

# The Eco-Religious Understandings of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr: A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

*The present study deals with the religious moral teachings in connection with environmental sustainability by focusing on some eco-religious understandings of two contemporary scholars John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. By presenting a comparative analysis of their eco-religious views, the paper highlights their distinctive suggestions for ecological sustainability. In so doing, the paper aims to show why their eco-religious views seem essential in addressing the present environmental issues and how their suggestions can motivate humans for protecting the natural environment. It also investigates their thoughts and proposals in light of their respective religious traditions.*

## Keywords

Christianity, eco-theology, environmental ethics, Islam, religious morality.

## Introduction

By motivating humans towards environmental sustainability, religions can play a strong role in reducing environmental degradation. That is

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why religious moral teachings are considered significant in motivating human attitudes in favour of environmental sustainability.<sup>1</sup> This role of religions can be called eco-religion which promotes human moral attitudes to the natural world and their responsible activities in line with ecological equilibrium. It primarily focuses on the responsible behaviour of humans to all living organisms of the environment, by arguing mainly that humans are responsible beings apart from their rational character. Rationality implies the creative power of humans while responsibility means maintaining their mutual relationship with others. Since responsibility precedes rationality, humans should be service providers rather than service consumers. If this spirit is widely followed by humans, there will be no ecological issues like the current environmental problems.

In the field of religion and ecological crisis, few scholars are seen working by connecting their respective faith traditions with the current environmental problems. Of them, John B. Cobb, Jr.<sup>2</sup> and Seyyed Hossein Nasr<sup>3</sup> are playing significant roles as the pioneers in Christian and Islamic traditions respectively. With their extensive works, Cobb and Nasr relate eco-religious teachings to the present discourse of environmental issues, which is not elaborately done by other contemporary scholars of religions. The way both Cobb and Nasr

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John A. Grim, "Introduction: The Emerging Alliance of Religion and Ecology," in "Religion and Ecology: Can the Climate Change?" special issue, *Daedalus* 130, no. 4 (2001): 1-22; Lai Pan-Chiu, "Interreligious Dialogue and Environmental Ethics," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 21, no. 1 (2011): 5-19; Lai Pan-Chiu, "God of Life and Ecological Theology: A Chinese Christian Perspective," *Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 67-82; Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Pattern* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013); Aimie L. B. Hope and Christopher R. Jones, "The Impact of Religious Faith on Attitudes to Environmental Issues and Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS) Technologies: A Mixed Methods Study," *Technology in Society* 38 (2014): 48-59; Kathryn D. Blanchard and Kavin J. O'Brien, *An Introduction to Christian Environmentalism: Ecology, Virtue, and Ethics* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For his life and works, see John B. Cobb, Jr., *Theological Reminiscences* (Claremont, CA: Process Century Press, 2014). For his theological biography, see David R. Griffin and Joseph C. Hough, *Theology and the University: Essays in Honor of John B. Cobb* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> For a short biography of Nasr, see Enes Karic, "Nasr: Tinker of the Sacred" in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001), 782-83. For a detailed biographical description of Nasr, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "An Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2001), 3-85.

connect the present ecological crisis with their respective faith traditions<sup>4</sup> is hardly seen in the works of other scholars. Both scholars generally focus on the same objective, that is, reducing the current ecological disequilibrium to a tolerable level, but their methodologies are not identical. If one goes through Cobb's works<sup>5</sup>, one can easily find him a post-modernist in terms of his approach. Readers of Nasr's works<sup>6</sup>, in contrast, can see him as a traditionalist in terms of his approach to addressing the same issue. If these two reversal aspects are compared for a mutual understanding, it can help us to realize that their eco-religious ideas and suggestions are alternative approaches to the present forms of mitigating the ecological crisis. Keeping all these objectives in mind, both scholars' eco-religious understanding is chosen for a comparative analysis to bring faith communities, especially Christians and Muslims, to a common stance for reducing environmental disequilibrium.

