to permit a participatory engagement. Fieldwork ran from September to December 2025. Data was generated through twelve semi-structured interviews with the *pengasuh* (KH. Asep Abdul Aziz), three members of the pesantren's administration, two *ustadz*, and six santri; two focus group discussions of ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes, with six to eight participants each;¹⁶ four months of participant observation, conducted at weekends from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon with the researcher lodging in the pesantren's guest quarters, and recorded in field notes;¹⁷ and documentary analysis of the pesantren's curricular and administrative records. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of Indonesian and Sundanese; the originals are given in the notes and the translations in the text are ours.

¹³ David L Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life," *Research in Organizational Change and Development* 1 (1987): 129–69.

¹⁴ Cooperrider and Srivastva, 5–7.

¹⁵ McKnight and Kretzmann, *Building Communities from the inside out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, 1–11.

¹⁶ Two focus group discussions were held at Pesantren Al-Faruq (October and December 2025), with six to eight participants each and a duration of ninety to one hundred and twenty minutes.

¹⁷ Field notes, Pesantren Al-Faruq, September–December 2025. Participant observation was conducted at weekends (Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon), the researcher lodging in the pesantren's guest quarters.

Transcripts were analysed by thematic coding following Saldaña: open coding, consolidation of codes into categories, and identification of themes.¹⁸ Coding was performed by the lead author and cross-checked through structured discussion with a peer researcher, in the manner of informal inter-coder checking; no formal coefficient of agreement was computed, and we do not claim one. Credibility was pursued through member checking rather than through 'triangulation', a term belonging to the validation of measurement that sits awkwardly in interpretive work: a summary of the findings was presented orally to KH. Asep Abdul Aziz and to representatives of the pesantren administration in late December 2025, and their corrections were incorporated.²⁰

Two ethical points should be recorded. Participation was voluntary and informed consent obtained in writing; santri under eighteen participated only with the consent of their guardians and their own assent. And because the participatory paradigm adopted here holds the community to be a partner rather than an object of study, the findings were presented to the pesantren before submission.

A note on what this design can support. A short participatory engagement can establish what participants say, what practices exist, what commitments are articulated, and what disagreements surface. It cannot establish causation, and it cannot establish the formation of a durable disposition. We are explicit about this because an earlier version of this study was not, and because the temptation to overclaim is precisely the temptation that participatory research must resist.

3. Results and Discussion

From Ecocentrism to Ecological Theocentrism

The first finding is conceptual, and it is prior to everything that follows. The pesantren's theological vocabulary does not, and cannot, generate ecocentrism. What it generates is theocentrism, and the distinction is not academic.

Consider what an ecocentric commitment requires. It requires that the value of a wetland, a species, or a river be intelligible without reference to any valuer beyond the biotic community itself that value be, in Rolston's sense, discovered in the world rather than conferred upon it.²¹ Now consider what the pesantren's participants said. Asked why the river matters, no participant in this study answered that the river possesses value in itself. They answered that the river is God's creation; that polluting it is *ifsād fī al-ard*; that water is a divine

¹⁸ Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage, 2016), 234.

¹⁹ Howard Lune and Bruce L Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Essex: Pearson, 2017), 182.

²⁰ Carl D Glickman et al., *Supervision and Instructional Leadership: A Developmental Approach*, 10th ed. (London: Pearson, 1977), 314.

²¹ Rolston III, *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, chap. 1.

provision held in trust; that the one who fouls it will be answerable.²² The structure of the justification is theocentric throughout. KH. Asep Abdul Aziz, the pesantren's *pengasuh*, put it without hesitation: the Citarum was once the community's lifeline; to have blackened it is *ifsād fi al-ard*; water is an *amāna* entrusted by God and how, he asked, can we ruin what has been entrusted to us? Note the shape of the reasoning. The river's ruin is not deplored because the river suffers, nor because the community will go thirsty, but because a trust has been betrayed and an order corrupted. Nature is not the terminus of the moral claim; God is.

