

The Position of Humanity in Islamic Environmental Theology: Caliph or Servant*

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Submitted: 2024.11.21 | Accepted: 2025.01.28

Abstract

The theological concept of humanity as the “Khalīfah (vicegerent) of God” on earth is a widely held belief among Muslims. Although the term “Khalīfah” is mentioned twice in the Holy Quran, the phrase “Caliph of God” is never used. Historical sources suggest that this term was neither widely accepted nor prevalent during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. However, it appears that the phrase gradually gained popularity, particularly within political and governmental contexts, during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Over time, it shifted from political discourse into exegetical, hadith, mystical, theological, and philosophical domains. The key moment for this term’s transition from politics to theology seems to have occurred in the third century of the Islamic calendar, through the efforts of the great commentator, jurist, and historian, Tabari. For the first time, Tabari interpreted the word “Khalīfah” in verse 30 of Surah Al-Baqarah as meaning “Caliph of God.” After Tabarī, this interpretation was widely accepted and reiterated by most Muslim theologians, particularly within the fields of mysticism and Sufism. The phrase “Caliph of God,” born from “political theology,” carries contradictory meanings. The original meaning of “Khalīfah” refers to someone acting on behalf of an absent individual. However, the eternal, ever-present, governing, and perfect God described in the Holy Quran is not absent in a way that would require a weak and mortal human to take His place. In contrast, both the Quran and prophetic narrations describe humans as “Abd Allah” (servants of God). This teaching of servitude, which emphasizes humility and modesty, fosters a more balanced relationship between humanity and the natural world, proposing an ethic of humility toward nature. Conversely, the anthropocentric teaching of humans as the “Caliph of God” asserts human superiority, dominance, and control over nature—an attitude that can lead to environmental degradation.

Keywords: Islamic theology, anthropocentrism, caliph, servant, environment

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* This paper was originally written in Farsi and published in the journal *Practical Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1403, 57–84. DOI: [10.22034/PT.2024.421351.1020](https://doi.org/10.22034/PT.2024.421351.1020). The English translation was prepared by Rasool Rahbari Ghazani, whom I would like to thank for his efforts in translating this work from Farsi to English.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary scholars increasingly examine the relationship between anthropocentric doctrines in Abrahamic religions and environmental degradation. Lynn White argued that the modern environmental crisis stems from a culture of human supremacy, influenced by the doctrine of “anthropocentrism” in the Bible, which suggests that all creation exists for human use. According to this belief, humans were created in the image of God and share, to a significant extent, in the divine transcendence over nature. God has willed that humanity exploit nature according to its specific purposes, emphasizing that only humans possess the exclusive privilege of having a soul in this world. White further proposed that overcoming this crisis requires embracing the humility advocated by Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) toward nature. Saint Francis sought to dethrone humanity from its sovereign position over the world and to establish a system where all of God’s creatures are considered equals (White 1967, 1203–1207).

Anthropocentric teachings are also prominent and influential in Islamic theology. The term *Khalīfa* holds a significant position both in the historical context of Muslim governance and in Islamic beliefs. Historically, the ruler in an Islamic government was referred to as *Khalīfa* (caliph). However, during the Umayyad and later Abbasid periods, the term evolved into *Khalīfa Allāh* (“God’s Caliph”) (see Shavarani 1398 SH, 95–132). This semantic shift during the Umayyad and Abbasid eras appears to have been driven by political motives within the caliphal institutions. Subsequently, Quranic exegetes, influenced by these political currents, interpreted verses 2:30 (al-Baqara) and 38:26 (Ṣād) through this lens (Kadi and Shahin 2003, 81–86; Kadi, 1988, 392–411; idem, 2001, 276–278; Shavarani, 2019, 143–167). This interpretation, rooted in “political theology,” facilitated the emergence of the doctrine of humanity as “God’s vicegerent on earth,” a concept deeply intertwined with humanity’s treatment of the environment.

Furthermore, the widespread attribution of *Khalīfa Allāh* to all human beings was significantly influenced by Ṣūfīs and mystics, such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Rūzbihān Baqlī, Ibn ‘Arabī, Najm al-Dīn Dāya, and Naṣafī, among others (see Shavarani 1399 SH, 119–133). To date, many Muslim theologians writing on environmental preservation have generally presumed the *Khalīfa Allāh* concept as a valid, beneficial, and instructive belief, often defending it (Shavarani 2024, 183). However, contrary to this consensus, the present author has previously criticized the term *Khalīfa Allāh* across historical, theological, philosophical, mystical, narrative, and exegetical sources in separate publications. In this article, the concept of *‘Abd Allāh* (“Servant of God”) is proposed as an alternative.

2. The Meaning of *Khalīfa*

The term *Khalīfa* originates from the root *khalafa*, meaning deputy, and *khalaf* as opposed to *salaf* refers to “what comes later” (Rāghib 1416 AH, 1: 155). When a parent dies, their child becomes their successor, *khalīfa*, and deputy (Farāhīdī n.d., 4: 266). The Quran frequently employs *khalaf* and its derivatives to signify the succession of a present entity in place of an absent one:

“Servants. Whatsoever you have spent, He will replace” (34:39).¹ “Had We willed, We would have appointed angels among you, succeeding one another upon the earth” (43:60). In this verse, the term denotes substitution (Ṭurayhī 1414 AH, 541). “Then a generation succeeded them” (7:169). And: “Let those who would dread if they left behind their own helpless progeny have fear” (4:9). This notion is repeated again in verse: “And He it is Who made the night and the day successive” (25:62). Similarly, in the story of Mūsā (Moses), when he departed for Mount Sinai, he appointed Hārūn (Aaron) as his *khalīfa*: “And Moses said unto his brother, Aaron, ‘Take my place among my people, set matters aright’” (7:142). Upon his return, Moses said: “How evil is the course you have followed after me!” (7:150). In both instances, the root *khalafa* conveys the idea of a present successor replacing an absent figure. The Quran uses the word *Khalīfa* twice: “I am placing a vicegerent [*khalīfa*] upon the earth” (2:30). “O David! Truly We have appointed thee as a vicegerent upon the earth” (38:26)

Linguistically, *Khalīfa* refers to one who occupies the position of an absent predecessor (Farāhīdī n.d., 4: 267; Ibn Manẓūr, n.d., 9: 83, 89). The plural form *Khulafāʾ*, derived from *Khalīfa*, appears three times in the Quran: “Remember when He made you vicegerents after the people of Noah, and increased you amply in stature. So remember the boons of God, that haply you may prosper” (7:69); “Remember when He made you vicegerents after ‘Ād” (7:74); and “He, Who ... makes you vicegerents of the earth” (27:62). Another plural form, *Khalāʾif*, occurs four times: “Then We made you vicegerents upon the earth after them” (10:14); “Yet, they denied him. So We saved him and those with him in the Ark. And We made them vicegerents” (10:73); “He it is Who appointed you vicegerents upon the earth” (35:39); and “He it is Who appointed you vicegerents upon the earth” (6:165).