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<sup>4</sup> As a process theologian (originally belonging to the Wesleyan denomination of Protestant Christianity), Cobb concentrated his overall attention on developing a new form of Christianity in order to address the present ecological crisis. Due to his reforming and post-modern approach, Cobb's eco-theological ideas and suggestions may apparently be in contradiction to the traditional Christian views, of which some Christian scholars may be critical. Though Seyyed Hossein Nasr belongs to Shī'ī Islam, his traditional and spiritual ideas of Islam in regard to the present ecological crisis seem less controversial to other Islamic denominations, especially Sunni Islam. Despite his educational background in modern science, Nasr's works mostly cover traditional wisdom and he sees that the permanent solution to the current environmental degradation lies in the religious and spiritual worldview, not the modern (scientific) and mechanistic worldview.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (TX: Environmental Ethics Book, 1982); Cobb, *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (TX: Environmental Ethics Book, 1972); Cobb, *Sustainability: Economics, Ecology and Justice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1992); Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good: A Christian Perspective on the Global Economy* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1994); Cobb, *The Earthist Challenge to Economism: A Theological Critique of the World Bank* (London: Macmillan Press., 1999); Herman E. Daly and John B., Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976 [1968]); Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York, NY: Oxford Universe Press, 1996); Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 75-96; Nasr, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis," *The Ecologist* 30 (2000): 18-20; Nasr, "Islam and the Problem of Modern Science," *Islam & Science* 8, no. 1, (2010): 63-74; Nasr, "A Religious Nature: Philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr on Islam and the Environment," interview, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71, no. 5 (2015): 13-18.

In the below passages, we discuss Cobb's and Nasr's core eco-religious teachings and their environmentally friendly prescriptions and show how their ideas are similar and dissimilar to each other's understanding. Concurrently, a critical appraisal and comparative analysis are presented on their eco-religious views and suggestions.

### Relating Humans to God and Nature

Without understanding the inseparable relationship of humans with the natural world, it is impossible to bring a remarkable reformation in the present human (wrong) perception of nature. For this reason, Nasr, in his *Man and Nature*, concentrates more on a metaphysical understanding of nature.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, he interprets the nature of humans. With the primordial understanding of human nature, Nasr describes humans as pontifical and anthropocosmic beings not promethean and anthropocentric ones respectively.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Nasr relates his narrative to a perennial philosophical thought to understand more clearly an inborn feature of human beings. By giving such a metaphysical narrative about the primordial position of humans, Nasr argues that humans have an intimate and inseparable relation with other components of the natural world.

Differently, in his *Is It Too Late?*, Cobb implies the primordial relationship of humans with God and all other components of the natural world. For Cobb, being part of the primordial nature, humans should be very sensitive to treating what comes from the same root.<sup>9</sup> In Nasr's narration, God's relationship with humans and nature is more emphasized, while in Cobb's understanding the relationship of humans with all other elements of nature is more emphasized than the relationship of God with humans and others. Besides, in Cobb's process theological view, sometimes the natural world is seen as somewhat independent of God's direct control, which implies that the natural world is being conducted by a process, i.e., the natural law, without direct interference from God; and this process or law covers interdependence and interrelationship of each other, including abiotic organisms of the environment.<sup>10</sup> Cobb advocates for maintaining this intimacy between/among organisms. Otherwise, the equilibrium of the

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<sup>7</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 134-35; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 160-61.

<sup>9</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 124.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-44.

environment will collapse in total destruction.<sup>11</sup> Such interpretation is not found in Nasr's thought, because Nasr's understanding implies that everything in nature is being directly conducted by God. However, Nasr gives more emphasis on the God-human-nature relationship<sup>12</sup> than Cobb, while Cobb concentrates more on the interrelationship and interdependence of organisms<sup>13</sup> than Nasr. Despite their focal points being somewhat different from one another, both Cobb and Nasr attempt to determine an insightful relationship between humans and other creatures of God.

