

# The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

*"God is the Light of the heavens and the earth;  
The likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp  
kindled from a Blessed Tree,  
An olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose  
well nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it;  
Light upon Light." – Quran, 24:35*

As Edward Goldsmith has made clear in his article 'Archaic Societies and Cosmic Order', modern humanity has abandoned what has always been a fundamental principle of traditional religious world-views. The *Tao* of ancient China; the *r'ta* and *dharma* of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions; the *nomos* of the Ancient Greeks; the *shari'ah* of the Islamic world – all of these different concepts designate the same reality. They refer to the 'order' that governs humanity, as well as nature – from which comes the modern word 'cosmos', which literally means both order and beauty.

So, *nomos* in Greek meant not only the laws by which the planets moved, but also those which governed human life, and hence the laws by which the wise person should live. In Islam, the Greek word has come into Arabic as *namus*, which we regard as almost equivalent to the *shari'ah*, the Divine Law (a Quranic term), which is also identified with the laws of nature. The word *sunnah* in Arabic, which means both tradition and the wonts of the Prophet, is also used in the Quran to designate the wonts of God (*Sunnat Allah*) which are also the wonts of all living things. *Sunnat Allah* refers to the laws and norms that govern religion as well as God's creation – the principles by which the world functions.

The same holds true for *dharma*, even if this term is not associated with the personal God of monotheism. Nearly all contemporary Buddhist thinking about the environment rotates around this single concept of *dharma*, because *dharma* is not only related to the correct way of living, but also to the principles according to which things are what they are. In fact, everything in turn has its *dharma*. The streams, the flowers and the mountains have their own *dharma*; that is why this term is so difficult to translate into English. The same holds true of the

Hindu term *r'ta* (*Rita*), which is not only the law for human beings but also for the cosmos. The religious world-view points to a kind of mystery – the mystery of the relationship between laws that should govern us morally and spiritually and the laws that govern the universe.

### The Spiritual Crisis

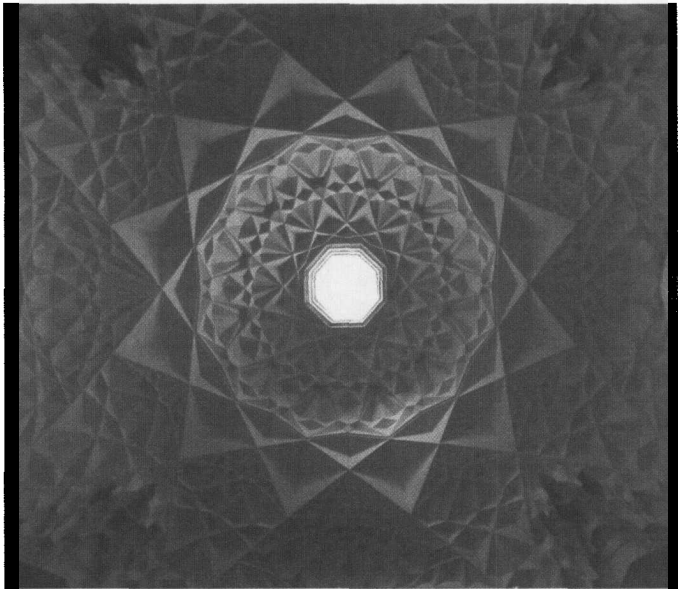
There is a profound relation between the two. There are currently some attempts by a number of scientists to try to rebuild this bridge from the other side. Professor Edward O. Wilson, the famous evolutionary biologist from Harvard, has published two essays which have been the cause of much discussion in the American intellectual establishment. He begins by saying that the humanities and science should come together and overcome

the separation that now exists between them. He further proposes that they should do so by developing the humanities on the basis of biology. He proposes that one should develop ethical and social laws for society on the basis of what natural scientists like him have discovered in the biological world.