The root *khalf* also appears in the form of *istifāl*: “God has promised those among you who believe and perform righteous deeds that He will surely make them vicegerents upon the earth, as He caused those before them to be vicegerents” (24:55). It is also mentioned in Anʿām (6:133), Aʿrāf (7:129), Hūd (11:57), and Ḥadīd (57:7), where it conveys a new group replacing a former one. Notably, the Quran does not contain the phrase *Khalīfa Allāh*.

As evident from this linguistic exploration, *Khalf* and its derivatives, especially *Khalīfa*, denote the succession (replacement) of one entity, individual, or group taking the position of a previous, absent one.

3. The Meaning of *Khalīfa* in Quranic Exegesis

The perspectives of Quranic exegetes regarding the term *Khalīfa* can be divided into two main periods: pre-Ṭabarī and post-Ṭabarī. In the early exegetical tradition, *Muqātil* explains verse 30 of *Sūrat al-Baqara* by stating that the jinn inhabited the earth before Adam (PBUH). However, due to their corruption and bloodshed, God appointed Adam as their *Khalīfa* (*Muqātil* 1423 AH, 1: 96). The Quran also references the creation of the jinn prior to humanity: “and the jinn We created earlier from scorching fire” (15:27).

In the third century AH, an exegesis attributed to Imam Ḥasan al-‘Askarī (d. 260 AH) comments on verse 2:30, indicating that the jinn inhabited the earth, but were expelled by the angels, who then resided on earth. God informed the angels that He would place a *Khalīfa* on earth (Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī 1409 AH, 216). *Hawārī*, in his exegesis, quotes *al-Kalbī*, who stated that the jinn corrupted the earth and shed blood, leading God to send a group of angels to expel them to the islands of the seas. Afterward, God informed the angels that He would establish a *Khalīfa* on earth, prompting the angels’ concern that this successor might repeat the jinn’s corruption and bloodshed (*Hawārī* 1990, 1: 93–95).

However, in his commentary on verse 2:30, although Ṭabarī (d. 310 AH) transmits Ibn ‘Abbās’ view that the jinn previously inhabited the earth, causing corruption and bloodshed and that Adam replaced them, he presents a differing view from Ibn Zayd’s. According to Ibn Zayd, no beings, except the angels, existed on earth before Adam’s creation. God announced to the angels His intention to place a *Khalīfa* on earth who would govern among His creation with divine justice. Thus the interpretation of this verse is as follows: “Indeed, I will appoint a *Khalīfa* on earth from Myself, who will govern among My creation in accordance with My commands.” This *Khalīfa* is Adam and those who succeed him by ruling justly among God’s creation (just rulers). Ṭabarī emphasizes that the term *Khalīfa* refers to the *Khalīfa Allāh* (God’s vicegerent) and *Sulṭān A‘zam* (the supreme sovereign) (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 1: 156–157). Ṭabarī’s interpretation of the word *Khalīfa* in verse 2:30 (Shavarani 2024), however, appears influenced by the ancient Persian concept of *farr-e izadī* (divine glory) (Shavarani 1403 SH, 125).

Overall, early exegetes with a philological approach and some access to Jewish and Christian texts (*isrā’iliyyāt*) largely understood the term *Khalīfa* and its derivatives to mean “successor.” During the Umayyad period, exegetes had yet to link the Quranic term *Khalīfa* with the political-religious institution of the *khilāfa*.

However, by the mid-2nd century AH, a broader interpretive shift emerged. This change, first noted by al-Suddī and later expanded by Sufyān al-Thawrī in his exegesis of verse 55 of Sūra al-Nūr: “The believers who succeed others on the earth are either rulers or a ruling nation.”

By the time of Ṭabarī, a complete fusion had developed between the Quranic *Khalīfa* and the head of the Islamic caliphate in mainstream Sunni tafsīr. Ṭabarī, in his commentary on Adam’s appointment as *Khalīfa* in verse 2:30, initially describes the term in its linguistic sense as “successor” or “replacement.” He then expands on the term, stating: “The *Sultān al-A‘zam* (the supreme ruler) is referred to as *Khalīfa* because he succeeds a predecessor, acting as his deputy in matters and serving as his replacement.” This mainstream Sunni view underscores that the title *Khalīfa* for the head of the Islamic polity is an abbreviation of the longer, more complex phrase *Khalīfa Allāh*, frequently employed by the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs (Kadi 2001, 1: 277–278). Post-Ṭabarī exegetes, due to his authoritative status, widely accepted and reiterated his interpretation (Shavarani 1401 SH, 121–125).

Over time, the scope of *Khalīfa Allāh* expanded from the ruler or sovereign to encompass all of humanity. In later Sunni, Shī‘ī, and Zaydī tafsīrs, the concept was further broadened, asserting that all human beings serve as *Khalīfa Allāh* on earth (Ṭabāṭabā‘ī 1417 AH, 1: 116; 10: 303; Shawkānī 1414 AH, 2: 212; 5: 200; Zuhaylī 1418 AH, 27: 299; Ḥaqqī Bursawī n.d., 8: 21).

Regarding the meaning of the word *Khalīfa* in verse 26 of Sūra *Ṣād*, when considering verses 247 to 251 of Sūra *al-Baqarah*, which briefly mention the appointment of Ṭālūt (Saul) as the king of the Children of Israel, his battle against Jālūt (Goliath), Goliath’s death at the hands of Dāwūd (David), and David’s subsequent kingship after Ṭālūt—it becomes evident that *Khalīfa* signifies David’s succession to Ṭālūt, the king who preceded him. Furthermore, verses 17 to 26 of Sūra *Ṣād*, which recount David’s story, closely parallel chapters 1 to 10 of the twelfth section of the Second Book of Samuel in the Bible. Although the Quran summarizes these events, the Bible elaborates on the incidents before and after Ṭālūt’s kingship in detail. Therefore, it can be concluded that the primary meaning of *Khalīfa* here is David’s succession to the former king, Ṭālūt, rather than his succession to the position of God.

4. Uses of *Khalīfa Allāh* in Various Texts

An examination of the ḥadīth sources from different Islamic traditions reveals (Shavarani 1399 SH, 21-25) that the Prophet Muhammad often used the term *Khalīfa* independently, primarily in its linguistic sense, as seen in the supplication: “O God, You are the Companion in travel and the *Khalīfa* in family affairs.” (Shaykh Ṣadūq 1362 SH, 2: 634; Muslim n.d., 2: 978; Mālik ibn Anas n.d., 2: 977; Tirmidhī

n.d., 5: 497; Nasā'ī 1406 AH, 8: 273). Similarly, regarding the emergence of the Dajjāl, the Prophet said: "Indeed, God is my *Khalīfa* over every Muslim." (Abū Dāwūd n.d., 4: 117; Muslim n.d., 4: 2251; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal n.d., 4: 181; Tirmidhī n.d., 4: 510; Ibn Mājah n.d., 2: 1356).