This is not a deficiency to be apologised for. It is a distinct position with real advantages. Ecocentrism has a well-known difficulty in accounting for *special human responsibility*: if human beings are simply one node in the biotic web, it is unclear why they alone bear obligations. Anthropocentrism has the mirror difficulty: if nature's value is exhausted by its usefulness, then a use that is profitable and unsustainable is difficult to prohibit in principle. Ecological theocentrism escapes both horns. It grants the human being a distinctive standing the *khalīfa* is answerable in a way that no other creature is while withholding from the human being the authority to determine what nature is worth. Value is not conferred by human preference; it is conferred by the Creator, and the human being merely recognises it. The *khalīfa* is a steward under audit, not a proprietor.

It may be replied that this is a distinction without a difference that if the practical upshot is the same, the label is idle. The reply fails, and it fails in ways that matter for pesantren pedagogy. Consider three cases in which the two frameworks diverge sharply. *First*, consider a species with no ecological function and no human utility, whose extinction would leave the web of life undisturbed. Ecocentrism, which grounds value in the integrity of the biotic community, has some difficulty condemning its loss. Theocentrism has none: a sign of God has been erased, and no further justification is required. *Second*, consider a restoration project that would improve ecosystem function by eliminating a population. Ecocentrism, on some construals, licenses it; a theocentrism that regards each creature as standing in an unmediated relation to its Creator resists it. *Third*, and most pertinently, consider the question of who is answerable. Ecocentrism dissolves the human being into the biotic community and thereby, paradoxically, dilutes the very responsibility it wishes to enforce. Theocentrism keeps the human being on the stand.

There is also a pedagogical argument, and in a pesantren it may be the decisive one. Ecocentrism must be *taught*; theocentrism need only be *extended*. The santri already believes that he is answerable to God for what he does with what has been entrusted to him. The entire work of ecological formation, on the theocentric framing, consists in extending the scope of that antecedent belief from prayer, property, and speech to soil, water, and air. Nothing new must be installed; something already present must be enlarged. The contrast with an

²²Interview with KH. Asep Abdul Aziz, pengasuh of Pesantren Al-Faruq, October 2025. Original (Sundanese-Indonesian): 'Citarum teh dulunya urat nadi kita. Kalau sekarang dikotori sampai hitam, itu namanya ifsad fil ardh. Air itu amanah titipan Gusti Allah, masa kita rusak?'

environmental ethic delivered as a module from outside with its own vocabulary, its own authorities, and its own implicit rebuke could hardly be sharper, and the participants themselves drew it.

One complication must be faced honestly, since it comes from the very scholar whose work most supports our reading. Tlili describes her own interpretation of the Qur'an as *eco-centric* and yet she is careful to add that this eco-centric reading is 'situated within a theocentric worldview'.²³ The formulation is exact, and it is ours. What Tlili calls eco-centric is the *denial of human superiority by species*; what she calls theocentric is the *frame* within which that denial is intelligible namely, that all standing before God is a function of piety, and that nonhuman creatures are answerable to God and not to us.²⁴ Strip away the theocentric frame and the eco-centric reading loses its ground entirely, since nothing in the Qur'an accords value to creatures independently of their Creator. Tlili's usage is therefore not a counterexample to our thesis but its most precise statement: whatever is 'eco-centric' in the Qur'anic vision is derivative upon, and unintelligible without, its theocentrism. The Indonesian literature has borrowed the adjective and discarded the frame, and it is exactly that operation which produces the incoherence we are diagnosing.

We therefore replace the standard formulation. The tawhīdic reframing of nature does not move the pesantren from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. It moves it from an *unreflective anthropocentrism* in which the natural environment is the unremarked backdrop of religious life to an *articulated theocentrism*, in which the environment is recognised as a domain of accountability before God. That is a smaller claim than the one usually made. It is also a true one, and being true, it can bear weight that the larger claim cannot.

The Ontological Status of Nature: *Āyāt*, *Tasbīḥ*, and the *Ash'arī* Problem

The theocentric position invites an ontological question that Indonesian ecotheology has largely evaded: what *is* nature, that it should be able to bear value in this way? An ethic without an ontology is a set of exhortations, and exhortations do not survive contact with an interest.

