

# The Roots of the Ecological Crisis in the Theological and Philosophical Landscape of Modern Civilization: An Analysis of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Perspective

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## Abstract

*According to contemporary Muslim philosopher and theologian Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the ecological crisis is a by-product of the modern Western worldview. The root cause of the crisis is the modern concept of nature, knowledge, and human, which has led to a spiritual crisis. For Nasr, the modern human has forgotten the vertical ascend and followed its echo and shadow in the earthly ambitions with the blind pursuit and application of modern science and technology (scientism). He desacralized knowledge and nature and sought infinite material progress in the finite world and thus brought about self-destruction in the form of ecological and environmental crises. For Nasr, the reign of quantity gave impetus to consumerism which resulted in the unprecedented destruction of nature. This paper analyzes Nasr's views about the theological and philosophical causes of the ecological crisis and attempts to offer a realistic solution to it.*

## Keywords

modern civilization, desacralization, nature, knowledge, ecological crisis, tradition, modernism, materialism, humanism, scientism.

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## Introduction

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) is a contemporary Muslim philosopher, theologian, and traditionalist. His thought is influenced by traditionalist writers like Rene Guenon (d. 1951), Firthjof Schuon (d. 1998), and Ananda Coomaraswamy (d. 1947).<sup>1</sup> According to Nasr, modern civilization is based upon a paradigm, which replaced the theocentric worldview with the human-centric one. Consequently, every aspect of human life, from art and architecture to science and philosophy, has become centre-less. Nasr argues that this imbalance of the soul is manifested in the desire for infinite progress in the finite world and has created an ecological crisis of the worst kind.

Nasr delivered a series of lectures, called “the Encounter of Man and Nature” at the University of Chicago in 1966, which later got published as a book, *Man and Nature*, wherein he predicted an impending ecological crisis. His views about the ecological crisis, however, were criticized by Christian theologians and philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Like Nasr, Lynn White (d. 1987) also wrote an essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” in 1967. This essay was appreciated by many in the West. If one compares these two works, one realizes that the former sought the philosophical causes of the ecological crisis whereas the latter sought its historical causes. For White, Christianity as a religion was responsible for the ecological crisis. But for Nasr, a deep philosophical and religious transformation came about in Europe, which triggered the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

There are three approaches to the ecological crisis based upon different diagnoses of the problem. Many modern scientists consider it a problem of bad engineering, which could be resolved by using more sophisticated technology. The modern environmentalists led by Arne Naess who invented the phrase “deep ecology” stress the rights of nature in the context of social justice.<sup>4</sup> The traditionalists led by Nasr consider nature sacred as the grace of God flows through it, which is the

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Moore, introduction to *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011), xvii.

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011), 200.

<sup>3</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, “A Scientific World-View of Nature and Environmental Problem with a Special Concentration on Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s Understanding of Environmental Sustainability,” *Journal of Islam in Asia* 15, no. 2 (2018): 312–28, <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v15i2.753>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Madsen, “Deep Ecology,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/deep-ecology>, accessed April 5, 2021.

very reason for its existence and survival. Nasr is of the view that the present ecological crisis is the offshoot of modern civilization which is based on the forgetfulness of God as no peace is possible inward as well as outward without Him who is the source of all peace.

Tarik Quadir explains how Nasr calls upon the Muslims to have confidence in their intellectual and Sufi traditions as it is the most thoughtful approach if they want to avert the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Nasr's views on the ecological crisis have been discussed by Ian Mevorach who compared the ecological views of Nasr with that of Macfague, a famous Christian feminist.<sup>6</sup> In his article, "The Eco-philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Spiritual Crisis and Environmental Degradation," Md. Abu Sayem discussed how Nasr related environmental degradation to the lack of spirituality.<sup>7</sup> But the existing relationship between this crisis and modern civilization has not yet been unearthed in any academic work. Since the ecological crisis is the crisis of the contemporary modern world and it was unknown to traditional civilizations, this paper specifically tries to study Nasr's views about the root causes of this crisis in the theological and philosophical landscape of modern civilization.

### The Ecological Crisis

There is growing evidence of man-made harm to nature. The level of pollution is increasing in air and water with every going day. An ecological imbalance in the biosphere is evident more than ever. Non-renewable energy resources are being depleted at a great pace. The environment is becoming more and more harmful for the physical, spiritual, and mental health of the people. The ozone layer is depleting and the greenhouse effect is now evident.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of the modern human on the earth is so devastating that some scholars have classified the contemporary period as a separate geologic age called the "Anthropocene." The population has increased ten times during the last three centuries. Fossil fuel which was generated

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<sup>5</sup> Tarik M. Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism: The Vision of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Mevorach, "In Search of a Christian-Muslim Common Path from Desacralization to Desacralization of Nature: Sallie Mcfague and Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the Ecological Crisis" (PhD diss., School of Theology, Boston University, 2015), <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/16229>, accessed June 2, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, "The Eco-Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Spiritual Crisis and Environmental Degradation," *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 2 (2019): 271–95, <http://irigs.iiu.edu.pk:64447/ojs/index.php/islamicstudies/article/view/651>, accessed March 16, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Patrich J. Mangan, "Environmental Crisis," *The Furrow* 41, no. 10 (1990): 588–90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27661840>.