### Connecting Special Human Dignity with Taking Care Attitude

Both Cobb<sup>14</sup> and Nasr<sup>15</sup> consider humans God's representatives on earth. Cobb tries to reinterpret the biblical term *imago Dei* (image of God), while Nasr attempts to give a new interpretation to the Islamic term *khalīfat Allāh fī 'l-ard* (God's vicegerent on earth). Both scholars relate this theological term to taking care of the natural environment. Traditionally, *imago Dei* or *khalīfah* is meant to refer to human supremacy over other non-human beings in terms of ruling and controlling. By referring to this term, some theologians may inspire humans to overpower others and justify human dominance over nature. In line with this spirit, humans deem themselves as rulers over other non-human entities of the environment. With such interpretation of *imago Dei* or *khalīfah*, humans like to be the rulers of the natural world, not protectors, custodians, or caretakers of God's creatures on His behalf. The term has at least two meanings, one is ruling and another is taking care. Unfortunately, humans emphasize the meaning of ruling ignoring the meaning of taking care. Keeping this negative attitude towards humans, Cobb and Nasr reinterpret the term in a comprehensive understanding, articulating both meanings. It is arguably true that without being a good caretaker no one can be a good ruler. To be a just ruler means to be just with others. If the terms "image of God" and *khalīfat Allāh* are granted to the ruler, there must be a just and benevolent ruler whose work lies in serving God's creatures rather than dominating them. In the paradigm of "image of God" or *khalīfat Allāh*, Cobb and Nasr place more importance on the responsible activities of

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<sup>11</sup> Birch and Cobb, *Liberation of Life*, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 134-35.

<sup>13</sup> Birch and Cobb, *Liberation of Life*, 207.

<sup>14</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 214-15.

humans towards nature rather than on showing their supremacy over non-human entities of the environment.<sup>16</sup>

### Human Responsibility to God's Creation

In the traditional Christian view of environmental preservation, humans are seen as stewards of the natural world.<sup>17</sup> In the Islamic view, the Qur'ānic term *amānah*<sup>18</sup> can be compared with stewardship, but the term *amānah* is more inclusive and distinct because it is difficult to translate the term into English. Cobb cannot take the concept of stewardship satisfactorily to interpret Christian environmental teachings. He argues that the concept of stewardship itself implies an anthropocentric approach in the sense that other components of the natural world have no intrinsic value,<sup>19</sup> rather humans should protect these ingredients of the environment for their own interest, not for their inherent value. That is why Cobb states that the concept of stewardship is insufficient to explore Christian eco-theological understanding.

Contrary to this, Nasr takes the concept of *amānah* satisfactorily for clarifying Islamic eco-religious understanding. According to him, the word *amānah* signifies the responsibility of humans to God's commandments, otherwise, they will have to show their accountability to God in the life after death.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic concept of *amānah* does not exclude the intrinsic value of other creatures. Referring to the Qur'ān,<sup>21</sup> Nasr argues that everything in nature is valuable, meaningful, and purposeful; nothing is worthless in the sight of God. Humans are not the only criterion to assess the value of other creatures. As a part of nature, humans must show respect to the inborn value of others. Everything in nature glorifies God.<sup>22</sup> Humans should not stop the voice that remembers God in their own ways. Humans are permitted to utilize the components of nature for meeting their basic needs, not to exploit them for their luxurious lifestyle. By repeatedly noting *amānah*, Nasr attempts to strengthen a strong sense of responsibility in the human mind towards

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<sup>16</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 95; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 214-15.

<sup>17</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 124.

<sup>18</sup> Qur'ān 33:72; the translation is of Muhammad Taqī-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, *The Noble Quran* (Medina: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, 1420 AH).

<sup>19</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 95.

<sup>20</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 214-15; Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 95; Nasr "Religious Nature," 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'ān 3:191-92.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24:41; 17:44; 22:18.

all other creatures of God, being trustee, custodian, caretaker, steward, etc., in the truest sense of the terms. Humans are entrusted with God's creation and they should maintain this trust with utmost responsibility, or else they will face severe punishment in the hereafter by God.