The Qur'anic vocabulary offers two registers. The first is semiotic: the natural order is a system of *āyāt*, signs, which point beyond themselves. This register is familiar and comparatively safe. The second is liturgical, and it is the more startling. In *al-Isrā'* 17:44 the seven heavens and the earth and all that is in them are said to glorify God, and the verse adds that human beings do not comprehend their glorification.²⁵ The theological weight of the second clause is easily missed. It asserts that creation's praise is real, that it is ongoing, and that it is inaccessible to human understanding which is to say that the natural order stands in

²³ Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, ix. Tlili describes her own reading as 'eco-centric' while explicitly situating it 'within a theocentric worldview' — a formulation on which the present argument turns and to which we return below

²⁴ Tlili, 252–53.

²⁵ Q. *al-Isrā'* (17): 44 — **تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ ۚ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُ كَانَ خَلِيقًا غَفُورًا**

a relation to God that does not pass-through human beings at all, and that human beings are not competent to assess. Tlili builds a substantial argument on precisely this point, observing that the Qur'anic cosmos is a highly interactive one, and that nonhuman creatures are answerable to God rather than to us.²⁶

This gives ecological theocentrism its ontological footing. Nature is not passive matter awaiting the imposition of human meaning; it is a community of praising creatures whose relation to God is independent of us. To destroy a species is therefore to silence a voice in a liturgy we cannot hear.

Two consequences follow, and both were audible in the pesantren's discourse before we had articulated them. The first is that nature's standing does not depend upon our *noticing* it. If the mountain praises God whether or not any human being is present to hear, then the value of the mountain is not a function of its being valued, and the familiar move of environmental persuasion that we protect what we care about and must therefore be taught to care becomes unnecessary. The mountain's claim on us is prior to our affection for it. This is, we suggest, why environmental appeals grounded in aesthetic or affective attachment tend to land poorly in a pesantren, while appeals grounded in accountability land hard.

The second consequence concerns the *kind* of wrong that environmental destruction constitutes. On an anthropocentric view it is imprudence: we are damaging our own life-support. On an ecocentric view it is the violation of another's intrinsic worth. On the theocentric view it is neither of these primarily; it is desecration the treatment of a sign of God as though it were mere material, and the treatment of a trust as though it were a possession. The category of desecration has a purchase in a pesantren that neither imprudence nor violation possesses. A santri who would not use a copy of the Qur'an as a coaster has already grasped the logic; the work of ecological formation is to show him that the river belongs in the same category, and that the reasoning is the same reasoning.

An objection must now be met, and an earlier version of this study did not meet it. Ecotheological writing frequently claims that nature possesses 'autonomous moral standing'. Within an Ash'arī frame which is the frame the pesantren in fact inhabits that claim is difficult, because Ash'arī theology denies that moral value inheres in things independently of the divine determination.²⁷ If nature has autonomous standing, whence does the autonomy come? If it comes from God, it is not autonomous. The theocentric formulation dissolves the difficulty rather than papering over it: nature has *conferred* standing, not autonomous standing and conferred standing is not thereby lesser. It is, if anything, more secure, since it does not depend upon our recognising it, and it cannot be revoked by our ceasing to care.

²⁶ Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, 253. Tlili notes that the Qur'anic cosmos 'makes choices, experiences emotions, takes divine commands, prays, and hymns the praises of God' (x), and that nonhuman animals are answerable to God rather than to human beings.

²⁷ George F Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 57–66.

Two deeper metaphysical resources lie available, and we note them without pretending to have exploited them. In the Akbarian tradition, the cosmos is the locus of divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*), such that every existent is a theophany;²⁸ in Ṣadrian metaphysics, the gradation of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*) supplies a way of according reality to creation without compromising divine unicity.²⁹ Nasr draws on both in his account of the sacred cosmos. A full metaphysical grounding of ecological theocentrism would need to work through them; that is a task for a subsequent study, and we flag it as a limitation rather than claim to have discharged it.

Two terminological cautions close this section. The first: Indonesian scholarship frequently attributes to Nasr a doctrine called ‘ecosufism’. Nasr does not use the term. His categories are *scientia sacra*, the desacralisation of nature, and the perennial metaphysics; ‘ecosufism’ is a later coinage, harmless if flagged and misleading if not.³⁰ The second concerns a comparison that Indonesian ecotheology frequently draws and rarely examines: that between Nasr and Fritjof Capra. The two are often presented as convergent both critics of a fragmented, mechanistic modernity, both advocates of a holistic vision. The convergence is real but shallow, and the divergence is instructive. Capra’s systems view grounds the interconnection of life in the *self-organising properties of living systems themselves*; the web has no weaver.³¹ Nasr’s cosmos is interconnected because it is theophanic because each existent discloses a single Reality, and the unity of nature reflects the unity of God. Capra can therefore ground an ecocentrism; Nasr cannot, and does not attempt to. To cite the two as interchangeable authorities for a single ecological ethic is to obscure precisely the point at issue. The unity Nasr describes is a *derived* unity: remove the Creator and it does not survive.

