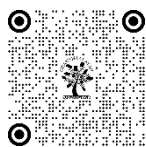


BRIDGING FAITH AND ECOLOGY: SYED HUSSAIN NASR'S INSIGHTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

The environment encompasses the interaction of all living species, climate, weather and natural resources that affect human survival and sustainability. Human beings from existentialistic perspective, are free and responsible agents for development through the acts of their own will and effort to develop oneself and the world better to live. The present study examines the environmental philosophy of Syed Hussain Nasr, a prominent Islamic scholar and his efforts to bridge faith and ecology. He offers a deeply spiritual and philosophical approach to environmental thought. His thought is rooted in Islamic Cosmology and metaphysical principles, where nature is seen as a “Divine Manifestations” rather than a mere resources to be exploited. His environmental philosophy addresses the current ecological crises by bridging faith and ecology, providing a unique perspective that integrated spiritual values with ecological responsibilities.

Keywords: Islam, Environment, Environmentalism, Nasr

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmentalism is an intellectual, moral and socio- political movement that arose in response to Global Environmental Crisis. The term ‘Environmentalism’ defines concerns for the natural world and its protection from transgression of human affairs. It advocates broad reformist philosophy, ideology of preservation, restoration and improvement of the health of the environment by reducing the impact of Human activities on the Earth and its various inhabitants. It is an attempt to balance the relations between humans and the various natural resources on which they depend.

The field ‘Islamic Environmentalism’ developed in 1970’s with the contribution made by contemporary thinkers, campaign’s and NGO’s such as Syed Hussain Nasr, than Mawil izzzi Dien , Fazlun Khaled, Ibrahim Ozdemir, Muaz Nasir, Nana Firman and campaign’ and NGO’s like Islamic Foundation For Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) ,Forum On Religion and Ecology (FORE), Green Khutba Campaign , The Green Guide to Hajj . NGO’s London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE), Wisdom in Nature (WIN) Environmental Ethics as a sub discipline came to prominence in the 1970’s due to the emergence of two monumental works in this field: Rachel Carson’s *silent springs* (1962) and Paul

Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), somehow compelled the world to ponder over the growing concerns of environmental degradation.

Islamic Environmental Teachings are based on the fundamental understanding of how interconnected humans and all other living things are with the rest of the components of the environment. The pivotal idea of Islamic teachings is that Allah is the One Who created the cosmos in balance, sustains the Heavens and causes rain to fall and maintains the separation between the day and the Environment or natural world includes plants, animals, forests, air, water are considered as the signs of God's existence.

Though Quran is not the book of environmental science, but the Quran demonstrated the way and means to use and preserve the natural world and its resources with maximum usage and simultaneously inculcates the sense of balance in its usage. There are around 200 verses in the Holy Qur'an are dedicated to the environment and its sustainability. Ayah; the Arabic word 'AYAH' has been mentioned about around 288 times in the Holy Qur'an with multiple meanings. It can mean both a verse in the Holy Qur'an and a sign of God's Existence. Environment which includes both biotic and abiotic components like humans, plants, animals, forests, soil, water etc. all these are considered as the signs of God's existence. *Al sam'a* ; Around 387 times the word al sama is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an . Al Sama itself means to increase or something high. Although the word Al Sama in the Qur'an connotes as a space or the cosmos. *Al Ardh*; around 463 times the word is mentioned in the Qur'an. *Al Bia'h* ; The term Al Biah can be defined as Environment i.e., the Unity of space with all objects, forces, conditions and living creatures including Humans and their behaviour which affects the nature itself, life continuity and the welfare of humans and other living creatures. Around 18 times the word Al Bia'h is mentioned in the Holy Qur'an.

2. SYED HUSSAIN NASR: LIFE AND CONTRIBUTION

Syed Hussain Nasr (b.1933)-a prominent Islamic philosopher and scholar, has written extensively on the environment, emphasizing the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of the ecological crises. His works bridge traditional Islamic teachings, perennial philosophy and environmentalism offering unique perspective on humanity's relationships with nature. For Nasr the root cause of the modern environmental crises lies in humanity's disconnection from the sacred texts. Traditional societies viewed nature as a sacred, imbued with divine significance but modern secularism has stripped nature of its spiritual value. Nasr asserts that the ecological crises is not just a physical issue but a spiritual one.

Nasr has written voluminously on multidimensional aspects like Philosophy, Science, Metaphysics, Traditional Islamic Cosmology, Theology Sufism Islamic Art, Architecture, Religious Pluralism and Modernism. Some of the literary contribution of Nasr pertaining to his environmental thought are discussed below His other important works came in the form of a lecture series which he delivered in the University of Chicago in 1966 under the title *The Encounter of Man and Nature*. This was later published under the title *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (1990).¹ The work extensively and significantly outlines Nasr's understanding of the environmental crises. It is a pioneering work that addresses the most causes of the environmental crises through a philosophical, spiritual and metaphysical lens. The book argues that the environmental crises is not merely a technical or scientific problems but a spiritual and philosophical, stemming from modern humanity's worldview. According to Nasr, the desacralization of nature in the west, starting with the Renaissance and Enlightenment led to the exploitation and degradation of the natural world. The secular and materialistic outlook views nature as a source to be dominated and consumed, ignoring its intrinsic spiritual values.

