Qur’an of Nature: Cosmos as Divine Manifestation in Qur’an and Islamic Spirituality

by Omid Safi

A key component of Islamic teachings is that the signs of God, what the Qur’an calls the “ayat”, are to be found in three sites: the verses of Scripture, the souls of humanity, and the natural realm. As the Qur’an [41:53] states:

“We shall show them our signs within the furthest horizons and inside their own souls until it becomes clear to them that God is Truth [Haqq].”

While the idea of the Qur’an as the Word of God has been adequately discussed, and while the Sufis have explored the mysteries of divine revelation inside humanity, we have not adequately realized that the natural realm is also a site for Divine revelation and manifestation.

Sufis have recognized the mutual relationship between the written Qur’an and the “natural” Qur’an. The 13th century Sufi ‘Aziz al-Din Nasafi referred to the Qur’an-e Tadwini (written down in a book) and Qur’an-e Takwini (Qur’an of existence). About this Qur’an of Nature Nasafi stated:

“Each day destiny and the passage of time set this book [nature] before you, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, letter by letter, and read it to you...like one who sets a real book before you and reads it to you line for line, letter for letter, that you may learn the content of these lines and letters.”

This comparison of scripture and nature as theophanies of the Divine is an old and honored analogy. In the Masnavi, Mawlana Rumi compares good and pure water to scripture itself:

“For the good ones, there is an inheritance of sweet water what is that inheritance? “We made them receive in inheritance the scripture.”

Sweet water is like scripture itself, giving life to the earth and the heart alike.

There are incorrect and indeed destructive readings of both the Bible and
the Qur’an which interpret humanity’s authority over the natural realm as a dispensation to do with it as we wish. Today many recognize the environmentally destructive aspect of this misinterpretation, seeing the rape of the natural cosmos as the destruction of our own home, the delicate circle of life, and ultimately, of our own selves.

While many are waking up to environmental awareness, and the interconnectedness of all life, we have been slower to recognize the spiritually destructive aspects of this violation of trusteeship (khilafat) that God has entrusted to humanity. It is the cosmic weight of this amaanat (Trust) that the Qur’an refers to:

We offered the Trust to Heavens and the Earth, and the mountains. And they refused to bear it, being afraid. But the human took it on.

It is this Trust that is both our greatest source of honor, and if carried out improperly, a fulfillment of the Qur’anic prediction that “we were unjust and foolish”, when we betray this Trust. ³

Within the Qu’ranic worldview, when God informs the angels that He is going to put a deputy on Earth, a khalifa, the angels look into the future, and see the negative potential of humanity: “Why would you place a deputy on Earth who is going to shed blood and cause mischief?” God’s answer is not to deny humanity’s potential for bloodshed and mischief, but mysteriously to state: “Because I know that which you do not know.” ⁴ In other words, both the potential for bloodshed & mischief, as well as being the purpose of God’s creation are within the potentiality of what it means to be human.

The question for us today is which human do we wish to be: the human being that consumes incessantly and destroys, fulfilling the angel’s worst expectation, or the Trusted and Trustee-worthy human being that is suited to be the care-taker for all of creation, and the deputy of God on Earth. This choice, which has a cosmic consequence for our very existence, is today reflected in our destruction or caretaking of natural resources, including water.

This trusteeship, this spiritual concern for God’s creation, begins with an interconnectedness: the oneness of all existence. When we operate from a perspective of oneness of being (wahdat al-wujud), we come to see that all existence, all being, is ontologically connected, and in fact one.

So much attention has been paid, and rightly so, to ensure that the scripture of the Qur’an is not desecrated. How rarely have we come to pay the same respect and attention to the Qur’an of nature. In our lack of stewardship for creation, we are also depriving ourselves from one of the sites in which we can reflect upon the Signs of God, and come to see God as truth.

Let us get back to the Qur’an. In the Holy Book, we are told: “From Water God Brought Everything to Life.”⁵ It is this verse (aya) that we see inscribed in so many ablution fountains in Istanbul, and inside the Sultan Ahmet Camii, and outside of the Aya Sophia (Haghia Sophia). Our very life, and our ability to
see the Signs of God, is through water. I want to use the remainder of our time together to reflect on the prominence of one of the foremost Signs of God, water, in the Qur’an and Islamic spirituality.