by nature in millions of years will be consumed by the modern human in a few generations. Humanity has consumed more than half of all available freshwater. The development-related activities of the modern human will make half of the world's species extinct in a century and oceans will be degraded to such an extent that the life of all sea animals will be at risk. Fertility will be adversely affected by the micro-plastic and nuclear waste accumulated in the food chain.<sup>9</sup>

These developments will have an exceptionally long-term impact on nature with far-reaching and unpredictable consequences. One of the key features of the ecological crisis is the adverse impact of humans on the ecosystem. Humans are confronted by something so absolutely beyond their collective experience that they do not perceive it, even when the evidence is irresistible. This leads to grave difficulties for societies and individuals in terms of proportionately reacting and responding to interlinked crises.<sup>10</sup>

For Nasr, the state of humanity is extremely disturbing. Blatant aggression against nature such as the burning of forests, huge oil spills, climate change, and the depletion of the ozone layer should have awakened the modern man from the deep slumber and enabled him to realize the gravity of the crisis. The deterioration of the climate has become too evident to be ignored. A popular reaction has joined the earlier voices of nature lovers, resulting in the mushrooming of "green parties" everywhere. However, Nasr argues that these movements focused primarily on external causes of the crisis and that the modern human who lives under the spell of modernism is unable to see that crisis is an externalization of his inner emptiness.<sup>11</sup>

### Modern Civilization

Change is the fundamental aspect of life and nature. But for Nasr, modernism is not simply a change or newness; rather, it is a philosophy, which is based on the rejection of the theocentric view of reality. It is a worldview that removes God from the centre of reality and replaces it with the human. Nasr elucidates that modernism puts special emphasis on different faculties of humans, particularly reason and senses. Hence, the epistemology and cognition of the modern human entirely depend

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<sup>9</sup> Aran Martin et al., *Responding to the Environmental Crisis* (Nagoya: Nanzan University Institute for Social Ethics, 2015), 5, <http://rci.nanzan-u.ac.jp/ISE/ja/publication/book/workshop2014en.pdf>, accessed March 1, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), 2.

on rationalism and empiricism as if the terrestrial values are the supreme and the only criteria for all things. In other words, modern civilization is characterized by a set of philosophies like humanism, empiricism, anthropocentrism, rationalism, and individualism.<sup>12</sup>

For Nasr, modern civilization is a worldview based on the desacralization of knowledge. According to this worldview, the reason is separated from the intellect; empiricism is the only source of trustworthy knowledge; revelation is but superstition; things are only those which can be counted and reducible; the whole universe works like a model of the clock; and God is the creator but not the sustainer of the universe (deism).<sup>13</sup> Modern civilization is based on a quantitative and mechanistic view of the cosmos and life. Materialism, rationalism, consumerism, and hedonism are the working ideologies of this civilization, wherein nature is used as a lifeless object, which can be dissected, quantified, and used without any consideration of its rights. The modern human lives in this world of God without God, forgetting his responsibilities as His vicegerent and acting like an owner. Modern civilization results from Western science and technology, which has acquired the position of virtual God for the scientists. Nasr termed it as scientism.

### **Tradition: A Response to Modern Civilization**

When the desacralization of both knowledge and cosmos entered the final stage of modern civilization during the Renaissance, the usage of the term “tradition” came to the fore. The traditional perspective was the response of the sacred to the lament of the modern man, trapped in the quagmire of his ill-conceived world of Godlessness.<sup>14</sup>

Nasr elucidates that the word “tradition” gained its particular meaning at a time, when the West had already become inundated in almost all of its aspects, by an ideology called modernism. It was used to distinguish the traditional truth of thinking and living according to divine dictum from a humanly conceived worldview during the Renaissance. The term tradition rather than religion was used because religion itself was looked down on by many people, especially in continental Europe.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nasr with Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred*, 210.

<sup>13</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam in the Modern World* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011), 190–91.

<sup>14</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Since Nasr follows the traditional school of thought, it is pertinent to introduce and explain the term tradition briefly, before analyzing his ecological and environmental philosophy. According to Nasr, the term tradition does not imply customs or habits of a society as it is usually understood; rather, it represents those principles, which have been descended from the Sacred for the guidance of the people intermittently since the inception of the cosmos.<sup>16</sup> Tradition implies both the sacred origin and the continuation of the sacred teachings, which involve art, thought, life, and all different aspect of existence on the earth. Thus, tradition is a set of principles, based on truth having origin in the Sacred along with its unfolding applications and manifestations.<sup>17</sup>

Schuon says, "Tradition is not a childish and outdated mythology but a science that is real."<sup>18</sup> Since reality has been eclipsed in the modern age, there is a need to restate it, precisely in the name of tradition. Nasr maintains that we do not find any term in the languages of the pre-modern age which is exactly equivalent to the term tradition. The pre-modern man was too deeply submerged into the world based on tradition to think of defining it exclusively. He had full awareness of the revelation and the Sacred but he had had no experience of a secularized world, like the modern world.<sup>19</sup> Tradition distinguishes itself from anything which is cut off from the divine source. Therefore, the term is to be understood as dealing with the sacred, which comes from the Sacred, contains the Sacred, and transmits the Sacred.