***Khilāfa*, the *Maqāsid*, and the Juridical Translation**

If the foregoing is right, then *khilāfa* cannot be quietly redescribed as an ecological doctrine; it must be argued for as one, against a real objection. And a theology that cannot be translated into obligation remains edifying and inert, so the argument must end in law.

The objection first. If the human being is God’s deputy on earth, and the earth has been subjected (*sakhkhara*) to human use, then the doctrine reads naturally as a warrant for exploitation a Qur’anic analogue of the dominion mandate that White identified as the root of the Western crisis.³² Tlili presses the point from within the tradition, arguing that the

²⁸ William C Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) esp. chaps. 1–3, on *tajallī* and the theophanic cosmos.

²⁹ Mulla Sadra, *The Wisdom of the Throne*, trans. James Winston Morris (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 95–130, on the gradation of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*).

³⁰ Nasr, *Religion and The Order of Nature*, chap. 4. Nasr’s own categories are *scientia sacra* and the desacralisation of nature; he nowhere uses the term ‘ecosufism’, which is a coinage of more recent Indonesian scholarship.

³¹ Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (Anchor Books, 1996), 3–13, 157–76.

³² Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3737 (1967): 1205–6.

exegetical tradition inflated *khilāfa* into a hierarchy the text does not support, and that the Qur'an makes standing turn on piety rather than on species.³³

Three replies are available, and the pesantren's own discourse supplies all three. *First*, *khilāfa* is conjoined in the Qur'an with *amāna* a trust and a trust is by definition held on terms and subject to account. A deputy who ruins the estate is not exercising his deputyship; he is forfeiting it. *Second*, *taskhīr* is not ownership: what is made available for use is not thereby made available for destruction. *Third*, and decisively for the present argument, the destruction of nature is prohibited under a description that does not mention nature's interests at all: it is *ifsād fī al-ard*, corruption in the earth, an offence against the order God established. This is the theocentric logic operating exactly as described. The wrong is done to God, and creation is its occasion.

The result is that *khilāfa* survives the objection, but it survives as a bounded anthropocentrism nested within a theocentrism not as ecocentrism. The human being remains central to the moral drama; he is simply not sovereign within it. Özdemir's *tawhīd*-grounded ethic, built around the Qur'anic concept of *mīzān* the balance that God has established and that the human being must both comprehend and observe operates on the same structure, and it is instructive that he too declines the ecocentric label.³⁴

Now the translation into law, which is where the pesantren's decisive advantage lies: it possesses the translating apparatus already, in the *maqāṣid al-sharī'a* and the developing discipline of *fiqh al-bī'a*.

Al-Qaradāwī's treatment grounds environmental obligation in the classical objectives the preservation of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*), of progeny (*ḥifẓ al-nasl*), of property (*ḥifẓ al-māl*), and, on some accounts, of intellect and religion.³⁵ It is worth pausing on how this framing works. It does not assert that the river has rights. It asserts that poisoning the river kills people, harms the unborn, and destroys property, and that these are precisely the goods the Law exists to protect. The obligation to the river is derived, not primary; the river is protected because of what its destruction does to the goods God has commanded us to preserve, and because that destruction is itself *ifsād*. The most influential contemporary formulation of Islamic environmental law thus makes no appeal whatever to nature's intrinsic worth a fact that ought to be decisive for anyone still tempted by the ecocentric description.

The classical instruments confirm the structure. *Himā* the protected reserve, in which grazing and cutting are prohibited and *ḥarīm* the inviolable zone surrounding a watercourse or a well are not conservation measures grounded in ecological science; they are legal categories grounded in the recognition that certain goods are held in common under God and are therefore withdrawn from private appropriation.³⁶ Mawil Izzi Dien has argued that these

³³ Tlili, *Animals in the Qur'an*, 43.