However, concerning the successors of the Prophet, the term *Khalīfa* appears with its technical meaning: "This matter will not end until twelve *khalīfas* pass through it." And: "The religion will continue to exist until the Hour arrives, or until twelve *khalīfas*, all from Quraysh, govern over you" (Muslim n.d., 3: 1452-1453). "No prophet was sent, nor was any *Khalīfa* appointed without having two intimate friends: one guiding towards righteousness and urging it, while the other guiding towards evil and urging it. The protected one is the one whom God protects" (Bukhārī 1407 AH, 6: 2632; Nasā'ī 1406 AH, 7: 158).

In some sources, the term *wālī* (governor) appears instead of *khalīfa*. In al-Haythamī's narration, the term *khulafā'* (plural of *khalīfa*) is used: "O God, have mercy on my successors." They asked: "O Messenger of God, who are your successors?" He replied: "Those who will come after me, narrating my ḥadīths and teaching them to the people" (Haythamī 1407 AH, 1: 126). Additionally, the term *mustakhlaf* (one entrusted as a successor) appears meaning successor: "Indeed, the world is sweet and green, and indeed Allah has made you successors in it to see how you will act. So, be mindful of the world" (Muslim n.d., 4: 298; Ibn Mājah n.d., 2: 1325; Tirmidhī n.d., 4: 483; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal n.d., 3: 19).

However, in collections such as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, *Sunan Tirmidhī*, *Muwatta' Mālik*, *Sunan Nasā'ī*, and *Sunan Dāraqūṭnī*, the expressions *Khalīfa al-Raḥmān* (Vicegerent of the Merciful), *Khalīfa Rabb al-Ālamīn* (Vicegerent of the Lord of the Worlds), *Khalīfa Allāh*, and *Khulafā' Allāh* are not found. Only twice does the phrase *Khalīfa Allāh* appear—once in *Sunan Ibn Mājah* and once in *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (Ibn Mājah 2: 1367; Aḥmad n.d., 5: 277). These rare instances have been criticized by some scholars, who argue that the phrase was not authentically used by the Prophet (Rashīd Riḍā 1990, 9: 416; Amīn, Aḥmad n.d., 3: 235-246; Albānī 1412 AH, 1: 195-198).

A historical review reveals (Shavarani 1398 SH, 101-109) that after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, from the earliest days of the caliphate, Abū Bakr was referred to as *Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh* (Caliph of the Messenger of God) (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 3: 1121). On one occasion, when a man addressed Abū Bakr as *Khalīfa Allāh*, he responded: "I am not the *Khalīfa Allāh*, but the *Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh*, and I am content with that title" (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 3: 137; Aḥmad n.d., 1: 10; Balādhurī 1417 AH, 1: 529; Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 1: 239; Qalqashandī n.d., 3: 250; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr 1412 AH, 3: 972). The title *Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh* remained commonly used for

Abū Bakr (Balādhurī 1: 528; Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 1: 282-283; Miskawayh 1379 SH, 1: 414; Qalqashandī n.d. 5: 475). After Abū Bakr's death, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was referred to as *Khalīfa Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh* (Caliph of the Caliph of the Messenger of God). Finding the title lengthy and cumbersome, he instead proposed the term *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful) (Ibn A'tham 1411 AH, 1: 124; Ibn Athīr 1385 AH, 3: 58-59; Balādhurī n.d. 1: 528; Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 1: 282-283; Miskawayh 1379 SH, 1: 414; Qalqashandī n.d., 5: 475; Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 4: 208; Ibn Athīr 1409 AH, 3: 667). When someone once called him *Khalīfa Allāh*, he strongly objected, saying: "May God contradict you" (Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd 1385 AH, 12: 94; Ṭabarī 1967, 4: 209; Sam'ānī 1384 SH, 11: 237).

However, examinations reveal that this taboo has gradually been breaking, with the concept of *Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh* eventually giving way to the idea of *Khalīfa Allāh fī-l-Arḍ* (Successor of God on Earth). In this reinterpretation, the term *Khalīfa*, fundamentally at odds with early Islam, seems to have gradually evolved to signify the successor of Zoroastrian or Christian kings. The exact time and circumstances of this transformation remain unclear—whether Byzantine influence played a role is uncertain. What can be asserted is that the title *Khalīfa Allāh* was used during the Umayyad era (Barthold 1377 SH, 23).

However, Siktawārī Basnawī believed that the first to be titled *Khalīfa Allāh* was *al-Mu'tasim*, son of Hārūn al-Rashīd (1300 AH, 58). Nevertheless, titles such as *Khalīfa Allāh*, *Khulafā' Allāh*, *Khalīfa Rabb al-'Ālamīn* (Successor of the Lord of the Worlds), *Khalīfa al-Raḥmān* (Successor of the Merciful), and *Khilāfa Allāh* have also been attributed to various figures:

Mu'āwiyah: (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 5: 20, 216; Mas'ūdī 1409 AH, 3: 43; Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 5: 223; Ibn A'tham 1411 AH, 4: 301, 330). Yazīd: (Qalqashandī n.d., 9: 278; Mas'ūdī 1409 AH, 3: 65; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 8: 235; Balādhurī 1417 AH, 5: 345; Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawārī 1368 SH, 1: 240). 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān: (Ibn al-Jawzī 1412 AH, 6: 39; Mas'ūdī 1409 AH, 3: 143; Abū Dāwūd n.d., 4: 210; Qalqashandī n.d., 9: 281; *Akhhbār al-Dawla al-'Abbāsiyyah* 1391 AH, 152; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 9: 64; Dhahabī 1413 AH, 6: 140; Mubarrad 1409 AH, 1: 539; Balādhurī 1417 AH, 13: 379). al-Walīd: (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 8: 69, 83, 117; *Akhhbār al-Dawla al-'Abbāsiyyah* 1391 AH, 152; Maqdisī n.d., 6: 41). Sulaymān: (Ibn al-Jawzī 1412 AH, 7: 14; Ṭabarī 1967, 6: 544, 548; Miskawayh 1379 SH, 2: 454). 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz: (Ibn al-Jawzī 1412 AH, 7: 38; Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam 1404 AH, 51, 52; Ibn Qutaybah al-Dīnawārī 1410 AH, 2: 134). Yazīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik: (Ibn 'Asākir 1415 AH, 69: 229; Ibn al-Jawzī 1962, 614; Mas'ūdī 1409 AH, 3: 201). Hishām: (Dīnawārī 1368 SH, 346; Balādhurī 1417 AH, 9: 60, 64, 106; Ibn 'Imād al-Ḥanbalī 1406 AH, 2: 113; Ibn al-Athīr 1385 AH, 5: 263, 278; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 9: 351). al-Walīd ibn

Yazīd: (Ṭabarī 1967, 7: 220). Yazīd ibn al-Walīd: (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 9: 195, 292; Ṭabarī 1967, 7: 275).