### **The Misdeeds of Modern Philosophy and Its Consequences for the Ecological Crisis**

In pre-modern history, traditional philosophy and religion remained an indispensable part of each other except for a short period in Greco-Roman antiquity. Modern Western civilization rebelled against traditional philosophy as well as religion. For Nasr, this rebellion opened up a new chapter in the history of Western philosophy, wherein philosophy was no longer understood as the love for wisdom; rather, it rejected wisdom as a valid form of knowledge. Because of this trend, Nasr has termed Western philosophy as misosophy (hatred of wisdom).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>17</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Firthjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2011), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, *Religion and Order of Nature*, 80.

Western philosophy in the European Middle Ages had schools, which could be compared with the intellectual traditions of the Islamic world, India, and China. But, according to Nasr, in the post-medieval period, it turned against revelation and intellection as a source of knowledge and accepted empiricism as the only viable source of knowledge. As far as the relation between faith and reason was concerned, this new development had a terrible impact on the unity of modern Western civilization. Nasr emphasizes that the religious and anti-religious approaches to the order of nature and their impact on the ecological crisis cannot be fully understood without taking into account Western philosophy and science, in addition to religion.<sup>21</sup>

The Renaissance marks a rupture with the Middle Ages that is at once abrupt and transitional. Nasr points out that this period of history witnessed the rise of humanism; a new conception of the human which was altogether different from that of the traditional point of view. Although Christian Aristotelianism continued, yet attacks on it were intensified. Nasr explains that on the one hand, this age saw the rediscovery of Platonism, Hermeticism, and Greco-Alexandrian thought, on the other hand, there were strong movements against the esoteric perspective. For Nasr, the seeds of modern philosophy and modern science were sown during the Renaissance, which appeared later in the seventeenth century, with a devastating impact on nature, causing an ecological crisis.<sup>22</sup>

The Renaissance thought about the order of nature demonstrates a general anti-Aristotelian trend in opposing teleology and explaining things through causes that exist within them. Nasr argues that this negation of teleology and finality can be easily observed in the writings of Francis Bacon (d. 1626) who is famous for his contribution to the rise of modern science, which is based primarily on the domination of nature. The dominant thought of the Renaissance tended to view nature as something divine and self-creative. However, Nasr elucidates that the sacramental character of nature was never rediscovered as nature was considered divine outside the sacred world of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Contrarily, this divine view of nature was deprived of the fortification of a living tradition and gradually in the later years, this gave way to the mechanistic view of nature dominated by the world of mathematics. Nasr is of the view that during the Renaissance, the interest in magic and astrology was replaced by an interest in mathematics and physics. This

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–82.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

paradigm shift was the result of the change in understanding of the order of nature.<sup>24</sup>

Nasr argues that the philosophy of Rene Descartes (d. 1650), who is regarded as the father of modern Western philosophy, is also mainly characterized by dualism and one finds in it a radical departure from the traditional perspective as far as understanding of the order of nature is concerned. Descartes thought that all real properties of matter must be derived from the extension as it is the fundamental attribute of matter. He considered only those qualities of matter important which could be measured mathematically whereas all other qualities of matter were overlooked and termed secondary. Consequently, he rejected the qualitative aspect of nature altogether. For him, nature was nothing but a kinetic reality and its functions could be explained by mathematical geometry. He failed to differentiate between the object and the environment and reduced the order of nature to mathematical order and the physical world to mechanics, from which the aspect of finality was excluded. He tried to derive his principles of physics from metaphysics but his metaphysics was not based on the traditional perspective.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, Descartes developed a completely mechanistic view of the order of nature, based on the dualism between the knowing subject and the known object, and between mind and body, whose influence is still pervasive everywhere in modern civilization. He deprived nature of all ontological realities, focused only on the quantitative aspect, and reduced nature to pure “it” cut off from all spiritual realities. Nasr concludes that this view of nature is still dominant in the intellectual horizon of modern thought, despite all later transformations of Western philosophy and science. Descartes like other modern philosophers mistook mathematics of nature for the philosophy of nature and hence only served the purpose of the science of his day.<sup>26</sup> Nasr explains that the views of Descartes led to the philosophy of positivism which severed the relations between the order of nature and all questions of ontology and causality. Therefore, the majority of the metaphysical systems in modern Western thought are based on the “mechanistic hypothesis of the physico-mathematical methods.”<sup>27</sup>

Nasr illustrates that this was not the metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī or Plato in the traditional sense of the term. Rather, it was a kind of generalization of the mathematization and quantification of the order of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 101–02.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Philosophy of Nature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 44.



nature which separated the order of nature, in the Platonic sense, from the intelligible world. That metaphysical system separated the order of nature from ethical principles dominating human life and any kind of spiritual reality which humans and nature could share except through the physical reality of the matter. This modern perspective of metaphysics has a catastrophic impact on the earth and leads to an ecological crisis, which is becoming more evident with every passing day.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Cosmic Crisis of Christianity**

Nasr points out that when Christianity came to Europe, it came across beautiful poems about nature, written by Germanic saints as the positive theophany of God. Christianity had to overcome the worship of the cosmos, which was the result of the weakening of the Greek religion. Therefore, Nasr explains, the Christian theologians had to choose between the correct theology and weak vision of the cosmos on the one hand and the sacred vision of cosmos and false theology on the other hand. They chose the first option. Early fathers shied away from discussing what later theologians sometimes called cosmic crisis, i.e., the cosmic function of the Christian message and the role that universe can have, in the positive sense, in the spiritual realization.