This is not, however, how most religious people see the situation, because none of us wants to live under one form or another of social Darwinism, applying what people wrongly call the 'laws of the jungle' or some other so-called 'biological law' governing human society. In fact the image we have of the 'law of

the jungle' is itself an illusion, because if it were the only law involved, all the animals would already have eaten each other. In truth, we find that there is an incredible harmony in the jungle that applies to both living and non-living beings, a harmony to which little attention is paid by many modern scientists.

This idea of a scientific law pertaining to both society and the cosmos actually misses the real point – which is that many traditional peoples believed that their way of living was in keeping with how the world functions. They knew this despite their total lack of modern scientific knowledge, and this principle provided the basis of the function of the 'priest-kings' of various ancient civilisations. For example, the Chinese Emperor was the bridge between Heaven and Earth, and performed cer-



Khànaqàh ceiling, Mähàn, Iran, 15th century



Left: Cosmic Mountain from Behbahan, Fars, Iran, 14th century



Above: 'He is the One who gave unto everything its nature, then guided it aright' (20:50)

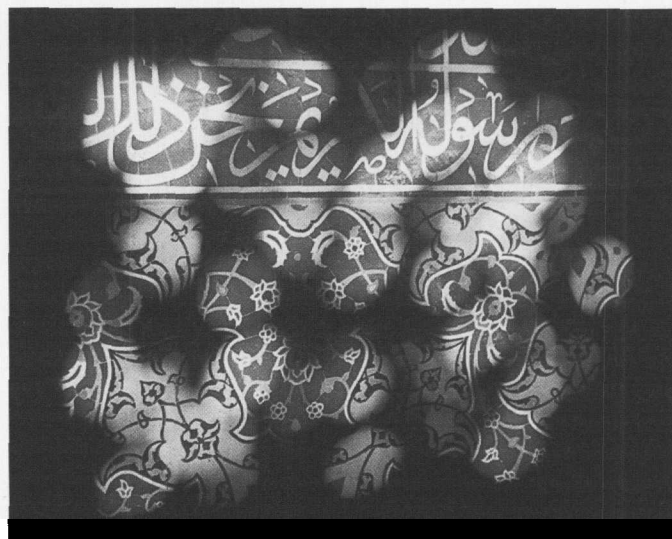
Painting of Hajji Bektashi, 13th century founder of the Bektashi Order

Below: The world is a veil concealing the Divine. The journey to God begins by removing this veil only to become aware that the veil and God are one and the same thing

tain rituals whose object it was to maintain the harmony of the cosmos. The same principle can be observed in the function of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, Melchizedek in the Hebrew tradition, Saoshyant in Zoroastrianism and many others.

#### Science: The Religion of the West

We can no longer continue to regard the world of nature as one bereft of moral and spiritual value. Our ethical concerns cannot ignore the rest of creation. Non-Western people do not generally understand the 'secularisation of nature' which has taken place in the West. Although not aware of the philosophical background of the rise of modern science and the idea of domination over a segmented 'nature', non-Western people are none the less fully aware of the relationship between the applications of modern Western science and political and economic power. They tend to think that this science can help them gain power and domination over their own affairs, without thinking of its ethical, spiritual, or environmental consequences. That is why,



in the non-Western world, virtually all governments, from the left to the right, from the religious to the anti-religious, subscribe to the faith of modern science and technology, and espouse the cause of industrialisation at the greatest possible pace. This is remarkable, given the survival of the religious view of nature that still partly survives among their people.

For several years, in the 1970s, I was the President of Iran's leading scientific and technological university. Our university had agreed to the building of a nuclear power station in the port of Bushehr in the Persian Gulf. The students in the university who were opposed to this project would come out nearly every day with pronouncements of how foolish it was to build such a dangerous installation. I was happy to agree with them, and told the authorities at the time that the students were right. I tried several times to stop this irresponsible project, but my voice was not heard, and it went ahead regardless.

As soon as the Islamic Revolution of 1979 took place, the building of the plant was stopped – but, as it turned out, not for long. Twenty years later, at an extra cost of several billion dollars, the plant is now being completed. It is a telling fact that, whether one has the Royal regime or the Islamic Republic in Iran – or, for that matter, the monarchy in Saudi Arabia, or the secular Ba'ath party in Iraq – the attitude towards modern Western science and technology is always the same.

