

Volume 13. December 2012
Transcendent Philosophy
An International Journal for
Comparative Philosophy
and Mysticism

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Transcendent Philosophy Journal is an academic peer-reviewed journal published by the London Academy of Iranian Studies (LAIS) and aims to create a dialogue between Eastern, Western and Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism is published in December. Contributions to *Transcendent Philosophy* do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or the London Academy of Iranian Studies.

Contributors are invited to submit papers on the following topics: Comparative studies on Islamic, Eastern and Western schools of Philosophy, Philosophical issues in history of Philosophy, Issues in contemporary Philosophy, Epistemology, Philosophy of mind and cognitive science, Philosophy of science (physics, mathematics, biology, psychology, etc), Logic and philosophical logic, Philosophy of language, Ethics and moral philosophy, Theology and philosophy of religion, Sufism and mysticism, Eschatology, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Art and Metaphysics.

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Submissions should be sent to the Editor. Books for review and completed reviews should be sent to the Book Review Editor. All other communication should be directed to the coordinator.

Transcendent Philosophy is published in December. Annual subscription rates are: Institutions, £60.00; individuals, £30.00. Please add £6.00 for addresses outside the UK. The Journal is also accessible online at: www.iranianstudies.org.

© London Academy of Iranian Studies
ISSN 1471-3217

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Answers to Some Questions Posed about Religion and the Environment

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Abstract

As the environmental crisis has come about as a result of the application of a materialistic and secular science of nature, the solution of this crisis cannot be found within the secular paradigm, but within a religious one. This paper aims to address some of the questions regarding the religious view of nature for the environmental movement.

Religion, in its universal dimension and sapiential teachings, provides crucial help in gaining an environmental consciousness that could provide us with full awareness of the total reality of the natural environment. The sacred scriptures of various religions present us with guidance in our treatment of the natural world.

The message of the world's religions concerning ethical consumption is very clear: avoid excessive consumption and waste. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon all societies, especially upon oil producing countries that possess the wealth necessary to devote to such research, to invest in green research.

Keywords: environment, religion, environmental consciousness, ethical consumption.

Why is it necessary to have a religious view of nature for the environmental movement? Why is not a secular view of nature sufficient for environmental activism?

This is a hard question whose full answer would require a book. In fact I have provided an extensive answer to this query in two of my books, *Man and Nature* and *Religion and the Order of nature*. But let me summarize some of the reasons for the necessity of having a religious view of nature. The environmental crisis has come about as a result of the application of a materialistic and secular science of nature and the solution of this crisis cannot be found within the very paradigm that has caused it in the first place. We need another paradigm that views nature not as an “it,” not as a vast mechanism devoid of life, not only as merely a source of raw materials to be exploited by man, not as a material reality devoid of innate spiritual significance, but as a sacred reality to be treated as such. And such a paradigm cannot come from anywhere but the traditional religious cosmologies and worldviews that dominated the perspective of humanity over the ages until the rise of modernism and are still alive for many members of the human family despite being marginalized in many parts of the globe through the spread of the secular view of reality accompanying the spread of modernism.

Let us remember the basic metaphysical teaching to which traditional religions refer and upon which they are based in one way or another, the doctrine to which the Western and Islamic traditions refer as the “great chain of being” or ladder of universal existence. According to this basic teaching both the macrocosm and the microcosm do not possess only one level of reality or being but consist ultimately of multiple states of being which have been summarized in our classical texts as *spiritus (al-rūh)*, *anima (al-nafs)* and *corpus (al-jism)*. Within ourselves as microcosms all three are present and can be experienced by us. Our spirit, which some confuse with the psyche, affects our psyche and our psyche our body. Our total being is a whole, a wholeness that we realize when

we are healthy both outwardly and inwardly. It is not accidental that wholeness, health and holiness are etymologically related. Nor is it accidental that the limitations of a secularist view of the body as a machine and the medicine based upon it are drawing so many to what is now called holistic medicine. Despite many achievements in certain fields, modern medicine is confronted with limitations even in the treatment of many physical diseases as a result of its imprisonment in a secularist view of the psycho-physical aspect of the human microcosm. The secular view of nature, as far as it concerns the human body, is inadequate because it is not based on the whole of reality and is therefore only partially real.