In Nasr's view, the whole study of nature turned away from the traditional Christian point of view. The Western human revolted against his half angel and half man image and consequently lost a paradise, which was compensated with the opening up of a new earth.<sup>29</sup> It is theologically explained as the cleverness of the devil; whenever one gives up something sacred, he immediately gains something wonderful but worldly.<sup>30</sup> Nasr concludes that total metaphysical knowledge which always must be viewed as a tool of spiritual realization was lost in the West or at least became less and less accessible. The general people in the West have no longer access to a religion, which has a spiritual discipline, where the methods of controlling the mind and the body are taught along with other devotional rites. As it became more and more prevalent, sacred sciences gradually changed into occultism, sciences whose principals are forgotten and become occult (hidden).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Nasr, *Religion and Order of Nature*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 64.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

## The Conquest of Nature

The radical change in the philosophical conception of the human and his role occurred primarily because the Western human put all human activities beyond the consideration of religion. For him, the end justifies the means and here the end was always worldly gratification called development or progress as the spiritual world was no longer relevant. Nasr utterly rejects this Western idea of progress and considers it the most dangerous word for the future of humanity, especially in the context of impending ecological crisis.<sup>32</sup>

For infinite progress, the Western man needed infinite land. He used cannons with utter disregard of human life and property and tried to conquer the whole of the earth. He became independent of both heaven and the earth. Nasr explains that independence from heaven refers to overlooking the spiritual aspect of knowledge and action as if it never existed and freedom from the earth refers to gaining unparalleled mobility on the earth with a license to exploit its resources with impunity.

The quest for the infinite lies at the heart of all civilizations. Nasr defines the man as a creature who is never satisfied with what he is and always wants to transcend himself. If transcendence is understood in a correct sense, it is a vertical ascent; otherwise, he follows the echo and the shadow of his ascent in his earthly and worldly activities. He wants to satisfy himself with different activities, which correspond to different passions and ambitions.<sup>33</sup> During the Renaissance, the sense of the infinite was removed from the religious consciousness and was transferred to the earthly domain. For the modern man, this earth appeared to have infinite possibilities and he suddenly lost consciousness of the limited nature of the terrestrial existence, which perhaps no other civilization has ever lost before. The ecological crisis is the result of seeking the goal of infinite possibilities in the finite world, which is simply unattainable.

As for the current theological trends in Christianity, the problem of the presence of the other religions and the presence of nature are interrelated in the sense that both are concerned with realities, which are cut off from revelation. This is the reason that the followers of Karl Barth (d. 1968) show complete indifference to both the theology of the comparative religions and the theology of nature. A spiritual man extends his horizon to embrace other revelations including nature,

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<sup>32</sup> Nasr, *Living Sufism* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2005), 136.

<sup>33</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 63–64.

which is also a revelation of God having explicit spiritual reality and message. The modern human, Nasr asserts, is confronted with both of these issues simultaneously. For its physical and spiritual survival, modern humanity has to develop a new concept of nature as well as its relation with it.<sup>34</sup>

Nasr argues that something went wrong in the application of modern science that claims to have objective knowledge which is absolutely cut-off from all metaphysical and spiritual considerations. He holds that if the West wants to revive its lost spiritual knowledge, it should seek help from the living traditions of the East like Islam and Hinduism. Even in the field of natural sciences, Nasr illustrates, the East can help the West. For example, Islamic philosophy of nature and physics, Chinese medicine, and Indian alchemy have something to say about the ecological crisis, which is the by-product of the application of modern science and technology.<sup>35</sup> For Nasr, the West is not only in need of Eastern spirituality which is of course the essence of all Eastern traditions and their sciences but also of the remedial influence of the worldview based on the Eastern sciences of nature. The worldview which is based on the Eastern sciences of nature is not being taken seriously by the modern Western intellectuals. Modern science has developed a monolithic and monopolistic character and negated the possibility of any other science of nature. Nasr regards it as a kind of totalitarianism, which is unprecedented in the history of mankind.<sup>36</sup> Any science, which does not conform to the point of view of modern science, is relegated to the category of pseudo-science. Modern science has developed such a totalitarian character that it denies the possibility of any other knowledge of the serious kind.<sup>37</sup> According to Schuon, the modern human has been deceived by the discoveries and inventions of modern science. He further asserts that modern science is unable to recognize its limits and is wrong about those issues, which are beyond its scope.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Nasr, *Living Sufism*, 135–36.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 136–37.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Firthjof Schuon, “No Activity without Truth,” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 3, no. 4 (1965), [http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/No\\_Activity\\_Without\\_Truth-by\\_Frithjof\\_Schuon.aspx](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/No_Activity_Without_Truth-by_Frithjof_Schuon.aspx).