Water is explicitly named in the Qur’an as an important sign of God, and is named over 60 times. Some 50 other references are to rivers and seas. Here is one reminder:

“Your God is One God, there is no deity other than Him, the most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Truly in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the succession of the night and the days, and in the ships that speed through the sea with what is useful to humanity,

and in the waters which God sends down from the sky, giving life thereby to the earth after its death, and

...in all of this, there are ayat for those the people who use their intelligence.”

Within the context of the Qur’an, water is typically described as being “sent down” from the sky, from heavens, in the same way that God’s mercy and indeed Scripture are sent down (tanzil). It makes sense that in the arid climate of Arabia, the life-giving quality of rain would be seen as an all-too real symbol of God’s mercy. The great scholars of Islam have seen these Qur’anic verses to be both literally referring to water and also spiritually referring to mercy and knowledge. One example will suffice here: In the Qur’an we hear:
God sends down water from the sky, and [once-dry] valleys are running high Each according to its capacity.7

The great scholar Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali in the Mishkat al-Anwar interprets the above in a metaphorical fashion, where the water being sent down from heaven corresponds to ma’rifa (intimate knowledge of God), and the valleys are none other than our hearts.8

It is this same imagery, that of the waters that flows inside our hearts in the once-dry but now full streams of ‘ishq (love) and ma’rifat, that leads many Sufis to talk about the “Water of Life” (aab-e hayaat) to symbolize the highest levels of spiritual attainment. Mawlana Rumi stated in the Masnavi:

The Prophet said, “Amongst my people are some who are one with me in nature and aspiration

Their spirits behold me by the same light by which I am beholding them.”

Without the two Sahihs and hadiths and Traditionists; nay, (they behold him) in the place where they drink the Water of Life.9

To put in other words, our very hearts, and our ability to know God intimately, are connected to the external symbols of life-giving water. As outside, so inside; as below, so above.

The Qur’an is clearly not a science book, and while it contains what I believe can be called an eco-spiritual ethics, it is not a modern scientific environmental textbook. What it does is to establish a close relationship between natural phenomenon (signs of God), God, and us: So we have seen the lovely Qur’anic metaphor about Moses being ordered to strike the rock so that streams gush forth from it:

And when Moses asked for water for his people,
we said: ‘Strike with thy staff the rock.’
And there gushed forth from it twelve springs,
and everyone knew his drinking place.10

The advice that Moses’ community is given in that verse is the very ethical notion of eco-spiritual trusteeship that we also need to heed today: “So eat and drink of God’s sustenance, and do no evil or mischief on Earth.” In a subsequent verse of the Qur’an, we are told that the rock that the prophets strike is not just a physical rock, but rather the rock-like hardness of our own hearts:

“Then even after that, your hearts grew hard so that they were like rocks, or even harder, for verily there are rocks from which rivers gush forth, and there are rocks which split asunder so that water flows from them, and others which sink because of the awe they have towards God.
And God is not unmindful of what you do.”11

It is well-known that in the Islamic tradition, the ablutions (Wudu, Vozu), and the bath-ablutions (ghosl) are seen as physically purifying the human form. This accounts for the importance of Sabil (water fountains), qanat and
Hamams (public baths) in many traditional Islamic cities. The great architect Mimar Sinan alone built 33 Hamams across the Ottoman Empire. This purifying aspect of water is a common religious imagery, which we also see as Baptism in the Christian tradition. In the Masnavi, Mawlana Rumi uses the image of transformation of water as a symbol of God’s mercy:

God by a single spark of His mercy negates a hundred thousands minister’s sins… He makes the essence of that poisoned water to be a (wholesome) drink (Sharbat).
He turns the doubtful into certainty;
He makes love grow from the causes of hatred.12

It is the transformation of poisoned water (Zahr-ab) to sweet drink (sharbat) that symbolizes the transformative power of God’s mercy.

If humanity is to serve as a mirror for divinity, and if the Microcosmos (‘alam-e saghir), that is to say the human being has an ontological connection with the macrocosmos (‘alam-e kabir), then it comes as no surprise that heavenly and celestial realities reflect earthly realities. This is especially true for those natural phenomenon that are most essentially a symbol of mercy, and life-giving quality: water, gardens, rivers, shade.