### Sacred Features of Nature

For Nasr, nature is sacred in the sense that it is God's creation in due proportion and due order.<sup>23</sup> No part of nature should be contaminated, misused, abused, or destroyed. Humans should keep it as it is kept by God. He blames the secular scientific worldview for removing the sacred characteristics of nature.<sup>24</sup> For Nasr, nature is not dead, and it should not be considered a machine as a secular scientist argues.<sup>25</sup> Nasr disproves the so-called scientific arguments denying the sacredness of nature. In his view, when nature became detached from its sacredness because of secular scientific understanding, the current ecological crisis began.<sup>26</sup> To him, discovering and reconnecting to the sacredness of nature is essential for environmental sustainability. Considering this pertinent point, Nasr urges people to revitalize and revive this sacred quality of the natural world. Cobb also recognizes the natural process as sacred,<sup>27</sup> though he cannot impose the term "sacred" on nature generally. Based on this, one can easily guess that Cobb does not disagree with what Nasr means by the sacred features of nature.<sup>28</sup>

### Sanctity of Life

In Nasr's view, every form of life is sacred, no one should ignore the sanctity of any living form in the environment.<sup>29</sup> Though Cobb is not comfortable with the term "sanctity of life" to understand the intrinsic value of life,<sup>30</sup> he does not disagree with the way Nasr interprets the

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<sup>23</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 286-87; Nasr, "God is Absolute Reality and All Creation His *Tajallī* (Theophany)," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Ecology*, ed. John Hart (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Nasr, "God is Absolute Reality," 2.

<sup>25</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 124.

<sup>28</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 95; Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 117-20.

<sup>29</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 144-45.

<sup>30</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Dialogue with John Cobb," *Process Studies* 49, no. 2 (2020): 254-74.

sanctity of life model.<sup>31</sup> When Cobb suggests becoming more empathetic and showing the utmost respect for life during domesticating and slaughtering animals, eventually there is no obstacle to accepting Nasr's argument that sanctity of life means to show respect for life, which ultimately shows respect for the Provider of life, and showing no respect for life refers to becoming disrespect to God as life-giver. Agreeably, both scholars opine that no living entity should be harmed by humans without due justification; if humans are to take the life of something for food and medicine, it must be done in a way permitted by God. Their arguments never suggest refraining from taking animals as food and medicine because they believe in a hierarchy of beings and values<sup>32</sup> according to which it is seen as God's wisdom that a group of living forms become food items for another group of living creatures. It is a scientifically proven truth that there is a food chain in the environment according to which every biotic organism is by turn transformed into food for others. They never suggest becoming vegetarian to safeguard the living forms in the environment. Instead, they promote maintaining sustainability by taking care of non-human animals so that no specific animal species disappear as a result of human attitude and behaviour towards them.

### **Reinterpreting Some Relevant (Biblical and Qur'ānic) Verses in a Holistic Approach**

Cobb and Nasr criticize supporting human exploitation of nature by misinterpreting certain verses of the Bible and the Qur'ān. For instance, the traditional interpretation of the verse, Gen. 1:28: "God blessed them (humans) and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground'"<sup>33</sup> shows human excellence and supremacy over the earth, sea and air, from where people can mistakenly take a license to exploit the natural world for satisfying their uncontrolled economic and military wants. But when this verse is interpreted taking in view the verse, Gen. 2:15 "The Lord God took the man (Adam) and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it

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<sup>31</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 117, 119-20, 144.

<sup>32</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines: Conceptions of Nature and Methods used for Its Study by the Ikhwān Al-Ṣafā', Al-Bīrūnī, and Ibn Sīnā*, rev. ed. (Bath: Thames and Hudson, 1978 [1964]), 51-74; Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 53; Birch and Cobb, *Liberation of Life*, 205.

<sup>33</sup> For biblical references, *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, compact ed. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002] is used.

and take care of it,” a caring mind and responsibility of humans to God’s creatures are ensured. If the former verse is interpreted without reference to the latter verse, humans may become tyrants; if the latter is brought to interpret the former, it depicts humans as custodians of God’s creatures. By interpreting both verses together, both scholars—Cobb and Nasr—focus on the human role as a safeguard to the natural world and disprove the traditional explanations of human unconditional supremacy over non-human entities.