## Desacralization of Knowledge

According to Nasr, knowledge has always been associated with the Sacred, in all traditional civilizations and its attainment has been the prerequisite of spiritual perfection. He emphasizes that the process of seeking knowledge transforms the knower in the spiritual sense. It was also true for the Western civilization before it was eclipsed by the modern philosophies of humanism and secularism during the Renaissance. On the other hand, despite the onslaught of modern philosophies, in all traditional civilizations, intelligence has always been considered as a sacrament and knowledge has been enduringly correlated with the Sacred.<sup>39</sup>

Nasr argues that the West is reducing the Sacred to the profane and destroying the tradition of the East by adopting a rigorous campaign of secularization by interpreting the sacred teachings through employing the methods of historicism and evolutionism. He stresses that the majority of the scholarly work produced by the modern orientalists is the result of the application of the secularized reason while studying the tradition of the East.<sup>40</sup> When the manifestation of Reality became blurred for the Western civilization, knowledge became separated from being and bliss. In the process, Nasr explains, it almost completely desacralized and externalized knowledge to such an extent that it could no longer smell the perfume of the Sacred. But, for Nasr, the root of knowledge is inseparable from the Sacred as the very substance of knowledge is indeed the knowledge of the Real.<sup>41</sup>

According to Nasr, the man tasted the fruits of the tree of life and the tree of good and evil in Paradise. The tree of life symbolizes unitive knowledge whereas the tree of good and evil symbolizes separation and otherness. The vision of duality is an obstacle in the path that leads to primordial knowledge. Because of the unitive vision which lies at the centre of being, knowledge acts as a way to access the Sacred. Sacred knowledge, Nasr asserts, is the ultimate path of merger with the Real where being, knowledge, and bliss are unified.<sup>42</sup> He admits that human has fallen as described by different religious traditions, yet the road to the Sacred continues to be illuminated by the light of knowledge. Intelligence is a divine light, which penetrates the density of cosmic manifestation and is reflected in different modes in all things.

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<sup>39</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, vii-viii.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

knowledge can attain the Sacred which is the imminent Subject as well as the Transcendent Object. This seat of intelligence, which is the “eye of heart,” got blurred because of the long history of forgetfulness. However, human intelligence was constantly rescued by heavenly interventions with the blessings of the knowledge of inward and outward. The human consciousness has been endowed with the faculty of contemplating the Reality, which is none but the Self of oneself.<sup>43</sup>

Modern philosophy defines the human as a rational being. According to Nasr, however, this faculty is a reflection of human intellect and if it is divorced from the latter as is the case in the modern Western world, it will become an instrument of the devil. Instead of defining the human as a rational being, he defines him as a being endowed with total intelligence which is capable of knowing the Absolute. For Nasr, “to be human is to know and also to transcend oneself.” For a human being to know means ultimately to know the Absolute Self which is the source of the objective world as well as the Absolute Self which shines in the human consciousness like a ray of light. Nasr further asserts that the Absolute has the same relation with intelligence as the Sun has with its rays.<sup>44</sup>

However this intellectual faculty is eclipsed and replaced by pure reason, Nasr argues, the roots of knowledge are still sunk in the Sacred. He further asserts that the Sacred cannot be discovered without discovering the sacred quality of knowledge. This goal can be achieved if we know how knowledge falls from being the fruit of the Tree of Being to just profane knowledge. The totalitarianism of profane knowledge has only hastened the fall of the modern human from the abode of grace to the desacralization of human life. The lost higher state of humanity can only be regained by giving and accepting the role of intelligence as a means of access to the Real, Who is the origin and source of all traditional authentic religions.<sup>45</sup>

The modern worldview has reduced the intellect to reason and thereby has made the sacred knowledge inaccessible and also meaningless for modern humanity. The Christian theology of nature, which was a reflection of the sacred knowledge, according to Nasr, was also ruined in the process. For Plato, Nasr explains, the natural theology was *sapientia* but afterwards, the Christian theologians such as Saint Augustine relegated it to an inferior level and banished it completely

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

from the field of science particularly and from the field of faith generally.<sup>46</sup> When modern Western philosophy developed fully during the Renaissance, the reason was completely reduced to the human instrument of perception.<sup>47</sup> Nasr argues that if we want to restore the real function of intelligence and intellect and want to acquire sacred knowledge, we need to appreciate the significance of natural theology, which has also been of great significance in the tradition of Christianity.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Modern Concept of Human**

The modern human considers himself the creature of this world only. He feels at home in his artificially created world, where he has forgotten God as well as his inner reality. Nasr calls this modern view of man a promethean man. For him, this world is no longer God-centric but is homo-centric. The concept of life for such a man is like a marketplace where he is just roaming and enjoying without a specific purpose. He has divorced every sense of the Sacred from life. Though he is a slave of his worldly passions, yet he considers himself free. Outwardly, he rejects the higher Reality but adopts different ways, ranging from psychological to drug-induced mystical ways, to satiate his spiritual needs.<sup>49</sup>