In the Abbasid period, the expressions *Khalīfa Allāh*, *Khalīfa al-Raḥmān*, *Khulafā' Allāh*, *Khalīfa Rabb al-Ālamīn*, and *Khilāfa Allāh* were employed concerning the rulers such as “al-Saffāḥ” (Zamakhsharī 1412 AH, 4: 252; Qalqashandī n.d., 9: 278), “al-Manṣūr” (Dhahabī 1413 AH, 8: 356; 9: 634; Mas'ūdī 1409 AH, 3: 286; Ibn 'Imād al-Ḥanbalī 1406 AH, 2: 237; Ibn al-Athīr 1385 AH, 5: 473, 603; Ibn al-Jawzī 8: 10, 147; Miskawayh 1379 SH, 3: 359, 448; Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 7: 486; 8: 38; Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 3: 250), “Mahdī” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 8: 74; Ibn al-Ṭiḡṭaqī 1418 AH, 182; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 10: 147; Ibn al-Imrānī 1421 AH, 71; Dhahabī 1413 AH, 10: 22; Ibn al-Athīr 1385 AH, 6: 70; Mustawfī 1364 SH, 300; Ibn al-Imrānī 1421 AH, 71; Ibn Khayyāt 1405 AH, 444), “Hārūn al-Rashīd” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 8: 350; Ibn al-Imrānī 1421 AH, 88; Dhahabī 1413 AH, 12: 32; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 10: 221), “al-Amīn” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 8: 503), “al-Ma'mūn” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 8: 453, 655, 662; Ibn al-Jawzī 1412 AH, 10: 95; Barthold 1377 SH, 24), “al-Mu'tasīm” (Ibn al-Ṭiḡṭaqī 1418 AH, 228), “al-Wāthiq” (Dhahabī 1413 AH, 17: 382), “al-Mutawakkil” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 9: 176), “al-Muntaṣir bi-Llāh” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 9: 247), “al-Muhtadī bi-Llāh” (Ibn al-Imrānī 1421 AH, 133), “al-Mu'tadid bi-Llāh” (Ibn al-Imrānī 1421 AH, 145), “al-Mu'tadid” (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 10: 62), “al-Ṭā'ī' li-Llāh” (Dhahabī 1413 AH, 26: 274), “al-Qādir bi-Llāh” (Gardīzī 1363 SH, 209; Miskawayh 1379 SH, 7: 243), and “al-Zāhir bi-Amr Allāh” (Ibn al-Athīr 1385 AH, 12: 457; Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 3: 661; Ibn Kathīr 1407 AH, 13: 113).

The prominent Mu'tazilite litterateur al-Jāḥiẓ (1332 AH, 84) even argued that it was obligatory to address Muslim rulers as *Khalīfa Allāh*.

In the philosophical works of the 4th to 6th centuries AH, such as the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (1412 AH, 1: 297, 306; 3: 174), *Ilāhiyyāt al-Shifā'* by Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna 1960, 455), *Ḥikmat al-Ishrāq* (1380 SH, 2: 11-12), and *Alwāḥ 'Imādī* by Shaykh al-Ishrāq (1380 SH, 3: 194), the expression *Khalīfa Allāh* and its derivatives are also mentioned.

However, the most frequent usage of this expression is found within the realm of Sufism and mysticism. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH, the use of *Khalīfa Allāh* and its derivatives among the Sufis was rare. Notably, figures like Ma'ādh al-Rāzī, Sahl al-Tustarī, and Junayd al-Baghdādī avoided its usage. The expression appears only once in *al-Waṣāyā* by Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (1986, 72, 214), *Riyāḍat al-Nafs* (1426 AH, 72), *Khatm al-Awliyā'* by Ḥakīm Tirmidhī (1422 AH, 430), and the *Dīwān* of Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (1305 AH, 148).

In the works of the 4th and 5th centuries, such as *Qūt al-Qulūb* by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (1417 AH, 2: 107), *al-Muqaddima fī al-Taṣawwuf* by Sulamī (1426 AH, 101, 142), and *Laṭā'if al-Ishārāt* by Qushayrī (1981, 1: 80), the expression appears only

once in each text. However, it is mentioned multiple times in *Hilyat al-Awliyā'* by Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (n.d., 1: 80; 7: 48; 10: 194; 4: 295; 10: 167, 318), *Mukāshafat al-Qulūb* (1422 AH, 65), and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* by al-Ghazālī (n.d., 1: 23; 7: 80; 9: 192; 14: 61, 117).

During this period, prominent figures like Niffarī, Sarraj, Kalābādhī, Bakrī, Kharaqūshī, Mustamlī Bukhārī, Abū al-Ḥasan Daylamī, Hujwīrī, Khwāja 'Abdullāh Anṣārī, Qalānsī, Qaysarānī, and Aḥmad Ghazālī did not use the expression. Nevertheless, its appearance increased slightly in the 4th and 5th centuries compared to earlier periods, indicating a gradual rise in its usage.

In the 6th and 7th centuries AH, the expressions *Khalīfa Allāh* and its derivatives were mentioned in several mystical and philosophical works, such as *Rūḥ al-Arwāḥ* by Sam'ānī (1384 SH, 406, 251), *Ḥadīqat al-Ḥaqīqa* by Sanā'ī (1383 SH, 467), *Asrār al-Tawḥīd* by Muḥammad ibn Munawwar (1899, 9), *Kashf al-Asrār* by Maybudī (1371 SH, 2: 234; 6: 561), *Sirr al-Asrār* (1428 AH, 74, 274, 275), *al-Faṭḥ al-Rabbānī* (1426 AH, 79, 157, 197, 286), *Fatūḥ al-Ghayb* by 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1428 AH, 101), *'Abhar al-'Ashiqīn* (1366 SH, 3), *Tafsīr 'Arā'is al-Bayān* (2008, 1: 518; 2: 370; 1: 456; 3: 249), *Mashrab al-Arwāḥ* (1426 AH, 227, 279), *Risālat al-Quds* (1381 SH, 99), *al-Miṣbāḥ* (1428 AH, 77), *Taqṣīm al-Khawāṭir* (1428 AH, 139), *Sharḥ Shaṭḥiyyāt* by Rūzbihān Baqlī (1374 SH, 368), *Tadhkirat al-Awliyā'* by 'Aṭṭār Nishābūrī (1905, 1: 204), *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif* by Suhrawardī (1427 AH, 1: 228), and the *Dīwān* of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (1410 AH, 60).

Ibn 'Arabī, more extensively than others, employed the term and its synonyms in numerous works, including *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (n.d., 1: 50, 118, 124, 242, 596, 757; 3: 16, 278, 280, 319, 337, 363, 400; 4: 26, 319), *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* (1946, 1: 84, 162, 163), *Majmū'at Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (1421 AH, 1: 94), *Majmū'at Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (1367 AH, 1: 5, 12, 16, 19), *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (1378 SH, 115), *Muḥāḍarat al-Abrār wa Musāmarat al-Akhyār* (1422 AH, 1: 218), *Tafsīr Ibn 'Arabī* (Ta'wīlāt 'Abd al-Razzāq) (1422 AH, 1: 116), *Dhakhā'ir al-A'lāq: Sharḥ Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* (1420 AH, 98), and his *Dīwān* (1423 AH, 201, 219, 302). He frequently linked the concept of *Khalīfa Allāh* with the "Perfect Man" (*al-Insān al-Kāmil*).