³⁴ Özdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from Qur'anic Perspective," 15–24.

³⁵ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *Dirasah Fi Fiqh Maqashid Al-Syari'ah* (Kairo: Dar al-Syuruq, 2006), 39.

³⁶ Mawil Izzi Dien, *The Environmental Dimensions of Islam* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2000), 32.

instruments constitute an environmental jurisprudence in all but name, and that their disuse rather than their absence is the problem; Othman Llewellyn has gone further and sketched the discipline such instruments would constitute if systematised.³⁷ We would add only this: their revival within a pesantren requires no theological innovation at all. It requires that the *fiqh* already taught be taught as though it applied to the land the pesantren stands on.

An internal tension should be acknowledged here rather than smoothed over, since it is the sort of thing a careful reader will find in any case. The *maqāṣid* framing protects nature *through* human goods: life, progeny, property. But the ontology set out in the preceding section grounds nature's standing in something that bypasses human beings altogether a praise we do not comprehend and are not competent to assess. The two do not sit together without strain. If the river's *tasbīḥ* is real and independent of us, then a river poisoned in a wilderness where no human being lives or ever will has still been wronged; yet no *maqāṣid* has been violated, since no life, progeny, or property is at stake. The juridical apparatus, in other words, under-describes what the theology asserts.

We do not regard this as fatal, and it may in fact be productive. Law and theology need not be coextensive; the *sharīʿa* has never claimed to render justiciable everything that is true. The *maqāṣid* give us obligations that can be enforced within a community; the ontology of *tasbīḥ* gives us a reason to care about what enforcement cannot reach. A pesantren needs both the first to organise its conduct, the second to keep its conduct from collapsing into mere prudence the moment no human interest is visible. But the relation between them is unexamined in the existing literature, and it deserves examination. Our provisional suggestion is that *ifsād fī al-ard* is the hinge: it is a juridical category, but its object is the divinely established order rather than any human good, and it is therefore the point at which the *fiqh* reaches furthest toward the theology. That suggestion is offered for testing, not asserted.

This is, in the end, why the conceptual correction proposed in this article is not a scholastic refinement. A pesantren asked to adopt ecocentrism is being asked to adopt a foreign metaphysics, and it will not do so. A pesantren shown that its own *fiqh* already contains *ḥimā*, *ḥarīm*, *isrāf*, and *ifsād* is being shown a mirror, and it may well act. The theological accuracy and the practical efficacy point the same way which is, we think, some evidence that the accuracy is real.

2. Asset-Based Formation in the Pesantren: The Five-D Cycle, Its Yield, and Its Limits

ABCD, as Kretzmann and McKnight formulated it, begins from an inversion: a community is to be described by what it has rather than by what it lacks, and development is

³⁷ Othman Abd-ar-Rahman Llewellyn, "The Basis for a Discipline of Islamic Environmental Law," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, ed. Richard C Foltz, Frederick M Denny, and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 185–247.

to proceed from the inside out.³⁸ Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham describe this as a shift 'from clients to citizens'.³⁹ For a pesantren the inversion is peculiarly apt, since the deficit framing that dominates public discourse about pesantren insanitary, under-resourced, backward is both inaccurate and disabling. But the critical literature must be admitted rather than suppressed. MacLeod and Emejulu argue that ABCD can function as 'neoliberalism with a community face': by locating the resources for change inside the community, it can quietly relieve the state of obligations properly its own, and convert structural injustice into a problem of local attitude.⁴⁰ In the Citarum basin this is no abstract worry. The pollution of the river is overwhelmingly industrial in origin, and no quantity of pesantren-level composting will address a discharge regime that is a matter for regulation and enforcement.⁴¹

Our position is therefore deliberately limited. ABCD is used here as an instrument for *formation* for surfacing the theological and institutional assets by which a community may come to understand its own ecological agency and not as a *substitute* for structural remedy. A pesantren that composts its organic waste and separates its plastics has not cleaned the Citarum. It has, however, done something regulation cannot do: it has constituted a body of young people for whom ecological negligence is a religious failing. Those are different goods, and conflating them would be a serious error, which the earlier version of this study came close to committing.⁴²