When the modern human feels stifled in his self-created prison of the world and becomes wary of the ecological crisis, he seeks a solution from the traditional teachings. For Nasr, these teachings will not be helpful until and unless the modern human changes his perspective of himself. For this, he has to think and act, like a traditional human, who acts as a bridge between heaven and the earth. For a traditional man, this world has both an Origin and a Centre. He is aware of the Origin whose primordial purity he wishes to emulate and transmit. Nasr argues that the traditional man has full awareness of the Centre of the circle where he lives and to Whom he seeks to reach in his life, thought, and action. He is His vicegerent on earth, responsible for his actions, and the protector and custodian of the earth. He has been created in the form of God, living in this world but is for eternity.<sup>50</sup>

According to Nasr, the modern human has played havoc with nature that just in five centuries the world is facing an ecological and environmental catastrophe. Nasr stresses that the modern man must

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Qadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism*, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 4–5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

understand the nature of man as the central creature who acts as a witness to an Origin from which it originates and to which it will return. With the help of the traditional doctrine of man, one can understand the very essence of that *anthropos* who still resides in the inner of every man, despite the revolt of the modern man against heaven since the Renaissance.<sup>51</sup>

Nasr has tried to trace the stages of the disfiguration of the image of a man in the modern West. It began with the revolt of the modern man against Heaven during the Renaissance. Some of its causes were present even in the late Middle Ages. For Nasr, the final stage of this disfiguration is this modern, supposedly humanistic civilization, which has its direct manifestation in its worldly art. One of the most important aspects of this disfigurement is the desacralization of knowledge and life.<sup>52</sup>

The causes of this sudden fall have also originated in the age, which was interpreted as the rediscovery of the human when the influence of Christianity started to fade away from the Western man. For Nasr, one of the important causes, in this regard, is the excessive separation between the man as a conscious being and the cosmos as a domain of reality, which is directly related to the chasm that existed between the spirit and flesh in the official theology of Christianity.<sup>53</sup>

Other factors, according to Nasr, which were responsible for the demolition of the image of the traditional man and the birth of the modern man had a direct or indirect link with the phenomenon of the Renaissance. During that phase of history in the West, the unity and hierarchy of knowledge was destroyed which was the result of the eclipse of the spiritual dimension of the tradition. The esoteric and qualitative aspects of nature were ignored as non-existent and sciences were based only on quantification which resulted in the rise of scepticism and agnosticism.

The disfigurement of the pontifical man, Nasr explains, took place in the late Middle Ages as far as the intellectual point of view is concerned. During the thirteenth century, Muslim philosopher-cum-jurist Averroes (d. 1198 CE) excessively Aristotelianized Western thought. The naturalization of the Christian man completely secularized cosmic science in the seventeenth century which was the result of this

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 163.

exteriorization of Western thought.<sup>54</sup> In the nineteenth century, German philosopher Georg Hegel (d. 1831) divinized time and the historical process, which later became the foundation of truth and reality. Nasr is of the view that Aristotelian philosophy provided Christian theology with a strong metaphysical language and dogmatic assertion and that it was not anti-traditional but exteriorized the process of knowledge. Moreover, Averroes played a role in the secularization of the cosmos in the Western world by depleting the cosmos of its soul.<sup>55</sup>

In Nasr's view, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century mechanized the conception of the world and the human. Consequently, the modern man lost the sense of belonging. Arthur Saniotis also agrees with Nasr that the desacralization of nature has a direct relation with humanism which supports domination of nature for economic reasons.<sup>56</sup> The scientism and apparent success of Newtonian physics established a series of sciences of man which emulate outdated physics till today. Nasr argues that these modern sciences of man have their roots in the doctrine of positivism which is associated with French philosopher Auguste Comte (d. 1857) who proposed the theory of human progress by reversing the traditional relationship between God, man, and nature. Nasr concludes that although social sciences and humanities strongly refute the mechanistic physics and the anthropology for which man is nothing but a mammal walking upright, yet these disciplines have a sort of inferiority complex as compared to natural sciences which force them to adopt an alien worldview.<sup>57</sup>

According to Nasr, the Hegelian doctrine of dialectic process and turning the permanent into changing challenged the basic traditional concept of man as the image of immutability and hence humanized the divinity which culminated in the final stage of secularization of the life of modern man. Hegel tried to equate the finite consciousness of man with the infinite consciousness of God. German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach (d. 1872) went one step further by asserting that the awareness of man of the infinite consciousness is nothing but the consciousness of infinite within human consciousness itself. Instead of man being seen as the image of God, the relation was now reversed and God was considered the image of man and just the projection of his consciousness. Nasr concludes that the modern man not

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur Saniotis, "Muslims and Ecology: Fostering Islamic Environmental Ethics," *Contemporary Islam* 6 (2012): 165, DOI 10.1007/s11562-011-0173-8.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.



only tried to steal fire from heaven but also tried to kill God, without realizing that he cannot kill Him without annihilating himself.<sup>58</sup>