At the root of this is the misunderstanding of non-Western people of what is really involved, of the dangers which threaten their religions and cultures; and of the desperate mistake it would be to repeat the errors of the industrialised West in every corner of the globe – often, ironically, as a means of gaining independence from the West. This is one reason why the whole environmental issue has been so late in sinking into people's consciousness in the non-Western world.

In the West, however, one has seen a very different process. Gradually, step by step, the religious view of nature has been lost – to be replaced by a mechanistic world-view. And now, after three or four hundred years (really since the trial of Galileo) the Western religious establishment is trying, one way or another, to reformulate a theology of nature. For that very reason, I believe that the Western thinkers who are dealing with this issue have a very grave responsibility – not only for the Christian or the Jewish world, but for the world as a whole. Quite obviously they have become much more aware of all the issues involved than many people in the non-Western world, who are only now turning to the environmental question. Nevertheless, the thinkers of non-Western religions have the advantage that amidst their co-religionists the sense of the sacred in nature and the legitimacy of a religious knowledge of nature has not been lost to the extent that it has in the West.

### Helping Nature Recover

Let me conclude by giving a few practical suggestions as to what can be done at this late hour to reverse the critical environmental situation. I am certainly not opposed to individual or group efforts to clean up the Thames, or to prevent a particular tree from being cut down; thank God for such initiatives. But they can only delay rather than prevent mass disaster. The fact that we are murdering creation is what has to stop, and to stop it, we must first realise that we are responsible for our actions; we cannot sit down and do nothing on the pretext that this tragedy is the 'work of God', or is inevitable because of the 'march of progress and technology'. God holds us responsible for what we do and what we do not do but could and should do.

There is no alternative but to change our whole world-view. We cannot continue to entertain a worldview based on the sev-

erance of the relationship between humanity and the Divine, and hence between humanity and nature as a spiritual reality. We must restore this critical relationship, which means that the current modern world-view must be discarded. There is no other way. A compromise at this stage of history is the worst kind of treason. We have already made far too many compromises with the truth. Things have gone on day after day, year after year, in this manner, and they cannot go on doing so for much longer.

I do not see how the modern world, with all its presumptions, can survive. Nor can humanity survive while holding on to a world-view that is false to its very foundations. How can we go on electing governments that naively believe in continuous material development, without committing mass suicide? I do not see how, if we extrapolate all the present trends, as scientists tend to do all the time, and we continue on our present path, the Earth can continue to sustain human life, not to speak of life with any sort of quality.

It is in the light of these considerations that the religious view of nature becomes so important. Its resuscitation requires of course a very radical change. First of all, we must challenge not what science says within its own legitimate domain, but its monopolistic claims to providing the only true knowledge on every aspect of our relationship with our society and the natural world. We must realise the serious philosophical shortcomings of modern science and realise too that it is its largely inevitable applications that are rapidly making our planet uninhabitable. We must overcome the hypnotic trance into which we have been lulled, which causes us to deny, in the space age into which we see ourselves as entering, the relevance of all the traditional knowledge of the past.

It is not by conquering space that we can solve our real problems, but by addressing the real, fundamental cause of what we are currently doing here on Earth, to ourselves, to our families, to our greater family of living creatures, to the non-living creatures of the Earth and to the skies that we are also systematically polluting. We must realise that the traditional religious wisdom applies to us as much as it did to our remote ancestors, and that humanity must be seen, as it once was, as an inseparable part of the natural world, as God's creation and subject to the same divinely ordained laws that must be observed if we are to maintain its fundamental order.

It is this vision that we must regain if we are to live at peace with God, with ourselves, and with all of His creations both animate and inanimate, that His Mercy sustains and nourishes, even if, in our present ignorance, we are unworthy of His blessings. □

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### Suggestions for further reading:

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