Within the Islamic tradition, there are multiple references to the function of water not just here on Earth, but also in Paradise: The Qur’an mentions that God’s throne, in fact, is established upon water: “wa kaana ‘arshuhu ‘ala al-maa’.”13 The Prophet is given the fountain of Kawsar, and in the Ahl-e Bayt tradition it is the Prophet’s family who give water to those thirsty there. Water is such a sacred phenomenon that even the unseen realm contains it. As Rumi states:

The Unseen World has other clouds and water, it has another sky and sun.14

Yet perhaps the most crucial water-imagery in the Qur’an is that of paradise. Paradise is frequently as a garden in which rivers flow. More explicitly, four rivers are named in the Qur’an:

The parable of the paradise which the God-conscious are promised—[a paradise] wherein there are rivers of water which time does not corrupt, and rivers of milk the taste whereof never alters, and rivers of wine delightful to those who drink it, and rivers of honey of all impurity cleansed, and the enjoyment and of forgiveness from their Sustainer.15

As Cemalnur Sargut, the contemporary Turkish female Sufi master, has stated, each of these rivers can be taken both literally and metaphorically: the rivers of pure water are for humility (tavazo’), always flowing towards that which is lowly, and smoothing all the harshness on their path. The river of milk is for ‘ilm-e ladduni, Knowledge from Divine presence, for that knowledge which comes from the Murshid (spiritual guide) like mother’s milk.

The river of wine is that of divine love. The river of honey is that of tawhid, of bringing together all of the...
qualities in the Insan-e Kamil (perfected human being), when humility, love of God, and ‘ilm-e ladduni come together. When one has all these together, it offers a taste of paradise.

Yet the Insan-e kamil resides not just in paradise, but here on Earth. And what would be the eco-spiritual ethical duties of those who aspire to be full human beings, worthy of the Divine Trust today?

If the battles of the 20th century were partially over oil, it is very likely that some of the wars of the 21st century will be fought over water, unless we rise above our respective and collective selfishness, and develop an ethic of generosity and hospitality. At the end of the day, water belongs not to us, but to God. This same notion of collective ethic is made explicit in the teachings of the Prophet. The prophet had stated that people are co-owners in three items: water, fire, and pasture.16

If there is excess water for one group of people, that is to be given freely to others in need, for the messenger of God forbade the sale of excess water.17 This very theme is repeated in the Qur’an in a dire verse that warns the people Thamud. They rejected the warners that had come to them. God sent them a she-camel, and what they were told is what we are being reminded of today:

*And tell them that water is to be divided between them in equity.*
with each share of water equitably apportioned.\textsuperscript{18}

Time and again we are reminded in the Qur’an to “Eat and drink, but do not be excessive”\textsuperscript{19}, a message that is made even more clear in the Prophetic traditions:

“Excess in the use of water is forbidden, even if you have the resources of a whole river.”\textsuperscript{20}

It is these types of hadiths that remind that our own usage of water is tied to other people’s usage, that just because one of us has access to sufficient resources that does not absolve us of responsibility for all of us.

One of the realities that connects us to the planet is that we are both made out of water, and both the being of the human and the being of the planet contain about 70% water. Indeed, as the Qur’an reminds us: “And it is God who created the human being out of water.”

It is the trusteeship that we show water that comes to be a reflection of how we treat the gift of our own being, and ultimately our accountability before all of the ayat (signs): the human community, the Qur’an of nature, and the author of the Book, God.

Let me end as I began, with a reminder of water as a Sign of God. In calling for us to fulfill our trusteeship (khilafat) towards creation, we are not merely doing that which is environmentally just and necessary, we are also fulfilling the oath that we took towards God. In providing responsible caretaking and sharing for the Qur’an and nature, we are also assuring that our children and our children’s children will have the chance to keep seeing the Signs of God all around, and inside their own selves. The responsible sharing of the planet’s shared resources demands no less of us.

May we be like this water, always reflecting the heavens, always flowing from the high ground to the lowly, always purifying, and always smoothing. May we be like this, coming from the heavens, and flowing back into the Oceans, which in reality are all connected, the Oceans of oneness.
Notes
1 ‘Aziz al-Din Nasafi, Kashf al-haqa‘iq (“the Unveiling of Realities”).
2 Masnavi, Book 1:747.
3 Qur’an 33:72.
4 Qur’an 2:30.
5 Qur’an 21:30.
6 Qur’an 2:163-164.
7 Qur’an 13:17.
8 Cited by Martin Lings, “Symbolism of Water”.
9 Masnavi, 1:3462-3464.
10 Qur’an 2:60.
11 Qur’an 2:74.
12 Masnavi, Book 1:544-546.
13 Qur’an 11:7.
14 Masnavi, 1:2035.
15 Qur’an 47:15.
16 Sunan Abu Dawud, Book 23, Number 3470.
17 Sunan Abu Dawud, Book 23, Number 3471.
18 Qur’an 24:28.
19 Qur’an 7:31.