The forests were cut and the rivers and oceans were polluted because of the rights and needs of the modern human. He was made absolute and all other creatures were placed in the category of the relative. The modern human usurped the rights of other creatures. Even the rights of the Creator were utterly ignored and humans were considered the *raison d'être* of the whole universe.<sup>59</sup> Humanism grew in the West as a way of thinking during the Renaissance and evolved as a radical conception of man who got independence from any kind of spiritual hierarchy and acquired self-assumed dominance over nature.<sup>60</sup> During this period of history, nature was increasingly demystified and desacralized and this process continues up to the present day. The modern man revolted against his medieval past. He no longer appreciates the salvific beauty of nature. He has sacrificed everything for this earthly transitory life. Nasr concludes that the absolutization of humans is a heritage of the European Renaissance and its lethal consequences are being manifested in the treacherous role of this humanism in the present impasse created in man's relationship with nature.<sup>61</sup>

Humanism was grown out of *studia humanitatis* and influenced by the philosophical currents of this period. It has certain unique characteristics. It conceives man as an independent earthly being who has nothing to do with the medieval Christian faith. Rather than being half-man and half-angel, he has become completely terrestrial. He feels at home on this newly discovered earth rather than feeling like an exile from Paradise. For him, worldliness is the order of the day and otherworldliness is out of fashion.<sup>62</sup>

### The Impact of Modern Science and Scientism

The scientific revolution took place in the West in the seventeenth century but the transformation in the meaning of human existence took place during the Renaissance.<sup>63</sup> For Nasr, the Renaissance did not produce the modern sciences as the major change came in the

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<sup>58</sup> Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 164–65.

<sup>59</sup> Nasr, *Religion and Order of Nature*, 165.

<sup>60</sup> Saniotis, "Muslims and Ecology," 165.

<sup>61</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 5.

<sup>62</sup> William C. Chittick, ed., *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), 139.

<sup>63</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 67.

seventeenth century with the discourses of Galileo.<sup>64</sup> He explores the real nature of modern Western science, which is being imitated quite blindly, by all traditional civilizations without realizing its detrimental effects on the sacred sciences and nature.<sup>65</sup> He emphasizes that blind imitation and application of modern science throughout the globe have caused an ecological crisis of unprecedented nature.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, a new form of science was emerged, which was entirely terrestrial and monolithic in approach, and it closed all doors to higher levels of consciousness. This whole development during the Renaissance led to the complete secularization of the cosmos. Nasr views that the objective pole of modern science does not extend beyond the psycho-physical sphere of nature and its subjective pole is limited to human reason, cut off completely from the intellect.<sup>67</sup>

The view that the synthesis of oriental spirituality and modern science can make this world a paradise has already been exposed by the ecological crisis. Nasr rightly says that the problem is not the neglect of the Eastern spirituality by the West but the real danger is how the sacred culture is being deformed and profaned for the acquisition of wealth and power by the few.<sup>68</sup>

For Nasr, scientism is a way of generalizing the view of modern science to embrace the whole of reality and considering it a determining factor for understanding reality. It is a philosophy, which has exalted modern science from being a particular way of knowing nature to a totalitarian philosophy, which reduces all reality to the physical domain and utterly rejects the possibility of any non-scientific worldview.<sup>69</sup> Nasr accepts the legitimacy of science as long as it remains confined to the physical domain. He, however, highlights the importance of traditional worldviews which “bind physical nature to the realm of the Spirit and the outward face of things to an inner reality which they at once veil and reveal.”<sup>70</sup>

According to Nasr, scientism has caused many economic and social problems. For example, the population explosion is the direct result of Western medicine. Modernized leaders of Asia thought that it could be

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 67–68.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, “The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 76.

<sup>67</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2001), 72.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

<sup>69</sup> Quadir, *Traditional Islamic Environmentalism*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 4.

possible to use Western science and technology for the resolution of their problems and yet avoid other unnecessary ethical effects of this alien worldview. Nasr, however, holds that it is not possible to adopt modern Western technology and simultaneously keep the environment clean. The impersonalization of the means of production and the destruction of the natural environment are simply the by-products of scientism. The negative Western traits like depression, alienation, and nihilism are now rampant among the Westernized Orientals. The development of alternative technologies is the only viable solution and it had already been tried on a small scale, like in some villages of India, China, and Persia.<sup>71</sup>

Nasr is of the view that people on the whole generally and the scientists particularly are now losing confidence in the ability of modern science to solve their basic problems because of its very nature and scope. A major portion of society, especially in the West, during the last few centuries, had shifted their trust for the solution of their problems from the priesthood to modern science. Of course, the general public takes science as the panacea of all ills but serious scientists are aware of the limitations of modern science. The modern human has prolonged his life with modern medicine but the quality of his life has been seriously compromised as a result of the destruction of the natural environment.<sup>72</sup>

Nasr considers it a kind of crisis of confidence as many sagacious Westerners are now looking for alternative forms of technology such as soft technology. Human beings have always had adopted some sorts of technologies but modern technology sought to manipulate nature with utter disregard of the qualitative aspect of nature and threatened the harmony of the whole order of nature which has consequently caused an environmental crisis of unprecedented magnitude.<sup>73</sup>