Despite the increased usage of this expression during the 6th and 7th centuries, several notable figures abstained from using the term in their writings, including 'Ayn al-Quḍāt Hamadānī, Aḥmad Jām, Abū Sa'īd Abū al-Khayr, Ḥusayn ibn Naṣr (Ibn Khamīs al-Mawṣilī), Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī, 'Ammār Badlīsī, Daylamī, Tāj al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Zhandapīl al-Ghaznawī, Rūzbihān al-Thānī, Aḥmad al-Būnī, Bahā' al-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī, Abū Ya'qūb Tādilī (Ibn Zayyāt), Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī, Tirmidhī, Fakhr al-Dīn 'Irāqī, Muḥammad Rāzī, Muḥammad Mazālī, and Ḥasan Palāsī Shīrāzī. The term was also absent in works such as *Makātīb* by Sanā'ī, *al-Safīna al-Qādiriyya* by al-Jīlānī, and several works of 'Aṭṭār and Nasafī. This

omission suggests deliberate caution and reluctance by these authors regarding the term's usage.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, the expression *Khalīfa Allāh* became fully institutionalized, particularly in the works of ‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī, Qayṣarī, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, and Shāh Ni‘mat Allāh Walī. However, it remained absent in the writings of prominent figures such as Nūr al-Dīn Asfarā‘īnī, Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistarī, ‘Izz al-Dīn Kāshānī, ‘Alā’ al-Dawla Simnānī, Khwājū Kirmānī, Wafā Kabīr, Mas‘ūd Shīrāzī (Bābā Ruknā), Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī, Sajzī Dehlawī, ‘Umar Miṣrī (Ibn al-Mulaqqin), Shams al-Dīn Maghribī, Khwāja Muḥammad Pārsā, Muḥammad Shādhilī, Zarūq Fāsī, Muḥammad Tabādkānī, Farāhī Harawī (Mullā Maskīn), Jamālī Dehlawī, *Khilāṣat al-Mafākhīr* by Yāfi‘ī, *Madārij al-Sālikīn* by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzī, *Ta‘rīfāt* by Jurjānī, *Tamhīd al-Qawā‘id* by Ibn Turka, and *Nafḥāt al-Uns* by Jāmī. The lack of reference in these works warrants further examination (see: Shavarani 1399 SH, 134-138).

5. Critics of the *Khalīfa Allāh* Belief

Māwardī explains the term *Khalīfa* as signifying the successor to the Messenger of God among his followers. He states that it is permissible to use the expression *Khalīfat Rasūl Allāh* or simply *Khalīfa*. However, scholars have differed on the permissibility of the term *Khalīfa Allāh*. Some permitted its use based on the Quranic verse: “He it is Who appointed you vicegerents upon the earth” (Quran 35:39). Nevertheless, the majority of scholars opposed the usage of *Khalīfa Allāh*, arguing that it implies the absence or death of the one being replaced, whereas God neither dies nor becomes absent (Māwardī 1427 AH, 39).

Similarly, al-Farrā’ (1421 AH, 27) echoed Māwardī’s stance, suggesting that while some permit the term as a metaphor for implementing divine commands, it remains inappropriate since God neither dies nor becomes absent. Maybudī (1371 SH, 8: 339) also noted scholarly discomfort with the term, pointing out that the Quran never uses *Khalīfa* in reference to God directly. However, those who permit it cite figures such as Adam and David (PBUT) as examples, linking it to prophetic missions and divine law. Furthermore, the Prophet Muḥammad, when referring to the emergence of the Dajjāl, used the term in the statement: “God is my *Khalīfa* over every Muslim.” Therefore, it was deemed acceptable to use *Khalīfa Allāh* for Adam and David as well.

Baghawī, citing verses 30 of *Surah al-Baqarah* and 26 of *Surah Ṣād*, argued that the title *Khalīfa Allāh* is exclusively reserved for Adam and David (Baghawī 1403 AH, 14: 75). Al-Mahā‘imī also emphasized that the plurality of *Khilāfa* is only consistent with the title *Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh* and not *Khalīfa Allāh* (al-Mahā‘imī 1428 AH, 494). Al-Nawawī, similarly, opposed the use of *Khalīfa Allāh* for Muslim rulers,

suggesting that it is more appropriate to use *Khalīfa*, *Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh*, or *Amīr al-Muʾminīn*, since only Adam and David were referred to as *Khalīfa Allāh* in the Quran (al-Nawawī 1414 AH, 360-361).

Ibn al-Rifʿah also refers to the disagreement among scholars on this matter, stating that some have deemed its use permissible solely for the purpose of upholding divine rights among people. However, citing verse 165 of *Sūra al-Anʿām*, most scholars have refrained from using it and have attributed sin and transgression to those who do, as God, the Most High, neither becomes absent nor dies (Ibn al-Rifʿa 2009, 18: 3). Ibn Jamāʿa also supported the appropriateness of the term *Khalīfa Rasūl Allāh*, emphasizing that succession pertains only to the Prophet's role within the community, while *Khalīfa Allāh* is incorrect (Ibn Jamāʿa 1405 AH, 57).

Ibn al-Qayyim also held that calling a ruler *Khalīfa Allāh* or *nāʾibullāh fī al-ard* (Deputy of God on Earth) is discouraged because *Khalīfa* and *Nāʾib* imply the absence of the one being represented, whereas God, the Exalted, Himself becomes the *Khalīfa* for a person absent from his family and the guardian of a believing servant (Ibn al-Qayyim 1415 AH, 2: 474-475).

Similarly, *Fayyūmī* stated that some scholars prohibited the use of the term *Khalīfa Allāh* except for Adam and David, and only because of explicit textual references (Fayyūmī 1414 AH, 178). *Damīrī* also acknowledged that the majority of scholars avoided using the title *Khalīfa Allāh* since the concept of *Khalīfa* implies the absence of the one being replaced (Damīrī 1425 AH, 9: 59).

Ibn Khaldūn addressed this scholarly disagreement, noting that the majority prohibited the term as the Quranic verses did not support such a meaning. He added that succession applies only to an absent figure, while a present figure needs no successor (Ibn Khaldūn 1408 AH, 1: 239).

In *Minhāj al-Sunnah*, Ibn Taymiyyah explained that *Khalīfa* refers to succeeding someone who is absent. Therefore, during the Prophet's (PBUH) presence in Medina, he refrained from appointing a *Khalīfa* for himself. When he temporarily appointed deputies during his absence, their authority ended upon his return. Hence, it is incorrect to claim that God appoints a *Khalīfa* for Himself, as He is *al-Ḥayy* (the Ever-Living), *al-Qayyūm* (the Sustainer), *al-Shahīd* (the Witness), and *al-Mudabbir* (the Manager of affairs), free from death, sleep, or absence. All Quranic references to *Khilāfah* pertain to succession over creation, not God (Ibn Taymiyyah 1426 AH, 8: 256).