Similarly, if the Qur’ānic verse, for instance, 2:29, “He it is Who created for you all that is on earth” is interpreted without considering the verse 33:72, “We offered *al-amānah* (the moral responsibility) to the heavens and the earth, and the mountains, but they declined to bear it and were afraid of it, while (hu)man being bore it,” it may make humans tyrants. If the former verse is interpreted in connection with the latter verse, it makes humans more responsible for taking care of God’s creatures. As told before, the popular Islamic concept of *khalīfah* is also reinterpreted by Nasr. Usually, it refers to God’s vicegerency on earth, from where it is traditionally understood that humans are selected as rulers of all other non-human creatures on the surface of the earth. Here Nasr connects the responsibility and accountability of humans to God for playing their role as caretakers of God’s creatures on earth.

Though Nasr frequently refers to some verses of the Bible and the Qur’ān to understand the same thing, Cobb is not seen to frequently refer to the relevant Qur’ānic verses to understand the common point with Nasr.

### **Creating a Service-oriented Mentality**

Cobb and Nasr equally focus on serving God’s creatures,<sup>34</sup> by arguing that religions place more importance on sacrifice rather than permission for enjoyment and entertainment. It is arguably true that a religious human is a service giver more than a service taker. For Cobb, if it is believed that Jesus Christ has sacrificed himself for the sake of others,<sup>35</sup> how can Christians be service takers instead of service providers? The event of crucifixion is enough, as viewed by Cobb, for Christians to be motivated for serving creatures. Nasr characterizes Islam as a tradition that emphasizes service and advises Muslims to show kindness to God’s creatures. Nasr shows how Muslim mystics used to love and take care of

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<sup>34</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 93; Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 133-135.

<sup>35</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 93.

animals. By noting some examples from their own respective faith traditions, both scholars see that God's love lies in serving His creatures.

### **Insufficiency of Environmental Ethics**

Both Cobb and Nasr commonly assert that the present environmental ethics is an insufficient attempt to address the current unprecedented ecological crisis.<sup>36</sup> As the present environmental ethics is an outcome of a secular knowledge system, it can deal only with the physical existence of an appeared thing but not with the inner view of the same visible entity. Environmental ethics cannot develop an inner consciousness and feeling from inside the heart for the environment. The way religious teachings can work to motivate humans for environmental sustainability cannot be done by the present form of environmental ethics. The main difference is that secular environmental ethics emphasize the outer side of a thing more than its inner side, while religious and spiritual teachings for the environment emphasize the inner side of a thing more than its outer side. That is why both scholars equally emphasize religious views of the human-nature relationship.

### **Considering the Environmental Problem a Spiritual Crisis**

For Cobb and Nasr, the current environmental problem is a spiritual crisis of modern humans.<sup>37</sup> Everyone today talks about the ecological crisis, but few of them take the issue seriously. Some environmental activists are seen to play an important role in campaigning to preserve the environment, but this is also likely done without a deep knowledge of or feeling for the environment and without revitalizing a sense of intimate connection of humans with nature. Most people talk about the problem, but their actions are neither supportive of environmental sustainability nor are they in its favour. Modern humans are indeed becoming aware of the ecological crisis day by day, but ultimately their response to the issue is not satisfactory. The potential cause of this, as both Cobb and Nasr state, is a spiritual one in the sense that people have less or no spiritual feeling for the sustainability of the environment.<sup>38</sup> It may be argued that when people acquire a spiritual feeling for the environment, they can take necessary steps to compromise their over-development agendas and luxurious lifestyles for the sake of ecological equilibrium. Both scholars attempt to connect spirituality with what

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<sup>36</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 117-144; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 223-80.

<sup>37</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 49; Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 106.

<sup>38</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 49; Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 106.

humans deal with practically.<sup>39</sup> In his overall discussion, Nasr places more importance on spirituality than activities that have no spiritual dimension, while Cobb places somewhat more importance on practical action plans than the spiritual feeling for the environment.