It is an exceptional book in the discipline of eco-theology and environmental philosophy. In his review of the book, E. L. Mascall applauds this book as a unique and distinct work.² Haven O'More notes that Nasr's Encounter of Man and Nature presents challenges to the present scientific world view.³ The book warns that humans are in grave danger due to their broken relationship with nature. Relying on data from history and philosophy as well as religious and cultural traditions

¹ Man, and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man. London, Boston, Sydney, Wellington: Mandala Unwin Paperbacks, 1990.

² E. L. Mascall, review of The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Religious Studies 6, no. 1 (1970):103.

³ Haven O'More, review of The Encounter of Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Aperture 15, no. 2 (1970): 58.

of both Europe and Asia, Nasr argues that the sense of harmony between humans and nature declined in the West under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and the rise of modern sciences. He opines that though such relationship still exists in Eastern traditions, but it is under threat due to the pressure of the Western sciences, secularism, and the modern scientific world view. He further contends that if humans want to save themselves from any environmental catastrophe, they must rediscover the metaphysical significance of nature. He views those Eastern traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, including Islam and Eastern Christianity comprise rich source material that can strengthen relation between humans and nature, because these traditions bear metaphysical significance of the natural world. Nasr urges Christians to revive the metaphysical tradition of Christianity as the Western version of Christianity lost this tradition. For him, Islam can help the Western tradition, because Islam comes from the same Abrahamic faith root. Nasr reiterates that a pure metaphysical doctrine of nature can revive a spiritual conception of nature. O'More recommends Nasr's work as one of the best resources of consultation for policy makers to properly address the ecological crisis from the grass-root level.⁴

In his another book published in 1993 "The Need for a Sacred Science", Nasr argues for the necessity of a universal guidance to control the modern uncontrolled science and technology. For Anton Heinen, Nasr's *Need for a Sacred Science* is a useful source material for realising negative effects of modern science and technology in terms of ecological crisis.⁵ Nasr clearly differentiates between sacred science and secular science, though he considers science as secular and neutral. For him, the "sacred science" refers to the "science of the Real."⁶ The metaphysical basis of the sacred science is God and the world of the spirit.⁷ He argues that this science belongs to the very essence of human being and the authentic religious teaching, which is attained by the intellect. On the other hand, the modern science developed by the West can work at best as a shadow or physical appearance of the reality. Modern science is based on empirical understanding of phenomena while sacred science entails contemplating the reality that is beyond any phenomenon. Modern science ignores metaphysics, but it works as the basis of sacred science. Modern science is viewed as value free, but sacred science itself is embodied in absolute value. That is why, modern science and technology can be used for destruction. Humans are utilising them for gaining control over nature. Instead of being part of nature, they consider themselves master of it, rejecting the right of non-human creatures to share the same planet. Nasr blames modern science as materialistic, utilitarian, and inhuman and considers it incapable of dealing with the present ecological crisis. In his view, it is not possible to address environmental degradation without a clear understanding of the root problems of modern science and technology.⁸

In "An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines,"⁹ Nasr gives an introductory exposition of the origin and development of Islamic cosmology. It was originally his doctoral dissertation submitted in 1958 to the Department of the History of Science and Learning, Harvard University, USA. Harvard University Press published its revised and expanded version in 1964 with a preface by a famous historian and orientalist, H. A. R. Gibb. Michael E. Marmura reviewed the book in *Speculum*.¹⁰ Nasr integrates classical Islamic thought with contemporary concerns, particularly environmentalism, spirituality and the relationship between science and religion. For Nasr, the fundamental concept that underpins Islamic cosmology in Tawhid, which asserts that Allah is the sole creator and sustainer of the universe. Nasr emphasizes that the universe in its entirety is not separated from divine. It is an expression of divine unity and wisdom.

⁴ O'More, review of *Encounter of Man and Nature*, 58.

⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁶ Anton Heinen, review of *The Need for a Sacred Science*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society* 85, no. 4 (1994): 681–82

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ Heinen, review of *Need for a Sacred Science*, 682.

⁹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An introduction to Islamic cosmological doctrines: conceptions of nature and methods used for its study by the Ikhwan al-Ṣafā', al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 1964).

¹⁰ Michael E. Marmura, review of *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine: Conceptions of Nature and Methods Used for Its Study by the Ikhwan al-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr), *Speculum* 40, no. 4 (1965): 744–46.