In *Talmīs al-Jahmiyyah*, Ibn Taymiyyah attributed the belief in humanity being *Khalīfa Allāh* to a faction of the *Ittiḥādiyyah* and others who argued that Adam was *Khalīfa Allāh* because divine names and attributes were manifested in him. He identified two groups within this belief: one claimed that since God transcends the

universe, humans act as *Khalīfa Allāh*; the other asserted that God is the existence of the world, and humanity is a condensed reflection of this reality, making humans comprehensive successors in the world. This belief aligns with the idea of *al-insān al-ṣaghīr* (“the microcosmic man”) (Ibn Taymiyyah 1426 AH, 6: 577).

Among later scholars, *Rashīd Riḍā* suggested that a group of rational animals existed on earth before Adam but eventually perished. He argued that the angels’ awareness of these beings was the basis for their statement in the Quran, and the term *Khalā’if* refers to this succession (Rashīd Riḍā 1990, 1: 215).

6. God, the Ever-Living and Present

The God described in the Quran, both explicitly and implicitly, possesses unparalleled power: The Sovereign (*Malik*), the Owner of all dominion (*Mālik al-Mulk*), the true Heir and Possessor (*Wārith*), the All-Powerful (*Qādir, Qadīr, Qahhār*), the Dominant (*Qāhir*), the Mighty (*Muqtadir, Qawī*), the Ever-Lasting and Sustainer of all (*Qayyūm*), the Judge (*Qādī*), the Best of Rulers (*Khair al-Ḥākimīn*), the One whose help is sought (*Musta‘ān*), the Avenger (*Muntaqim*), the Swift in Accounting (*Sarī‘ al-Ḥisāb*), the Swift in Punishment (*Sarī‘ al-‘Iqāb, Shadīd al-‘Adhāb*), the Severe in Retribution (*Shadīd al-Maḥāl, Shadīd al-‘Iqāb*), the Possessor of Firm Power (*Dhū al-Quwwah al-Matīn*), the Supreme Planner (*Khair al-Mākirīn*), the Upholder of Justice (*Qā’im bi al-Qisṭ*), the Bestower of Security (*Mu‘min*), the Guardian (*Muhaymin*), the All-Encompassing (*Muḥīṭ*), the Vast (*Wāsi‘*), the Sufficient (*Kāfī*), the Victorious (*Ghālib*), the All-Prevailing (*‘Azīz*), the Compeller (*Jabbār*), the Guardian of Affairs (*Wakīl*), the Watchful Protector (*Raqīb*), the Splitter of the Seed (*Fāliq al-Ḥabb wa al-Nawā*), the Most High and Supreme (*A‘lā, Mut‘āl, ‘Alī*), the Magnificent (*‘Azīm, Kabīr*), the One with Supreme Greatness (*Mutakabbir*), the Ever-Kind and Compassionate (*Ra‘ūf*), the Most Merciful (*Arḥam al-Rāḥimīn*), the Oft-Accepting of Repentance (*Tawwāb*), the Best Provider (*Khair al-Rāziqīn*), the Continuously Merciful (*Raḥmān, Raḥīm*), the Generous (*Karīm*), the Constant Sustainer (*Razzāq*), the Bestower (*Wahhāb*), the Forgiving (*Ghafūr, Ghaffār, ‘Afūw*), the Subtle and Kind (*Laṭīf*), the Healer (*Shāfī*), the Beneficent and Rewarder of Goodness (*Barr*), the Most Loving (*Wadūd*), the Close and Intimate Friend (*Mawlā, Walī*), the Answerer of Prayers (*Mujīb*), the Supporter (*Naṣīr*), the Best Preserver (*Khair Ḥāfiẓ, Ḥafīẓ*), the Expander (*Bāsīt*), the Remover of Harm (*Kāshif al-Ḍurr*), the Guide (*Hādī*), the Helper of the Needy (*Ghiyāth*), the Opener (*Fattāḥ*), the Lord of all Worlds (*Rabb al-‘Ālamīn*), and the Intercessor (*Shafī‘*).

Moreover, God is described as the Knower of the Unseen (*‘Allām al-Ghuyūb*), the All-Knowing (*A‘lam, ‘Alīm, Ḥakīm, Khabīr*), the All-Hearing (*Samī‘*), the All-Aware (*Khabīr*), the Ever-Witnessing (*Shahīd*). He is the Creator and Originator (*Badī‘, Dhārī‘, Bārī‘, Ṣāni‘, Fāṭir, Khāliq*), the Giver of Life (*Muḥyi*), the Taker of Life

(*Mumīt*), the Seizer of Souls (*Qābiḍ*), the Fashioner (*Muṣawwir*), the Best of Creators (*Aḥsan al-Khāliqīn*), and the Constant Creator (*Khallāq*).

He is the First (*Awwal*), the Originator (*Mubdiʿ*), the Eternal (*Qadīm*), the Last (*Ākhir*), the Ever-Remaining (*Bāqī*), the Ultimate Everlasting (*Abqā*), the Manifest (*Zāhir, Mubīn*), the Hidden (*Bāṭin*), the Best of Heirs (*Khair al-Wāriṭhīn*), the Ever-Living (*Ḥayy*), the Self-Sufficient (*Ṣamad*), the Absolutely Independent (*Ghanī*), the One and Unique (*Aḥad, Witr*).

God’s power is absolute over all He wills: “Surely thy Lord does whatsoever He wills” (11:107). Furthermore, He declares His closeness to human beings: “We are nearer to him than his jugular vein” (50:16). He is the veil between the human and their heart: “And know that God comes between a man and his heart, and that unto Him shall you be gathered” (8:24).

God responds instantly to the supplication of the distressed: “He, Who answers the one in distress when he calls upon Him and removes the evil” (27:62). Additionally, His knowledge encompasses everything, even the falling of a single leaf or the growth of a seed within the darkness of the earth: “no leaf falls but that He knows it, nor any seed in the dark recesses of the earth, nor anything moist or dry, but that it is in a clear Book” (6:59).

These attributes are incompatible with the idea of God’s absence. The notion of human succession to God’s position implies His absence, while the Quran describes humans with traits like weak (*daʿīf*), transgressor (*tāghī*), unjust (*ẓalūm*), ignorant (*jahūl*), and impatient (*halūʿ*). These qualities make it clear that humans cannot reflect the divine attributes required for such a role.

God is described as unique and incomparable: “naught is like unto Him” (42:11). Claiming that a created human could succeed the Creator introduces a concept of *shirk* (associating partners with God), which conflicts with the strictly monotheistic theology of the Quran. The Quran emphasizes God’s uniqueness and absolute authority, rejecting the idea of a human replacing God. This claim risks implying a form of “human-godhood,” which contradicts the essential divine oneness in Islamic belief.