### **Controlling Greed in Practicing Frugality**

Both Cobb and Nasr relate the present ecological questions to uncontrolled human desire and greed.<sup>40</sup> They consider such attitude and behaviour of modern humans a very important factor in destroying the environment. What is commonly found in their statements about greed and its destructive attitude is that there is no end to greed unless it is controlled. Modern humans are obsessed with unlimited greed. With this greed, they extract natural resources in an unsustainable way. They exploit nature and pollute the environment to meet their highly ambitious target in terms of money and power.

So, bringing human greed under control is very crucial for environmental sustainability, but modern scientific knowledge and educational systems are based on it and there are no significant teachings for controlling such uncontrolled greed. Since modern education and teaching systems cannot inculcate moral values in human thought and everyday activities, modern humans are becoming greedier than ever before.<sup>41</sup>

Environmental sustainability depends on compromising so-called economic affluence and performing sympathetic activities for the natural world. Such virtues and values are not produced in secular education and teaching systems. Since different religious and cultural traditions of the world provide these spiritual and moral values and virtues as well as a deeper and more insightful knowledge of nature, both Cobb and Nasr emphasize the role of religions in controlling human uncontrolled desires and treating gently with the natural world as well as following a simple lifestyle.

In this regard, Nasr talks about Islamic guidelines for a balanced way of life, while Cobb refers to Christian teachings for simplicity in living. In keeping frugality in hand, Cobb develops some theoretical foundations for ecological asceticism<sup>42</sup> where he shows how a human can adapt his/her lifestyle in line with ecological sustainability. Though Nasr is not

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<sup>39</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*; Nasr, *Man and Nature*.

<sup>40</sup> Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*, 8; Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 129; Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective," 83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 58, 63.

quite familiar with the term ecological asceticism, his recommendations for the simplicity of lifestyle<sup>43</sup> support Cobb's ecological asceticism.

### **Balancing Population Size**

As for keeping population size at a balanced level with a sustainable ecosystem, Cobb's approach seems more assertive than Nasr, because he proposes forcing people to maintain a restricted rule like a one-child or at best a two-child policy for the cause of environmental sustainability.<sup>44</sup> Even he suggests distributing contraceptive materials freely or at a cheap price and advocates for imposing a tax on the family having more than two children.<sup>45</sup> Such assertive statements for controlling population size are not seen in Nasr's argument. Nasr does not give any specific suggestion, though he is well aware of the problem of overpopulation and its connection with the current ecological crisis.<sup>46</sup> Nasr seems to be a critic of the way Cobb suggests freely distributing contraceptive methods among young people. Due to a strong affiliation with eternal wisdom traditions, possibly Nasr does not support a system, which may increase immoral and illegal sexual activities. Nasr is likely convinced to believe that pre-marital and extra-marital sex are forbidden in moral teachings of all religions of the world, for these acts destroy the purity of heart and sanctity of family life. Thus, Cobb's approach is more direct and assertive while Nasr's approach seems more indirect and modest.

### **Comparing Nature with a Service-Providing Woman**

Nature nurtures humans like a kind and caring mother. Both Cobb and Nasr see the natural world in this way. They argue that mistreating nature can be compared with mistreating one's own mother. Human mistreatment of nature makes them seriously anxious about the consequences. In Nasr's view, nature has been degraded by humans in the past, but the difference between the past and the present is that in the past people had a caring heart for nature, while in the modern period people have lost such a caring attitude.<sup>47</sup> Nasr compares human

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<sup>43</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective," 90.

<sup>44</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 67.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr," interview with Seyyed Hussein Nasr, *Islamic Studies* 59, no. 2 (2020): 266.

<sup>47</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 18.

maltreatment of virgin nature with an act like kidnapping or rape.<sup>48</sup> Cobb also describes how nature is misbehaved by the activities of modern humans but in a different way. Cobb considers human mistreatment of nature a selfish and immature act, but never uses any abusive words. Cobb regards nature as a life-supporting agent. Earth is, to him, like a caring mother.<sup>49</sup> In this context, Cobb's style seems more modest than Nasr's.