Now, the same truth holds for the macrocosm. Nature is not only a collection of objects to be studied only through analysis and dominated for utilitarian ends. All levels of the reality of nature are interconnected. Nor is nature a dead reality in parts of which life has appeared as an accident. Nature is a whole, a living whole. This is the truth that has led some to pose the Gaia hypothesis. But even beyond the domain of life, nature is permeated by the presence of the spirit. Such a vision, moreover, is not simply a poetic expression but is based on metaphysical and cosmological sciences which are real, that is, they correspond to the nature of reality, to the nature of things seen in their totality. A secular view of nature is simply not completely real and mistakes a part of the reality of nature for the whole. Therefore it cannot solve in an ultimate sense the environmental crisis that is caused by this truncated view of reality in the first place. Only traditional doctrines contained in the world's traditional religions can bring about once again awareness of the reality of the multiple states of being in which the world of nature, as we experience it externally, participates but from whose higher levels it is not divorced.

Furthermore, it is only the religious view of man as a being having religious responsibility for the world of nature that can induce followers of various religions to take this responsibility seriously. Let us not forget that most human beings even today follow one

religion or another and on the practical level religious injunctions to protect the natural environment are much more efficacious in most parts of the world than the advice of some scientist or secular Western environmentalist. The world is not just France or Germany. Would a village in Sumatra or a pilgrim at the foot of Mount Fuji in Japan listen more to a Muslim or Buddhist teacher advising him or her not to pollute a stream nearby or desecrate the mountain peak before him or her or instructions from a secular environmentalist or some government agency? In fact if you look at this matter globally, you would have to agree that an environmental ethics that is based on religious ethics is much more efficacious on most continents than an environmental ethics presented as having nothing to do with religion. Paradoxically, even the environmental ethics presented by secularists ultimately has a religious basis even if its proponents claim to be secularists. Just look at the central idea mentioned so often today that life is sacred and valuable to be preserved.

I am in favor of every form of authentic environmental activism even if it claims to be secular while I am aware that for many ardent defenders of nature especially in the West, who claim to be secularists and have turned away from their religions, their environmental activities themselves have attributes of religion so that some are even willing to endanger their own lives to save the natural environment, practicing the religious virtue of self-sacrifice even if they think they are secular. But to solve the environmental crisis requires the acceptance of a paradigm that rejects the desacralization of both man and nature and that has its roots in religion understood in its most universal sense and not only its legal and social aspects although these aspects which include what we now call environmental ethics are also of great importance in the solution of the crisis at hand.

How can the environment we inhabit remind us of our place in the cosmos? And its reasons?

Nature reminds us of our place in the cosmos through its very existence, its forms, its laws and the Divine Wisdom it exhibits and reflects in its every detail. Alas, not all men have eyes and hearts open enough to be reminded of the signs (the *āyāt*) that God has placed in nature precisely to help us to remember Him, His Wisdom and Power. If we open our eyes and hearts, we shall be able to see these signs and also our interconnection to all other beings not only materially in terms of the commonality of the elements within our bodies and within the rest of the world, but also spiritually. Nature can teach us about the purpose of creation and our role in it and indirectly help us spiritually by providing sign posts on the path that leads to the Origin of all existence. Nature can also teach us humility and is a means of overcoming our *hubris*, a sin that plays a central role in the creation of the environmental crisis.

When modern science began, some of its greatest figures still looked upon their science as a way of studying God's Wisdom and His signs in the created order. The great botanist John Ray would go into the fields to study plant specimens as *vestigia Dei* (literally *āyāt Allāh* or signs of God). In discovering the three laws of planetary motion Johannes Kepler believed that he was discovering the harmony of the world that God had established therein. In writing his *Principia* Isaac Newton thought that he was studying the "mind of God." All these were highly religious men. But although exceptions continued, the mainstream of modern science turned away from such concerns. Entelechy, teleology and final causes came to be denied and expelled from the concern of science and the place of man in the cosmos came to be seen only in material terms.

A discourse developed concerning the position of man in the cosmos that combined a false humility with hidden *hubris*. We are told *ad nauseum* that man is but an insignificant creature living on a minor planet revolving around one among innumerable suns in a cosmos of dimensions so vast that its vastness is beyond even our imagination. But rarely are we told by the champions of scientism how it is that this insignificant being can know the vast reality that

is the cosmos and they even make claims about certain knowledge of cosmic history going way back to billions of years ago. Moreover, such supposed cosmological knowledge keeps being presented as completely certain knowledge and in fact the only possible knowledge of the cosmos despite the fact that this knowledge itself keeps changing all the time and does not possess any finality. What happened to that humility that was also asserted? That is why I spoke of fake humility. On the basis of what criterion do those who follow scientism reject the traditional cosmologies if not hidden *hubris*?

