

## **Religious Perspectives On Environmental Issues: A Study Of The Views Of Seyyed Hossein Nasr**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Studies have shown that religions can play a vital role in mitigating the current environmental degradation. The present paper focuses on Seyyed Hossein Nasr's eco-philosophical understanding in connection to the present ecological crisis. By correlating Nasr's eco-spiritual discussion with the environment, the paper investigates how deeply the human spiritual mind is connected in the ecological equilibrium. It endeavors to relate the present environmental crisis with religious traditions so that faith communities can discern this problem more seriously as their own problem.

**Keywords:** *Religion, Environment, Environmental Issues, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ecology*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Modern man learns the wisdom of ecological equilibrium and environmental health the bitter way. It is also the expensive way. Not until he has seen with his own eyes the bitter fruits of his scientific and technological culture and of the extravagant life style does he come to realize how important ecological equilibrium and environmental health are to the survival of humankind on earth. The names of these bitter fruits are environmental pollution and ecological disasters. The modern industrialized west became the first sector of humanity in history to taste these bitter fruits, just as it was the first to have planted the "forbidden tree of secular knowledge" that had borne these fruits. It was most unfortunate for humanity that the rest of the world, including Muslim societies, had uncritically followed the footsteps of the west in planting and cultivating the same tree and reaping its fruits. Uncontrolled human activities have rapidly degraded our natural environment. Modern humans continue to exploit

the natural world for their own comfort and benefit at the expense of the world as a whole.<sup>1</sup> In the present capitalistic-consumeristic world, humans are interested in short-term benefits rather than long-term benefits in terms of cost-benefit analysis.<sup>2</sup> If the environment is destroyed, can we continue with our comfortable life style and economic affluence? Why can't we change our treatment of nature? Such human behaviour cannot be reformed unless there is a deep feeling for nature. However, science and technology cannot provide the ethical or moral basis on which to save the environment. Using modern science and technology, greedy humans exploit nature for their economic affluence and military supremacy. Keeping these factors in hand, many eco-religious scholars have extensively worked on environmental issues by connecting their respective religious and spiritual traditions. Though some other eco-religious scholars' contributions to environmental sustainability and their suggestions for collaboration between religious communities and environmental activists are appreciable, the work by Seyyed Hossein Nasr plays a pioneering role in this way.

### **SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: A BRIEF ACCOUNT**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) is a well-known Muslim philosopher and Islamic scholar. He was born in Iran in 1933 to a Shia Muslim family and brought up there until 1946. He came to the United States for his education. After completing secondary school to Ph.D, he went back to Iran in 1965 and served there until 1979. He was forced to leave Iran after Khomeini's (Islamic) revolution and came back to the United States. Nasr's educational background is in science, though he is a critic of modern science. Having interests in philosophy and spirituality, Nasr relates philosophical understanding successfully with religious spirituality. He reconnects the natural world with the human heart. In his ecological understanding, Nasr gives more focus on spiritual feeling for the environment. For him, traditional views of the environment are not independent of religions, but are indivisible.<sup>3</sup> Nasr retrieves the traditional approach instead of the modern scientific approach to nature.

### **NASR'S VIEW ON ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees environmental issues from a deeply rooted level of spiritual, religious and philosophical understanding. Having considered the present ecological crisis as

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis: A View Point*, International Journal of Environmental Studies 3, 1972, pp. 141-146