### Connecting Modern Science and Technology with Environmental Crisis

Both Cobb and Nasr seem critical of modern science and technological equipment for triggering the present ecological crisis.<sup>50</sup> They suggest imposing some restrictions on the ongoing practices of modern science and technology. But they differ in placing modern science and technology for a permanent solution to the current ecological crisis. Cobb contends that it may be possible through reformed science and technology, for instance, green technology. In contrast, Nasr does not see a permanent solution in Cobb's vision of post-modern science and technology,<sup>51</sup> though he agrees that, for time being Cobb's model can work to reduce the huge amount of pollution, but for a permanent solution sacred science is inevitable,<sup>52</sup> because sacred science guides humans to determine a holistic relationship between mind and body, between humans and non-human entities, between Creator and creatures, and between spirituality and materialism. Nasr's argument seems logical because he looks into modern science and technology from their ontological roots with a strong philosophical grounding source and an ethical point of view. On the other hand, Cobb's argument is also

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*, 40-41.

<sup>50</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 24; Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective," 82.

<sup>51</sup> Nasr repeatedly argues that the permanent solution to the present ecological crisis lies in the traditional understanding of nature, not in technological use. For further details, see Md. Abu Sayem, "A Scientific Worldview of Nature and Environmental Problems with a Special Concentration on Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Understanding of Environmental Sustainability," *Journal of Islam in Asia* 15, no. 2 (2018): 312-28; Abu Sayem, "The Eco-philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Spiritual Crisis and Environmental Degradation," *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 2 (2019): 271-95; Abu Sayem, "Religions and Environmental Ethics: A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 34-50; Abu Sayem, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Works on Environmental Issues: A Survey," *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 439-51.

<sup>52</sup> Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 71, 96-99, 129-45.

logical, because he wants to reduce environmental pollution immediately by utilizing green technologies and renewable energy sources.

### **Transforming Science and Technology for Ecological Equilibrium**

In terms of integrity and synthesis, Cobb's position seems supportive, while Nasr's position is hostile. Nasr seems hopeless about modern science and technology, while Cobb seems optimistic about the utilization of modern science like green technology for solving the ecological crisis. Nasr is more critical and theoretical than Cobb in analyzing the root problem of modern science and technology on an ontological basis, while Cobb is more practical in terms of unavoidable circumstances like modern science and technology. Cobb focuses on how to utilize modern science for producing green technologies to control the uncontrolled ecological problems,<sup>53</sup> while Nasr concentrates on transforming all modern science into sacred science for a permanent solution to the environmental crisis.<sup>54</sup> As far as a durable solution is concerned, Cobb's proposal implies a temporary solution, while Nasr's view deals with a permanent solution. On the other hand, Cobb's proposal sounds more practical, while Nasr's suggestion seems impractical from a practical life's perspective because the possibility of going back to a past form of science seems impossible.

### **Criticizing Governments for Preferring Development Activities to Ecological Sustainability**

Cobb and Nasr criticize governments of different countries for giving priority to the economic development of the country at the expense of the environment.<sup>55</sup> Nasr categorically criticizes Muslim countries for taking some suicidal steps in the so-called economic development programmes,<sup>56</sup> while Cobb expresses his deep concern about Christian countries for the same reason.<sup>57</sup> Here, Cobb is seen as more critical than Nasr.

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<sup>53</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*; Cobb, *Sustainability*; Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*.

<sup>54</sup> See Nasr, *Man and Nature*; Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*; Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*.

<sup>55</sup> Cobb, *Earthist Challenge to Economism*; Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 93.

<sup>56</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, "Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis," 93.

<sup>57</sup> Abu Sayem, "Dialogue with John Cobb," 254-74.