7. Human as the Servant

The term *ʿAbd* (servant) in Islamic thought closely relates to humility and submission. The word *ʿubūdiyya* denotes the expression of humility and obedience, while *ʿibāda* (worship) carries a stronger connotation, signifying the highest form of submission (Rāghib 1416 AH, 542). The phrase *ṭarīq muʿabbad* refers to a road that has been flattened (Ibn Manẓūr n.d., 3: 273).

The expression *ʿAbd Allāh* (Servant of God) signifies one who is fully surrendered, humble, and submissive before God. The Quran states that the

purpose of the creation of jinn and humans is their *‘ubūdiyya*: “I did not create jinn and mankind, save to worship Me” (51:56). The exclusive nature of servitude to God is reinforced in *Surah al-Fātiḥa*: “Thee we worship” (1:5) and again in *Surah al-Zumar*: “Rather, worship God and be among the thankful!” (39:66).

The Quran considers servants of the *tāghūt* (false gods or tyrants) as the worst of people: “Say, “Shall I inform you of something worse than that by way of recompense from God? Whomsoever God has cursed and upon whom is His Wrath, and among whom He has made some to be apes and swine, and who worship false deities” (5:60). The prophets were sent to call people to the servitude of God and away from *tāghūt*: “We indeed sent a messenger unto every community, ‘Worship God, and shun false deities!’” (16:36).

The Quran repeatedly addresses prophets as *‘abd* (servant). For instance: Nūḥ (10:10, 9:3, 81:37), Ibrāhīm (37:111, 38:45), Lūṭ (10:10), Ishāq and Ya‘qūb (38:45), Yūsuf (12:24), Mūsā and Hārūn (37:122), the companion of Mūsā (18:65), Ilyās (37:132), Dāwūd (38:17), Sulaymān (38:30), Ayyūb (38:41, 38:44), Zakariyyā (19:2), ‘Īsā (4:172, 43:59, 19:30), and the Prophet Muḥammad (2:23, 8:41, 17:1, 18:1, 25:1, 57:9, 72:19, 53:10, 96:10).

The Quran defines a reciprocal relationship between *Rabb* (Lord) and *‘abd* (servant). This relationship is grounded in the principle of *Tawḥīd* (monotheism), the most fundamental Islamic belief. God is described as the sole *Rabb al-‘Ālamīn* (Lord of the Worlds) while all creation is in the position of *‘ubūdiyya*: “There is none in the heavens and on the earth, but that it comes unto the Compassionate as a servant” (19:93).

The Quran calls for exclusive servitude to God, rejecting *shirk* (associating partners with God) and the belief in multiple lords: “that we shall worship none but God, shall not associate aught with Him, and shall not take one another as lords apart from God” (3:64). It rebukes those who claim divine lordship: “It is not for any human being, God having given him the Book, judgment, and prophethood, to then say to the people, ‘Be servants of me instead of God’” (3:79). Similarly, the Quran criticizes the Jews and Christians for taking their rabbis, monks, and even ‘Īsā (Jesus) as *Rabb*: “They have taken their rabbis and monks as lords apart from God, as well as the Messiah, son of Mary, though they were only commanded to worship one God” (9:31).

The term *‘ibād* (servants) is also used in the Quran to praise those with high spiritual ranks: “Say, ‘Praise be to God, and peace be upon His servants whom He has chosen’” (27:59); “save Thy sincere servants among them” (15:40); “As for My servants, truly thou hast no authority over them” (17:65); “Gardens of Eden, those which the Compassionate promised His servants in the Unseen. Verily His Promise shall come to pass” (19:61). Particularly in the verse: “The servants of the Most

Merciful are those who walk upon the earth humbly” (25:63), the relationship between *‘ibād* (servants) and *arḍ* (earth) is emphasized, with *Hawnan* (humility) as the intermediary. This humility signifies that they do not seek corruption or destruction on earth (Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 19: 22). As mentioned earlier, the inherent quality of *‘abd* (servant) is humility, and this verse reinforces that *‘ibād* are those who walk the earth with humility.

In the verse: “Worship God, and ascribe not partners unto Him. And be virtuous toward parents” (4:36), *‘ubūdiyya* (servitude) is mentioned alongside *iḥsān* (kindness, benevolence, sincerity), indicating a connection between the two concepts. The Prophet (PBUH) also linked *iḥsān* with *‘ubūdiyya* when he defined it as: “To worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, then surely He sees you” (Bukhārī 1407 AH, 1: 27).

In multiple prophetic traditions, the term *‘abd* has been used to signify the spiritual rank and value of servitude: “No servant humbles himself for the sake of Allah except that He elevates him.” (Mālik ibn Anas n.d. 2: 1000). The Prophet (PBUH) also said: “The most beloved names to Allah are *‘Abdullāh* and *‘Abd al-Raḥmān*.” (Ibn Mājah n.d. 2: 1229; Tirmidhī, 5: 132; Nasā’ī, 1406 AH, 6: 218; Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, 4: 345; Abū Dāwūd, 4: 287).

Regarding himself, the Prophet (PBUH) said: “Should I not be a grateful servant?” (Bukhārī 1407 AH, 1: 380; Muslim n.d., 4: 2171).

It is also reported that an angel appeared to the Prophet and said: “God has given you the choice: to be a king and a prophet or a servant and a messenger.” Jibrīl (PBUH), standing beside the Prophet, advised him to show humility before Allah. Thus, the Prophet chose servitude, stating: “I choose to be a servant and a prophet.” Before introducing himself as *Rasūl Allāh* (messenger of Allah) among the people, the Prophet would first call himself *‘Abd Allāh* (the servant of Allah): “I am the servant of Allah and His messenger.” (Ibn Hishām n.d., 2: 317).

The concept of *‘Abd Allāh* is frequently emphasized in the Prophet’s (PBUH) words and teachings, which contrasts with the notion of *Khalīfa Allāh* (Shavarani 2022).

The Sufi masters and mystics have given profound attention to the concept of servitude in the Quran (Shavarani 1401 SH, 95-100). They emphasize that God praised the servitude of the Prophet Muhammad during his ascension (*Mi‘rāj*): “Glory be to Him Who carried His servant by night” (17:1). Similarly, Jesus took pride in his servitude, declaring: “Indeed, I am the servant of Allah; He has given me the Scripture” (19:30) (Qushayrī 1981, 1: 393; Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 1: 136; Rāzī 1425 AH, 180).

The mystics consider servitude the highest spiritual rank between the created and the Creator (Sarrāj 1914, 421). Abū ‘Alī Daqāq stated: “There is no rank higher

than servitude” (Qushayrī 1374 SH, 304). Some have described servitude as a station (*maqām*) and stage on the mystical path, identifying it as the ultimate goal of spiritual journeying (Hujwīrī 1375 SH, 95). Others regard servitude as the first of twelve stages of divine love (Baqlī 1366 SH, 100). Another explained servitude in four pillars: knowledge as the first, practice as the second, sincerity as the third, and certainty as the fourth (Badlīsī 1999, 115).

