

RELIGION & THE ORDER OF NATURE,
By Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: Oxford University Press,
1996. Pbk., vi-ix+310.

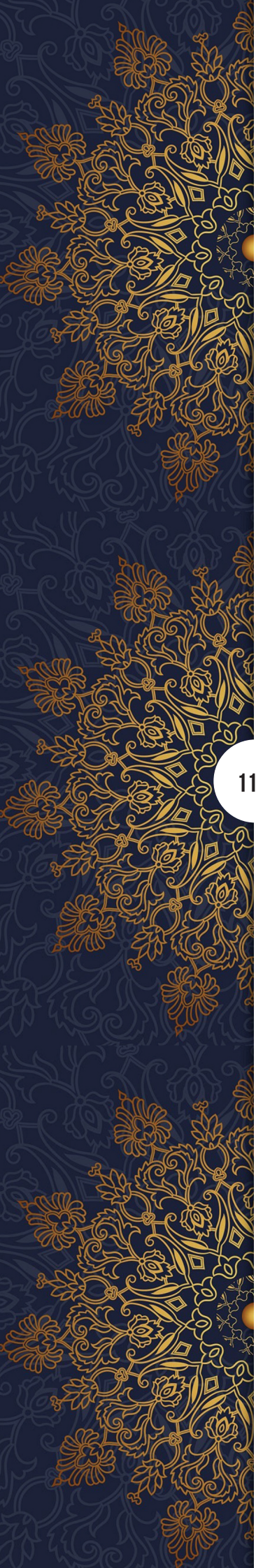
Reviewed by: Ashi YILDIRIM*

“The Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant strife with the terrestrial environment.”

These are the introductory words of Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is not only a distinguished member of the philosophical intelligentsia but also a prolific thinker and writer who deals with a variety of themes from religion to architecture, art, spirituality, Sufism, literature, and natural environment. Mostly described as a ‘polymath’, he is the writer of over 50 books and more than 500 articles and the only Muslim to be included in the *Library of Living Philosophers* among so many other memberships. After obtaining a scholarship to MIT, he received an undergraduate degree in physics in 1954 and pursued his Ph.D. degree in the history of science and philosophy from Harvard University. His doctoral dissertation was about Islamic cosmological doctrines, the first work in Islamic studies deals with cosmology, but by that time, he became already acquainted with the works of Frithjof Schuon, a prominent follower of the Traditionalist school of thought, the doctrine which shaped Professor’s life and thought ever since. So much so, when he returned to Iran and was offered to lead the *Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy*, in which a group of scholars composed of names like Henri Corbin, William Chittick, Sachiko Murata, and Toshihiko Izutsu held various philosophical discourses, was the first academic institution established in Iran in accordance with the intellectual principles of *Philosophia Perennis*. Professor Nasr currently teaches Islamic Studies at *George Washington University*.

Religion & The Order of Nature (1996) is not the only book, in which Nasr makes a solid critique of modernity and the modern conception of nature consequently obliged to end up with environmental crisis. His first predictions for the disastrous consequences of the natural crisis that we experience severely today were suggested in his book *The Encounter of Man and Nature* published in 1968. His later works like *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (1975), *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), and *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (1987) accentuate not only the encounter and interrelation between Islam and modernism, and its compulsory outcomes but also the unsettling challenge of contemporary Muslims faced with the modern world. Throughout his work, *Religion & The Order of Nature*, Professor Nasr also focuses on the central

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question of the analogy of how the spiritual crisis of man has become the very source and the reflection of the environmental crisis at the same time.

Before diving into the book *Religion & The Order of Nature*, it should be noted that to be able to understand the external world or social and cultural institutions such as history, politics, philosophy, and so on, it is required to delve into the conceptions of the realm of different traditions, that is, their doctrines of cosmology. Therefore, a theory, structure, or system proposed by a certain current of thought whether philosophical, scientific, or religious, should be considered as the organs connected to the body of cosmology. Hence it is essential to keep in mind that reading Professor Nasr is like swimming in the oceans of cosmologies in general, and Islamic cosmology in particular.

Written in chronological order, the book takes the reader on a journey through different religious and traditional worlds, whether they are indigenous or celestial, within their scope of the order of nature. Contrary to the modern point of view, Professor Nasr discusses the order of nature or the cosmological doctrines of those worlds not as outdated and/or primordial beliefs but rather perspectives that present an understanding of cosmos intertwined with man's role within it. By doing so, he draws a clear outline of man's perceptions, which drastically changed over time, of both for the universe and himself.

Philosophy, his area of expertise, gets its share of criticism as well, once being inalienably linked to religion and fully mean 'the love of wisdom' (*philosophy*) later transforms into 'the hatred of wisdom' (*misosophy*) in time, which is a state of denying the very category of wisdom as a legitimate form of knowledge. Throughout the entire chapter, he discusses how Western philosophy turned against both revelation and intelligence and limited itself down to empirical and rationalist knowledge excluding other methods and approaches on an assumption that they are obstacles for the progress of the reason. He also draws upon the scientific and intellectual revolutions as cornerstones which presents a historical map of thought and allows the reader to easily walk through by its guidance.

The Qur'an marks that the man was created in the most beautiful stature (*aḥsan al-taqwīm*) and then reduced to the lowest of the low (*asfal al-sāfilīn*). It would not be wrong to say that among many others, this verse seems to have permeated the very essence of the book. By criticizing the anthropocentric character of modernity, Professor Nasr portrays a type of man, whom he prefers to call 'Promethean', and suggested to be cultivated as a result of the Renaissance, diametrically opposed to the Islamic conception of man as 'Caliph'. Henceforth the central image of man's own as an earthly God, conqueror of the nature and maker of his own destiny drew him apart from his traditional role as a *Ponte* (bridge) between Heaven and Earth, who was in total harmony with the cosmic order. According to Professor Nasr, such a dramatic reversal of the role on an ontological level was doomed to result in a gradual desacralization of knowledge and man's envisioning himself as quasi-central. Last but not least, in order to undo the destructive effects in natural ambiance caused by the darkening of the soul of man, he claims that it is possible to come into a realization of the sacred quality of nature across religious frontiers despite

differences of understanding in various religions and traditions. It is essential to remember that nature is sacred but not divine, and man as vicegerent is here to have custodianship and rights over other creatures and thus also the steward of nature.

Presenting a vast variety of worldviews (*weltanschauung*), Professor Nasr strictly emphasizes the intimate connection between cosmology and civilization. Addressing the devastating effects of a civilization based on an earth-bounded cosmology on both man and society, he offers a rather unique thesis relating the environmental crisis within the concept of the inner crisis of man, which later became a pioneering point of view for the scholars and thinkers in the field.

The book undoubtedly requires a meticulous reading for its multi-layered and intense structure and offers so much more than expected. Professor Nasr also draws upon poetry, one of the hallmarks of Islamic writing tradition, using them at the beginning of each episode habituate the reader for the upcoming chapter. It is a masterpiece and a must-read not only for scholars who study Islamic philosophy, religion, or Sufism, but also for the ones who work in the field of ecology, anthropology, and even art. Let the book speak for itself:

“The religious understanding of nature, which we can share only on the condition of conforming ourselves to the world of the Spirit... enables us to see the sacred in nature and therefore to retreat it not only with respect but also as part of our greater self.”