If we go beyond this truncated vision of reality and see the cosmos in its total reality, the natural environment can teach us not only our interconnection with all beings and especially with the web of life, but also something about our central role on this earth. The fact that we, as one among numerous species on earth, have been the only beings who have been capable of bringing about the environmental crisis is proof of our centrality in this world. This environmental crisis is itself proof of our role as the central creature here on earth, as the center of the circle of terrestrial existence. Awakening to the real meaning of man and nature, we could then substitute authentic humility for that false humility that is so pervasive in scientific discourse and substitute authentic knowledge of the nature of reality on all its levels for that truncated knowledge parading as the only authentic knowledge and based on that hidden *hubris* that is foundational to the environmental crisis. The Qur'ān says, "Verily we come from God and to Him we return." This is a key verse that defines our position in the world of existence. The natural environment, if understood in depth, can help us to realize this truth as we journey through this world and also make us more aware of our responsibility towards the world of nature, a responsibility placed upon our shoulders by Him to Whom we shall return. This is the role that traditional cosmologies fulfilled. How unfortunate it is that most modern scientists negate the value of these sacred cosmologies, of this *cosmologia perennis* that is also *universalis*, and how rare are those scientists who understand the wisdom

hidden therein! A scientist such as Wolfgang Smith who wrote the very significant book *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology* is rare indeed. The deafening silence that has been the response to his work from the scientific community is a tragic commentary upon the sorry state of the domineering worldview of the present day world.

**Does religion necessarily help in environmental consciousness?
How come America, the biggest polluter, is also a pious nation?**

I think that I have already answered why religion in its universal dimension and sapiential teachings provides crucial help in gaining an environmental consciousness that could provide us with full awareness of the total reality of the natural environment. As for why America, or more precisely the United States, is a pious nation while also being the world's biggest polluter of the environment, this question requires an answer that is based on a complicated set of factors. Let us recall some of them. Protestantism, which is the most important religion in America and the most important source for the ethics that dominated American society after the European invasion of North America, was historically tied to the rise of capitalism which itself was central to the development of modern industrialism with its dire consequences for the natural environment. Furthermore, putting aside early Protestant theosophy, mainstream Protestantism developed for the most part an acosmic theology. Most of its followers emphasized individual and social religious ethics confined almost exclusively to the human world and not a truly Christian theology of nature. As for Catholicism that came to America from the 19th century onward, it had already surrendered the cosmos to modern science after the trial of Galileo. Since most of the Europeans who migrated to America in its earlier days, whether they were Puritans, Quakers, Anabaptists or other similar groups, did so to escape religious persecution back in Europe, they took advantage of the religious freedom that they found in their new homeland and created laws to preserve that freedom. Religion therefore remained strong among the masses but it did not possess a strong intellectual dimension. However, at least

secularist and anti-religious philosophies did not find as congenial a setting for their spread there as they did in Europe. From the 18th century onward most Western anti-religious philosophies came from Europe. America did not produce a Bayle, Marx, Comte or Sartre; those men were all Europeans. One can say sarcastically but in truth that today the most notable intellectual export of Europe is this new current of atheism. In this domain European exports are far ahead of the American.

As a result of the spread of secularist philosophies, piety diminished in Europe but it continued fairly strongly particularly on the popular level in America especially in the Bible belt which does not have a European equivalent. Yet, this American piety accepted a secularist view of nature and the sciences based upon it without bothering to pay much attention to the fact that this view of the natural environment was by no means Christian. In conquering America from the Atlantic to the Pacific, most Americans would go to church on Sunday while they had no qualms about killing animals and destroying forests with an ethically innocent attitude the rest of the week. These realities combined with the great industrial power of America made possible not only by the hard work of American men and women, but also because of the vast resources made available as a result of the domination over a continent which had been preserved in an almost virginal state of paradisaical beauty by the natives, the so-called American Indians, who had inhabited it for many millennia before the coming of the white man.