In the East, almost all earlier attempts to apologetically harmonize the Western perspective with the traditional perspective have failed pathetically. The traditional perspective, being rooted in immutable principles, is perennial in both its form and content, whereas the modern scientific worldview has been changing since the seventeenth century, and now even the roots of its basic concepts are being challenged. The scientific view that matter evolved into life and life

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<sup>71</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>73</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 76.

evolved into consciousness, all in a very mysterious but scientifically proven way, no longer holds any ground in the East.<sup>74</sup>

### **Need for the Spiritual Interiority**

Everyone wants to solve the problem but no one is willing to pay the price that must be paid to live in peace with nature. For Nasr, the price is death and rebirth. It is a transformation, which is very profound. It is another way of looking at the world. Most people think we must turn from quantitative growth to qualitative growth. In Nasr's view, one can only turn from quantitative growth to qualitative growth by turning the needs of humanity from material things to non-material things. Human passions and externalization have a deep impact on the human soul. It is very easy to externalize but awfully difficult to internalize for the modern human.

A peasant of a village can sit alongside a road for three hours waiting for a bus because his inside is not so empty whereas a modernized human has to have a transistor radio, a time magazine, a book, a pipe, a chewing gum, etc., to keep his psyche from being mad. He has a lot to do with his emptiness. The more he becomes empty inwardly the more he requires external things for satisfaction. For turning quantitative growth into qualitative growth, according to Nasr, one has to create a sense of interiority, a sense of inwardness within oneself.

Nasr writes, "To interiorize life itself and to become aware of inward dimension, man must have recourse to rites. . . ."<sup>75</sup> Today the humanity is in dire need of this interiority coupled with the sacred knowledge of the universe, a knowledge that is not divorced from the Sacred. These two together can alone give the human, the possibility of regaining the right to live in the world peacefully. The ecological crisis is the beginning of the punishment, which the human received from God as he is trying to live without God, in a world, which belongs to God, not to the human, where he is just a traveller and a custodian rather than an owner.

### **Conclusion**

During the last few decades, people have realized the intensity of the environmental crisis. Since no traditional civilization has had this crisis, it is the malady and the by-product of modern civilization. This article has explored the nexus between modern civilization and ecological crisis

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<sup>74</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 75.

<sup>75</sup> Nasr, "The Interior Life in Islam," *Religious Traditions* 1, no. 2 (1978): 50, <https://core.ac.uk/reader/229446002>, accessed March 20, 2021.

from the traditionalist perspective of Seyyed Hossein Nasr. For him, the usual approach to this crisis lacks profound thinking as the solution is often sought in overcoming over-population, generating more resources, and using more sophisticated technology. Nasr rightly considers this approach simplistic and superfluous in nature as the West is trying to cure the malady with the same germs that have caused it. For him, a deep transformation came about in the view of the modern human about the soul, during the Renaissance, as he had tried to establish a civilization based on the forgetfulness of God. Modern civilization, which has been resisted unsuccessfully by other civilizations for the last four centuries, now has become global as its influence has spilt over in other continents.

Nasr develops a reverse relationship between the tradition and the present ecological crisis, in such a way that the more a society lives according to the tradition the less it is prone to the ecological crisis as one observes that traditional societies were free from such a crisis. The modern human is trying to live in this world of God without God, which God will never allow. Nasr argues that one cannot have peace in this world without having peace with one's soul and one cannot have peace with one's soul without having peace with the ultimate Reality, Who is the Source of all peace. Religious spirituality emphasizes the ultimate unity of all things. Humans are the part and parcel of nature. Hence, they need to develop a sense of belonging to nature. This kind of spiritual attachment with nature is lacking in the modern human who is bent upon destroying the delicate ecological equilibrium of the natural world. Nasr rightly says that all creatures have their rights which must be accepted and respected if we want to avert the ecological crisis.

The environmental crisis is an external manifestation of a very deep inward disease, which like many other diseases often does not show any sign until a very late stage of its growth. For Nasr, this inward disease is the negation of the higher order of reality, the reduction of human intellect to reason, and nature to a lifeless object, which could be explored, dissected, and divided without recognizing its rights. Nasr's observation is based on the historical fact that the modern human destroyed the unity and hierarchy of knowledge when the spiritual dimension of the Christian tradition was eclipsed during the Renaissance. The esoteric and qualitative aspects of nature were ignored as non-existent and modern science was based only on empiricism which resulted in the rise of scepticism and agnosticism. All human energies were consumed for material progress by utterly denying the concept of spiritual exaltation. This unbridled urge for material progress gave

impetus to imperialism and consumerism which resulted in the unprecedented destruction of nature, causing an ecological crisis of the worst kind.

According to Nasr, the modern Western civilization can rediscover the totality of the Christian tradition by studying the living oriental traditions. This will help the West to revive the forgotten tradition which it once possessed. Modern philosophy and theology secularized knowledge, nature, and the concept of man and these are the philosophical and theological causes of the ecological crisis. One needs to address these causes to save humanity from annihilation, but it is not possible until and unless one learns to live according to the tradition.