The cosmos operates according to unified metaphysical system in which everything is interrelated and imbued with spiritual significance. For Nasr the cosmos order as being control to the Islamic view of the universe. The world is seen as a manifestation of divine wisdom and is a state of harmony and balance known as 'mizan'. This order is not arbitrary rather it is meticulously structured according to divine laws. In *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*, Nasr emphasises that in Islam, like other revealed religions, cosmological sciences are closely related to the divine knowledge that is acquired through the revelation, but depend on the perspective of the observer or the qualitative essence of the civilisation in which these are cultivated. Though cosmological sciences imply the same truth manifested in different forms, but humans see this truth differently according to their religious and cultural understanding. Because of such variation of human perception, different cosmological sciences may exist within the same civilisation. Therefore, Nasr suggests studying nature as a book of symbols with a deep contemplation to reach ultimate liberation and illumination.¹¹ Nasr argues that all cosmological knowledge must be related to God, because He is the "ontological origin" of all beings and things.

Nasr's "*Islam and the Environmental Crisis*"¹² was published as a book chapter in *Islam and the Environment*. It was originally published in the *MAAS Journal of Islamic Science* in 1990. Nasr notes that the Islamic view of nature is more significant for the West itself, because Islam shares many things with the West as a religious tradition of Abrahamic family. In his view, the way traditional Islamic society dealt with the natural environment was criticised by many Christian critics who accused Muslims of being naturalistic. He states that Islamic guidelines of the natural environment cannot be perceived without a clear comprehensive Islamic knowledge of human identity. He argues that the status of human as God's vicegerent on earth does not provide an open license to exploit nature; rather, it is checked and balanced by God's servanthood as another identity of humans in the eye of God. If humans want to enjoy their position as God's vicegerent on earth without their identity as servant and slave of God, they will become the most dangerous creature on earth to exploit what on earth.

Nasr's "*The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis*"¹³ is an analytical work on the current environmental problems especially in Muslim countries and repeats his earlier statements about the causes of the present environmental crisis resulting from modern science and technology. In line with previous critical analysis of the contributing factors of ecological problems, he recognises that environmental crisis has also philosophical, religious, and spiritual causes¹⁴ supported modern scientific world view of nature. Without addressing those supporting causes, it is difficult to deal with ecological crisis. This requires paradigm shift from scientific world view to spiritual one.¹⁵ He does not deny importance of short-term practical measures for reducing the problem, but also emphasises the permanent solution of the crisis through a radical change in the current lifestyle. He also blames governments of Muslim countries and some individual Muslims for being deeply influenced by Western science, technology, and culture and for adopting them without adapting them to Islamic traditional and spiritual norms, values, and guidelines.

Nasr has extensively worked on environmental issues from a faith and spiritual aspect. In his works, he successfully related the present ecological degradation to the spiritual crisis of modern humans. According to his eco religious understanding, a paradigm shift from the secular world view to the spiritual world view of nature is essential. Though it seems difficult to thoroughly follow a traditional and spiritual world view of nature, Nasr's eco-philosophical and eco-spiritual understanding should be evaluated in terms of reforming the present human attitudes to the natural world. The present survey urges scholars to further analyse and examine Nasr's views on human nature relationship and asks policy makers to benefit from his eco-religious prescriptions in order to save ecological equilibrium.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nasr, "Islam and Environmental Crisis" in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. A. Agwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997).

¹³ Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 75–96.

¹⁴ Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 81.

¹⁵ Ibid.

3. CONCLUSION

Environmentalism is defined as an ideology or belief system that attempts to minimize the harmful impacts of human activities on the environment. Modern environmentalism spans political, economic, and social spheres, often utilizing grassroots (or public) activism to create awareness about environmental issues, such as global warming, air pollution, and the endangering of plant and animal species¹⁶. Islamic environmentalism is a form of environmental philosophy as well as an Islamic movement based upon environmental principles derived from Quran and Sunnah. Seyyed Hossein Nasr-well-known Muslim philosopher sees environmental issues from a very deeply rooted level of spiritual, religious and philosophical understanding. Nasr's intellectual contributions are based on what he and others consider the perennial wisdom of forgotten truths, deeply religious and deeply relevant. Having considered the present ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis of modern humans, Nasr works toward developing a spiritual feeling in the human mind for a natural world. For Nasr, religious spirituality promotes a spiritual feeling for the environment around humans, so modern humans should come back to it. In Nasr's view, every authentic religious tradition of the world imposes some obligations over its followers for spiritual contemplation, which should be followed by practitioners with a due emphasis. Even textual indications of religious scriptures in regard to the natural world cannot even be somewhat understandable without a deep spiritual thought. If humans are to address ecological crisis in a more effective way, a religious spiritual feeling for nature should be promoted as an influential agent. In Nasr's view, a bond between sacred and profane, between spirit and nature, and the Creator and the created, can be possible through a religious spirituality. It is spirituality which talks about the ultimate unity of all things. The modern environmental crises according to Syed Hussain Nar is stems from a materialistic worldview, which separated humans from the natural world and treats nature as an object for exploitation.

Nasr encourages interfaith and intercultural dialogue on environmental issues, bringing spiritual insights into ecological activism.

Conflicts of Interest

None.

Acknowledgments

None.

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¹⁶<https://www.britannica.com/topic/environmentalism/History-of-the-environmental-moveme>