The combination of these factors made possible the coexistence in America of piety on a certain level, but without the intellectual and spiritual dimension of religion especially as it pertained to the world of nature, an ethics tied to the practice of unbridled capitalism, immersion without resistance in a culture of consumerism and the development of the most powerful industrial economy in the world. The result today is the presence of a society in which there is much piety on a certain level but also the power and the will to be the greatest polluter of the natural environment. In this context it is also

interesting to note that when the environmental crisis began to loom on the horizon most of those in America who were sensitive to the destruction of the natural environment left the formal religious structures of American society, some seeking religious guidance in other religions including not only Oriental ones but also Native American religions, and others created what came to be known as the New Age religions. The political consequence of this turning of events is that these days the right of the American political spectrum is associated with the religious right and is little interested in the environmental movement while the left of the political spectrum, often accused by the right of being secularist and even anti-Christian, has become the defender of the natural environment.

In conclusion to this response it must be added in all fairness that throughout American religious and political history there was also a current that was aware of the spiritual significance of nature. We can see this current in the sermons of Jonathan Edwards and the writings of Henry David Thoreau as well as in the creation of the national park system by Theodore Roosevelt. It is not at all accidental that the present day environmental movement began not in Europe or some other continent but in America.

Do scriptures of Abrahamic and other faiths help us in any way to approach the environment with care?

The sacred scriptures of various religions present us with guidance in our treatment of the natural world by pointing out the reality of both what nature is and who we are and what our responsibilities are in the world in which we live, the world including not only the human world but the non-human one as well. All we have to do is to study the Tao Te Ching, the Buddhist sutras, the Upanishads or the Avesta. As for the Abrahamic religions, there are numerous references in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to the world as God's creation and our responsibility before God to deal with His creation with care.

The last of these sacred scriptures, the Qur'ān, is especially rich in this matter. It often addresses not only men but also other creatures and in many verses takes natural phenomena and objects as witness, including the sun and the moon as well as the pomegranate and the olive. The Qur'ān also reminds man constantly that all creatures have rights which man must respect. That is why Islamic Law (*al-Sharī'ah*), which derives from the Qur'ān, contains many injunctions concerning our responsibility towards other non-human creatures from the beasts of burden to fruit trees. Care for God's creation is one of the central messages of the Qur'ān and an important part of the *Sharī'ah*.

Does one have to have a mystical perspective to appreciate the sacrality of nature?

Among followers of primal religions the awareness of the sacrality of nature was ubiquitous and so was what we call the mystical perspective. This fact is true even today to the extent that these primal religions, such as the Native American, Aborigine or Yoruba religions, have survived. But among the later religions that dominate the world today, especially among the Abrahamic religions, the legal and social dimensions of religion and the mystical and esoteric dimensions became more separated, Hinduism being to some extent an exception being both a primordial religion and a "historical" one. In the later religions awareness of the sacrality of nature became more emphasized in that aspect of these religions which are usually called mystical or esoteric than in their social and legal teachings. We therefore see a greater emphasis upon the sacred quality of nature in Taoism than in Confucianism. And in the Abrahamic world, the Kabbalists in Judaism, the Christian mystics and the Sufis in Islam have been more concerned with the sacrality of nature than those who have followed only their religions' legal and social teachings. It is not at all accidental that St. Francis of Assisi, who has been named as the patron saint of ecology by the Catholic Church, was also one of the greatest Christian mystics.

In today's world, therefore, awareness of the mystical perspective is of the utmost importance in the re-discovery of the sacrality of nature. It is the writings of the mystics and sages and those devoted to the mystical and metaphysical perspective, whether they be the *Zohar*, the *Canticles* of St. Francis or the poems of Rūmī that provide the most accessible means for most people today to re-discover the sacrality of nature.

What message does Islam have for those oil producing countries that do not place an ethical limit on their extraction of mineral resources?