<sup>2</sup> Stephen B. Scharper, *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment*, New York: Continuum, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Sayem, Md. Abu., *Religions and Environmental Sustainability: Focusing on Some Practical Approaches By John B. Cobb Jr. and Seyyed Hossein nasr*, Austrilian Journal of Islamic Studies, 2021

a spiritual crisis of modern humans, Nasr works for developing a spiritual feeling in the human mind for the natural world. The modern worldview is highly attached to secular approaches to nature, where there is no place for spiritual thought. Spiritually mostly comes from religious traditions and the modern scientific world view negates such knowledge; treasures which actually could pave the way towards a kind of awareness and deep attachment with the natural world, and thus, to motivate humans to prevent the present ecological crisis from further damage. On the other hand, the traditional method of education and understanding, where there was a scope for spiritual teaching, has disappeared from the world, which makes a very challenging issue for spirituality and growing spiritual feelings for nature. Without such a feeling for nature, no human can work towards the sustainability of the environment. The issue of spirituality in relation with the environment remains largely unexplored in the academic world. In line with this timely issue, Nasr attempts to provide some points from the traditional religious understanding. In some ways, Nasr has successfully integrated religious spirituality with the natural world and tried to show a potential correlation between environmental degradation and spiritual crisis. Nasr always prefers to deal with current issues from a traditional viewpoint and a spiritual insight.<sup>4</sup> Instead of a scientific approach to nature, he emphasizes on the traditional approach, even in this regard, he claims himself as a traditionalist.<sup>5</sup>

## ASSESSING SOME WORKS OF SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR ON ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

***Encounter of Man and Nature (1968):*** This is an exceptional work in the discipline of eco-theology and environmental philosophy. This 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 tradition 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 relationships still exists in eastern traditions, but it is under threat due to the presence of the Western sciences, secularism and the modern scientific worldview. He further contends that if humans want to save themselves from any environmental catastrophe, they must rediscover the metaphysical significance of nature.

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<sup>4</sup> Sayem, Md Abu., *The Eco-Philosophy Of Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Spiritual Crisis and Environmental Degradation*, Islamic Studies (Research gate), 2019. (See also, Nasr and Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred*).

<sup>5</sup> ibid

***Islam and the Plight of Modern Man (1975):*** In this book, Seyyed Hossein Nasr discusses the confrontation of modern science and technology with human culture and traditional norms. He blames scientism for ignoring the very essence of human identity that lies in spirit or soul. For him, ignoring spiritual dimension of human life is a suicidal step of human civilization. At many places, he labels such problems of modern humans as a spiritual crisis.

***Religion and the Order of Nature (1996):*** This work is the collection of Cadbury lectures of Nasr at the University of Birmingham in 1994. This is the significant work in the discipline of religious traditions, science and ecology. In this book, he argues that it is the modern science that regarded centuries-old religions and cultural view of nature as superstitious. As a result, sacred feature of nature was abandoned and nature was considered a machine to produce benefits to humans only. This suppressed order of nature and created the present ecological crisis. For him, a spiritual world that lies in traditional religions can save humans from this pervasive crisis.

***The Spiritual and Religious Dimension of the Environmental Crisis (2000):*** This is a brief research paper written by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In this paper, he elaborates various terms of different religions like *Tao* (in Ancient Chinese tradition), *rita* (in Hinduism), *dharma* (in Buddhism), *nomos* (in the Ancient Greece), and *Shari'ah* (in Islam), and connects them with natural order and beauty. Lastly, he argues to change the present worldview completely for the sake of environmental sustainability and does not allow any compromise in this regard; rather, he regards a compromise as the worst sort of treason.

## CONCLUSION

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. This is why he has written about religious spirituality through which humans can feel the problem and can be convinced by themselves to treat with natural world in a very modest way. By connecting eternal wisdoms with the environment, Nasr has tried to grow a positive sentiment in favor of ecological equilibrium. Secular environmentalists or atheist philosophers may criticize Nasr's eco-philosophical understanding of nature as a backward vision, but they cannot completely deny the significance of the insightful philosophical and spiritual motivations Nasr has brought to address the present ecological crisis. Remarkably, Nasr has tried to show the traditional understanding of nature as a support for environmental sustainability. He has emphasized how traditional science and religious

spirituality, being companied with the sacred sciences, worked in the past towards the sustainability of the environment; and by using these examples, for the long-term solution of the ecological problem, Nasr has suggested for a paradigm shift from the modern scientific world views to the spirituality-based world view of nature. 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.

## REFERENCES

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