Define. The first stage required the participants themselves to settle the topic of the inquiry, and this is not a formality: the framing chosen determines what will subsequently count as an asset. Two candidate framings were put to the initial forum. The first was framed in the idiom of environmental management waste, sanitation, water quality. The second was framed in the idiom of *tawhīd* and *amāna*: the pesantren as a community answerable to God for its treatment of creation. The participants chose the second. The reasons they gave bear directly on this article's conceptual thesis: the first framing, one administrator observed, made the pesantren an object of somebody else's programme; the second made it the subject of its own obligation.⁴³ This is, we think, the single most consequential finding of the field engagement, and it emerged at the stage the earlier literature had misplaced. Ecological commitment framed as an external obligation was received as an imposition; the same

³⁸ McKnight and Kretzmann, *Building Communities from the inside out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, 211.

³⁹ Alison Mathie and Gord Cunningham, "From Clients to Citizens: Asset-Based Community Development as a Strategy for Community-Driven Development," *Development in Practice* 13, no. 5 (2003): 474.

⁴⁰ MacLeod and Emejulu, "Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland," 440.

⁴¹ Zahra Zahra et al., "Manajemen Pengelolaan Sampah Rumah Tangga Dan Limbah Ternak Di Kawasan Peternakan Daerah Aliran Sungai Citarum Kabupaten Bandung," *Jurnal Ekologi Kesehatan* 20, no. 3 (2022): 165–75, <https://doi.org/10.22435/jek.v20i3.5317>.

⁴² MacLeod and Emejulu, "Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland," 475.

⁴³ Saeful Anwar and Rifki Rosyad, "Pemikiran Dan Aplikasi Teologi Lingkungan Di Pesantren Cicalengka Kabupaten Bandung," *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas* 1, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.vii2.11793>.

commitment framed as an extension of what the pesantren already believed was received as a recognition. The difference is not motivational packaging. It is the difference between heteronomy and ownership.

Discovery. The inventory surfaced four classes of asset. Theological: the curriculum already contained the entire conceptual apparatus required *ṭahāra* as a discipline of purity extending beyond ritual ablution, *isrāf* as a named vice, *ifsād fi al-arḍ* as a category of sin, the *maqāṣid* as a framework of protected goods. None of it had been assembled into an environmental ethic; none of it needed to be imported. Institutional: roughly 1.5 hectares of land; four permanent refuse bins, into which all waste was at that point deposited unsorted; a *waqf* garden at the rear of the compound; and a communal kitchen generating a substantial daily volume of vegetable waste together with an organisational structure, the *Qismun Naḍāfah* (cleanliness division) of the santri organisation, capable of assigning responsibility and enforcing routine. Human: the *kiai*'s moral authority, which is the pesantren's decisive asset and is not replicable in other institutional settings, together with some 350 resident santri already organised into rotations of duty. Associational: close informal relations with the village administration, and a cohesive alumni network (Ikatan Alumni Al-Faruq) across the surrounding district.

Discovery also produced a result we did not anticipate and which qualifies the study's optimism. Several santri, asked to identify the pesantren's environmental strengths, could name none; one observed that cleanliness was enforced as discipline rather than taught as religion that one swept because one would otherwise be punished, not because one was answerable.⁴⁴ The gap between the pesantren's theological resources and its lived practice was, in other words, visible to its own members before it was visible to us.

Dream. Invited to say what the pesantren would look like if its theological commitments were fully realised in its material practice, the santri did not describe a cleaner pesantren. They described a pesantren that the *village* would be ashamed to fall short of: if the pondok's drains ran clear and no plastic lay in them, one participant said, the villagers would grow embarrassed at their own littering. The horizon is thus social and exemplary rather than environmental in the technical sense the pesantren imagined as a standing rebuke, which is a very old understanding of what a pesantren is for.

Design. Two proposals were adopted and one was rejected, and the rejection is more instructive than either adoption. Adopted: a plastic waste bank in each dormitory, and a *sedekah botol* (bottle-alms) scheme. Rejected: the composting of kitchen waste the santri judged the workflow too burdensome and feared that the smell would carry into the areas set aside for study. Responsibility for implementation was assigned to the *Qismun Naḍāfah*. The theological rationale was not left to circulate informally: the *kiai* inserted it into the weekly *kitab kuning* study, at the point where the text treats *ṭahāra*, and it was set down in writing on

⁴⁴Interview with Ahmad Husen, santri of Pesantren Al-Faruq, November 2025. Original: 'Dulu mah nyapu halaman teh murni karena takut di-takzir sama bagian keamanan, Kang. Nggak kepikiran kalau itu ibadah.'

the dormitory regulation boards.⁴⁵ Since *tahāra* is already the first chapter of every fiqh manual the santri will ever open, the placement is precise: the environmental obligation is not appended to the curriculum but discovered inside it.