They believe pure servitude is embodied in humility and self-effacement (Tustarī 1423 AH, 129). True servitude, they assert, involves complete submission and self-nullification before God, where the servant has no independent existence apart from divine will (Daylamī 1428 AH, 203). The relationship between the servant and the Creator is based on two inseparable elements: servitude and *Iftiqar* (spiritual poverty) (Ma‘ādh Rāzī 1423 AH, 90).

This spiritual poverty compels the servant to recognize their total dependence on God, fostering humility. God has made humility the external expression of poverty, while its inward reality is reverence. Those who embody this state show compassion to others, respect the elderly, and demonstrate mercy to those tested by God. Their humility prevents them from seeing themselves as superior to others and instead makes them perceive their own flaws while imagining others’ perfection. Such a person remains unknown among people. The ethics of spiritual poverty (*maqām al-faqr*) include calmness, dignity, humility, self-sacrifice, honoring others, and adhering to noble conduct (Sulamī 1369 SH, 3: 34-36).

Furthermore, the concept of servitude prevents greed and attachment to worldly possessions, emphasizing non-ownership as an essential mark of servitude, since a servant cannot be both owned and an owner simultaneously (Mustamlī, 1363 SH, 1: 135). Abū Ḥaḥṣ al-Ḥaddād explained: “True servitude is to abandon everything you own” (‘Aṭṭār 1905, 1: 329).

How can someone truly be a servant of God while being a servant of something else? For whatever draws a person towards itself becomes their object of worship, and whatever they gain becomes their lord. According to the theologians, this constitutes *shirk*. Such a person contradicts the supplication of the Prophet (PBUH) and ultimately falls into spiritual downfall (Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 1417 AH, 1: 160). The Prophet said: “Cursed is the servant of dinar, the servant of dirham, the servant of fine clothing” (al-Bukhārī 1407 AH, 1: 380). Every servant whose heart is attached to something becomes a servant of that very thing. A true servant of God, however, is one whose heart is free from everything except God (Ghazālī n.d., 14: 199).

Muḥammad ibn Faḍl stated: Renunciation of the world and the self, and considering them insignificant, is the foundation from which the authenticity of spiritual poverty emerges. Poverty is a garment woven with the thread of

contentment and the fiber of humility, and it is one of the qualities of servitude (Sulamī 1369 SH, 3: 34, 37). Perseverance in spiritual poverty is among the spiritual stations of a servant (Hujwīrī 1375 SH, 29).

Moreover, according to the Sufis, servitude is deeply intertwined with serving others. Aḥmad Khidrawayh explained that the fifth level of servitude is *taḥammulī*—bearing the burdens of creation (Mustamlī 1363 SH, 3: 85, 87), and to serve others is to worship God (Mustamlī 1363 SH, 4: 1656).

When a servant performs service in this world, they will gain closeness in the Hereafter (Hujwīrī 1375 SH, 252). In the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), servitude and *iḥsān* (benevolence, sincerity, excellence) are closely linked. The highest level of *iḥsān* involves avoiding *shirk* and maintaining sincerity in worship and servitude (Jandī 1423 AH, 222). Another level of *iḥsān* is doing good to all things, as stated in the ḥadīth: “Indeed, Allah has prescribed *iḥsān* in everything” (Muslim n.d., 3: 1548).

God mentions all the rights of creation upon one another under the category of *Muḥsinūn* (those who excel in goodness) (Mībadī 1371 SH, 3: 607). Faḍl ibn ‘Iyād emphasized this by saying: “If a servant does all good deeds but fails to be kind even to their domestic hen, they cannot be considered among the *Muḥsinūn* (Qushayrī 1374 SH, 391).

Performing *iḥsān* through one’s body and wealth towards the servants of God is an act of worship and the key to eternal happiness, like a seed of everlasting success. One should strive not to be excluded from the ranks of *Aṣḥāb al-Yamīn* (the people of the right hand) who are the people of *iḥsān* and *futuwwa* (chivalry) (Hamadhānī 1370 SH, 358).

In the works of Abū ‘Uthmān Ḥīrī, *futuwwa* means servitude. A true chivalrous person embodies all qualities of servitude and has reached a level where they claim no good for themselves, as the perfect chivalrous person is the selfless servant (‘Afīfī 1369 SH, 2: 368).

Muḥammad ibn Faḍl al-Balkhī stated: “God adorned Abū ‘Uthmān Ḥīrī with the arts of servitude and created him to teach the etiquettes of servitude to people” (Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī n.d., 10: 244).

The believers, or the *ahl al-futuwwa* (people of chivalry), devote their souls and wealth to fulfilling the rights of servitude. They are compassionate and kind to all creation, considering it their duty to fulfill the rights of others. They have bound themselves to a life of service, making their existence a pathway for various forms of goodness and benevolence (Hamadhānī 1370 SH, 362).

8. Conclusion

The term *Khalīfa* signifies someone who takes the position of an absent individual. Early Muslim commentators with a linguistic approach understood the primary meaning of *Khalīfa* and its cognates as “successor.” These pre-Ṭabarī exegetes interpreted the term *Khalīfa* in verse 30 of *Sūra al-Baqarah*, referring to Adam, as *khalīfat al-Jinn* (successor of the jinn). The Umayyad caliphs, and even more prominently the Abbasid caliphs, used the title *Khalīfa Allāh* (“God’s Caliph”) to sanctify their social and political authority.

Under the influence of the evolving socio-political context of his time, Ṭabarī introduced a new meaning for *Khalīfa*, redefining it as *Khalīfa Allāh* and replacing the earlier interpretations. He identified its application with the *sulṭān al-a‘ẓam* (supreme ruler) and the governing caliphs. Subsequent commentators and theologians, influenced by Ṭabarī’s religious prominence, echoed and affirmed his views. Over time, the scope of *Khalīfa Allāh* expanded further in exegetical, theological, philosophical, and mystical texts, where the entire human race was described as God’s vicegerent on earth.

In Islamic mysticism and Sufism, more than in other fields, the notion of humanity as *Khalīfa Allāh* was emphasized. However, the concept of *Khalīfa Allāh*, originating from “political theology” rather than “Quranic theology,” has always faced significant opposition. It conflicts with the Quranic attributes of God as the Ever-Living, Present, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, and Sustainer.

Moreover, this doctrine, as the most human-centric belief in Islamic thought, risks elevating humanity to a “human-god” status, fostering a sense of superiority and dominance over nature, leading to its exploitation and destruction. In contrast, the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (PBUH) emphasize the concept of *‘Abd Allāh* (servant of God), presenting servitude as the highest spiritual rank, even for great figures such as the prophets.

A defining trait of servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*) is humility and modesty. Therefore, the human role as a servant emphasizes humility, lack of greed, service, and coexistence with nature, moving away from domination and exploitation. As Lynn White observed, this view aligns closely with that of Saint Francis of Assisi.

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Notes

1. All Quranic references in this paper are sourced from Nasr et al. (2015). However, to avoid repetition, only chapter and verse numbers are cited without restating the reference.