The message of Islam to them is multifold. First of all, the use of any natural resource should be in accord with the harmony and balance of nature that Islamic thought, basing itself on the Noble Qur'ān, emphasizes so much. Secondly, oil production should be carried out with the welfare of not only the present generation but also future generations in mind. Thirdly, increasing production just to placate external powers who then help to keep political structures in Muslim lands in power is certainly not Islamic. Nor is greater production to buy useless arms or making one's citizens to become better consumers of foreign products beyond their legitimate needs. I concede that in the present situation there is no way for governments in Muslim countries not to produce oil whose consumption results nevertheless in such great dangers for the natural environment and the wealth that comes from its sale accelerates the destruction of the Islamic ambience of those countries and results in so many political, economic and social problems resulting in the creation of such environmentally speaking monstrosities as Dubai. I remember that Iryānī, who became the first president of Yemen after Imam Badr was deposed, called oil *bawl Iblīs*, the urine of the Devil. If we recall the burning of the Kuwaiti oil fields and what has happened to the ecology of the Persian Gulf since the production of oil in that region not to speak of all the political upheavals and wars caused by ever increasing

“need” of powerful countries for oil and therefore their attempts to dominate oil producing countries in one way or another, it becomes clear that Iryānī’s observation was not just a poetic exaggeration.

If Islamic teachings were to be followed, much more care would be taken by oil producing countries in the production of their oil which should be carried out with the utmost awareness of its consequences in light of its impact upon both the natural environment including global warming and the real welfare of Islamic society. Oil is not an unquestioned divine gift to be squandered as modern man has done; it is a double edged sword. Man cannot squander and deplete in a century and a half what took nature, according to geologists, some four hundred million years to create, without this human action wreaking havoc upon the natural environment including of course causing global warming. The thoughtless use of wealth derived from oil to build very tall buildings even right next to the Ka‘bah thereby changing the very experience of the *hajj*, not to speak of their negative environmental impact, seems like an eschatological sign of the end of the world. Did not the Prophet—*‘alayhi ‘l-ṣalāwāt wa ‘l-salām*—say that one of the signs of the coming of the Hour, that is, the end of the world, would be that man would build tall buildings? Islam certainly places an ethical limit on the production of any substance such as oil that would have such devastating effect upon both the natural environment and human society. But one must ask the question where are the ears that would listen to Islamic teachings on such matters? If there are some ears which do listen, they do not belong, or rarely belong, to authorities and people in power who decide such matters.

Is it necessary to invest in green research and development if a country’s wealth is primarily from extracting mineral resources?

Investing in green research is incumbent upon all societies but especially upon oil producing countries which possess the wealth necessary to devote to such research. Such countries must

remember that oil is limited no matter how great their resources. They must devote some of their resources to green research while they still can. This is an investment in the future of their own people. They must remember that countries as different as America and China are spending much effort in the green research. If the Muslim oil producing countries which have all the means necessary to pursue such research now, do not do so, soon their oil resources will become depleted and they will be left as consumers forced to buy from whatever wealth they have left the new green technologies developed by others.

What message do the world's religions have regarding ethical consumption?

The message of the world's religions concerning ethical consumption, whether they be Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, or Judaism, Christianity and Islam just to give a few examples, is very clear. It is to avoid excessive consumption and waste or what Muslims call *iqrāf*. The Qur'ān states explicitly that human beings should avoid both miserliness and excess in spending. All religions teach the virtue of being content with one's lot (*qinā'ah*) and not to be wasteful, greedy and glutinous. Religions extol the virtue of poverty rather than wealth without denying that the wealthy can also be virtuous if they spend their wealth for God and in charity to others. In this context it is necessary to recall that Christ said, "Blessed are the poor," a saying conveniently forgotten by many especially some Protestant sects which not accidentally are the same groups that are so indifferent to the plight of the environment. Certain sayings of the Prophet also echo the dictum of Christ. Of course both Christ and the Prophet were also in favor of economic justice as were other prophets. Moreover, economic justice is central to the teachings of religions about ethical consumption but this justice is not meant to be based on waste and over consumption for the sake of economic benefit to certain groups.

Do the world religions predict an end of the world in terms of the environmental crisis?

If we look at the teachings of various religions about the last days, whether it be the Hindu description of the end of the Kali Yuga, the Revelation of John in the Christian Bible or certain passages of the Qur'ān and *hadīth* about the end of the world, we see that the crisis in the order of the natural environment plays a major role in eschatological events. But there is also the crisis in the human order and the turning of man away from God and religious teaching that are central components in the conditions that result in the end of the world. Therefore, one must say yes, the religions envisage eschatological events in relation to an unprecedented crisis in the natural environment but also in relation to the spiritual and religious decay and deviation among human beings.

والله اعلم