What can be measured. Simple before-and-after figures were kept, drawn from the waste-bank ledger maintained by the santri themselves and verified by direct inspection.⁴⁶ At baseline, no waste was sorted at all: everything went into the four mixed bins. By the close of fieldwork, an average of some 35 kilograms of plastic was being separated each month. Active participation rose from five santri the members of the cleanliness division, for whom it was a duty to roughly eighty, who deposited sorted waste as a matter of routine. Thirty fruit-tree seedlings were planted, of which twenty-five survived.

Destiny and uncomfortable findings. This is the stage at which the earlier version of this study overreached most seriously, and we correct the record. That version claimed that ecological practice had become an 'institutional habitus' and an 'inherited tradition'. Neither claim is available to us. *Habitus*, in Bourdieu's sense, is a system of durable dispositions formed through prolonged incorporation;⁴⁷ an inherited tradition presupposes at least one cycle of generational transmission. Four months cannot establish either.

What we can report is narrower, and it is not entirely comfortable. At the close of fieldwork one practice was still running reliably the collection and sorting of plastic bottles and the santri were candid about why: the bottles are sold, and the proceeds go to the dormitory's common fund.⁴⁸ The practice that survived is the practice that *pays*. The practice that was rejected outright, the composting of kitchen waste, is the one that would have paid nothing and cost effort.

We do not report this reluctantly. We report it because it is the most analytically valuable thing the fieldwork produced, and because suppressing it would have been easy. It bears on this article's thesis and it qualifies it. The theological reframing did real work: it secured the affirmative topic, it changed how the santri described what they were doing, and it moved cleanliness from the register of *takzīr* to the register of *ibāda*. Ahmad Husen's remark is evidence of that shift, and it is not a small thing. But over four months, theological reframing did not prove sufficient to sustain a practice with no material incentive attached. Where a religious rationale and a coin ran together, the practice held. Where the rationale stood alone, it did not.

⁴⁵ Didin Komarudin and Saeful Anwar, "Environmental Awareness: A Phenomenological Study of Al-Faruq and Bahrul Hidayah Islamic Boarding Schools in Bandung," *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 12, no. 2 (2024): 150–60, <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v12i2.44051>.

⁴⁶ Waste-bank ledger kept by the santri (*Qismun Naḍāfah*), September–December 2025, cross-checked by the researcher in situ; field notes, December 2025.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72–95, defining habitus as a system of durable, transposable dispositions formed through prolonged incorporation..

⁴⁸ Waste-bank ledger kept by the santri (*Qismun Naḍāfah*), September–December 2025, cross-checked by the researcher in situ; field notes, December 2025.

Three readings are possible, and honesty requires that we leave the question open. It may be that four months is simply too short: *habitus* is formed over years, and to expect a theological rationale to carry an unrewarded practice within a single term is to expect what Bourdieu's own account forbids.⁴⁹ It may be that the theological framing functioned here as *legitimation* rather than as *motivation* supplying the santri with a language in which to describe conduct in fact sustained by other means, which would be a considerably more deflationary conclusion than the one we should like to draw. Or it may be, as we are inclined to think, that the two operate on different timescales: incentives govern behaviour now, formation governs disposition later, and a programme that hopes to reach the second must be willing to lean on the first in the interim. Which of these is correct cannot be settled by this study. It could be settled by a longitudinal follow-up, and we recommend one specifically, a return to Al-Faruq after the present cohort has graduated, to ask whether the practice persists once its economic scaffolding is withdrawn, and whether the santri who have left still describe litter as *ifsād*.

Dissenting voices. A participatory study that reports only consensus has not been participatory. Three disagreements surfaced. The first was theological. Agus Mustofa objected that the programme risked *over-extending* religious categories: if dropping a snack wrapper is to be called a grave sin because it damages creation, he said, the burden becomes intolerable and the santri will grow afraid to do anything at all sin, on that reckoning, becomes far too easy to fall into.⁵⁰ The objection is serious, it was pressed by a santri and not by a scholar, and we do not think it was answered at the time. It identifies a real hazard in ecotheological work: the inflation of religious language to the point of devaluation. The reply we would now offer is that the *fiqh* already grades its categories *isrāf* is a vice and not a capital sin, and *makrūh* exists precisely so that not everything blameworthy need be called *ḥarām*. That a santri reached for the distinction and the programme did not is a finding about the programme.

The second objection was structural, and it echoed MacLeod and Emejulu without having read them: participants said they sometimes felt it futile to clean the pesantren's own drains when the Citarum is blackened by factory effluent upstream rather than by santri dropping litter.⁵¹ We regard this objection as correct, and it is why this article insists that ecological formation is not a substitute for regulation. The third was practical a curriculum running from before dawn until after nightfall leaves little room for daily waste-sorting and it was accommodated rather than dismissed: the burden was distributed through a rotating roster of

⁴⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 67.

⁵⁰ Interview with Agus Mustofa, santri of Pesantren Al-Faruq, December 2025. Original: 'Kalau buang bungkus gorengan sembarangan dibilang dosa besar gara-gara merusak alam, berat atuh, Kang. Nanti santri jadi takut ngapa-ngapain. Dosa teh kayak gampang pisan jatuhnya.' This is the first of the three dissenting voices discussed below

⁵¹ MacLeod and Emejulu, "Neoliberalism with a Community Face? A Critical Analysis of Asset-Based Community Development in Scotland."

duty by dormitory room, so that it fell evenly and not daily on anyone.⁵² These voices matter methodologically as well as substantively. An earlier version of this study quoted only administrators a study claiming to treat santri as sovereign subjects while allowing them no speech. That was a failure of method, and this version attempts to repair it.

3. Conclusion

This study set out to correct a description and to test a method. On the first, the conclusion is that the *tawhīdic* reframing of nature within a pesantren does not produce ecocentrism and cannot produce it: *khilāfa*, *amāna*, and *taskhīr* are concepts of bounded human centrality, and ecocentrism denies exactly the centrality they assert. What is produced instead is ecological theocentrism nature is valuable because it is God's creation, His sign, and a participant in a praise that human beings do not comprehend. This is a third position, distinct from both horns of the Western dichotomy and more defensible than either: it grounds a special human responsibility, which ecocentrism cannot, while denying human beings the authority to price nature, which anthropocentrism grants. Even Tlili, whose reading is the most radically non-anthropocentric available, situates her 'eco-centric' interpretation expressly within a theocentric worldview. We propose ecological theocentrism as a replacement for the ecocentric language now standard in Indonesian ecotheology.

On the second, the conclusion is that Asset-Based Community Development, used with the Appreciative Inquiry cycle in its correct sequence, is an effective instrument for surfacing theological assets a pesantren already possesses but has not assembled. The most consequential finding emerged at the Define stage: a commitment framed as an external environmental obligation was received as an imposition, whereas the same commitment framed as an extension of *tawhīd* and *amāna* was received as a recognition of what the community already believed. Ownership, not motivation, is the operative variable at the point of adoption. Ahmad Husen's report that he had swept the courtyard only for fear of sanction, and had never thought of it as worship, is the clearest measure of what the reframing supplied: not a new practice, but a reason.

This research has several limitations, and they are substantial. First, the field engagement was short and no baseline or end line measurements were taken; consequently, no causal claim and no claim of effectiveness is made or can be made. The findings report what participants said and what practices were established, not what was achieved. Second, the study is a single case, and the pesantren's most decisive asset the moral authority of the *kiai* is precisely the asset least transferable to other institutional settings; generalisation should be resisted. Third, the metaphysical grounding of ecological theocentrism is gestured at rather than executed: the Akbarian and Ṣadrian resources noted above are the obvious next step, and this article has not taken it. Fourth, the structural objection raised by our own

participants stands unanswered: the Citarum is polluted by industry, and a pesantren's ecological formation, however successful, is not a substitute for regulation. To pretend otherwise would be to commit precisely the error against which ABCD's critics have warned, and it would be a poor return on the trust of a community that told us so itself.

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