Cobb realizes that poor countries are leasing their lands to foreign companies just because of a so-called economic purpose and warns their governments to be cautious about it, arguing that after extracting natural resources from their lands, the companies will go back to their own countries leaving their lands devastated. He suggests that people and their governments should not let their lands be used for such so-called short-term economic benefits. Apart from these cautious statements, Cobb tries to rectify modern economic theories and policies. Cobb sees that behind the destruction of the natural world by humans there is a selfish economic reason. Therefore, unless it is put in the right direction, there is no solution. With this in mind, he proposes “bioregionalism,” a market-based economic activity by prioritizing the interest of local communities and the eco-systems of their regions.<sup>58</sup> Nasr also talks about the wise economic functions where ecological consideration is supposed to be with the economic activities and recognizes that by adapting these policies there will be some progress, but seemingly he does not propose these economic policies for a permanent solution to the present ecological crisis.<sup>59</sup>

### **Supporting a Strong Movement on environmental Issues**

If one goes through some works of Cobb and Nasr on environmental issues,<sup>60</sup> one can realize that they support a strong movement of common people from top to bottom for putting pressure on their governments to take necessary steps for improving the natural environment and saving local eco-systems from further destruction. Seemingly true, governments alone cannot dare this because of the complex systems of the present world order. Until there is huge pressure from people of all walks, the national governments cannot proceed with an effort of protecting local eco-systems. So, people’s participation is essential to protect their own lands. When religious scholars and faith community leaders can make people aware of their own responsibility towards nature, and when many such conscious people can create strong pressure on governments, it will force governments to respond to the issue.

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<sup>58</sup> Cobb, *Sustainability*, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Nasr and Iqbal, “Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” 79.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, see Cobb, *Is It Too Late?*; Cobb, *Sustainability*; Cobb, *Sustaining the Common Good*; Nasr, *Man and Nature*; Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*; and Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*.

A strong movement is not possible without a massive awareness among the majority of people of a country. In line with this spirit, both Cobb and Nasr try to inculcate a deeper awareness in humans through their extensive publications in the field of eco-religions. If the followers of their respective religions can be enlightened and convinced well by their eco-religious ideas and suggestions, they can mobilize people around them for some more popular social movements for restoring a balanced relationship between humans and ecology. Maybe, the ongoing worldwide green movements and environmental activities are influenced by their ideas and writings.

### **Emphasizing Meaningful Dialogues and Cooperation on Ecological Issues**

Cobb and Nasr advocate for dialogue between religions on the ecological issue to discuss how they can interpret religious moral teachings to change present human perception of the environment and to motivate them for working positively in terms of environmental sustainability.<sup>61</sup> They have their own distinctive approaches to a meaningful multi-faith dialogue on commonly shared issues. For instance, Cobb primarily emphasizes a transformist approach,<sup>62</sup> while Nasr concentrates on a value-centric approach.<sup>63</sup> Cobb's "transformist approach" addresses the objective of the dialogue by emphasizing the transformation of dialogue partners' minds and attitudes from sectarian-based narrow interest to a wider community-based universal perspective, while Nasr's "value-centric approach" focuses on commonly found moral values in religious and spiritual traditions of the world.

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<sup>61</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 93, 106; Nasr, "Islam and Environmental Crisis," in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 104-05; Nasr, "Islam and Environmental Crisis," in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. A. Agwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997), 34-35; Lai Pan-Chiu, "Interreligious Dialogue on Ecology: A View from China," *Religions/Adyan: A Scholarly Journal* (Fall 2012): 91-93; Abu Sayem, "Dialogue with John Cobb," 264.

<sup>62</sup> Lai, "Interreligious Dialogue on Ecology," 86-88.

<sup>63</sup> Anne Marieke Schwencke, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Traditionalism, Islamic Esoterism and Environmental Ethics" (B.A. thesis in Religious Studies, Institute of Religious Studies, Leiden University, 2009), 11.

### **Focusing on Global-Regional-Local Collaboration and Cooperation**

Both Cobb and Nasr see that the ecological crisis is both a global and local problem,<sup>64</sup> which needs to be addressed on both levels. In this regard, what is commonly found in the works of both scholars is that they see that global leaders and policymakers should take certain action plans to reduce carbon emissions to a tolerable level and local leaders should implement the steps taken by global leaders with the help and cooperation of their concerning communities. But local leaders and community people should not wait for a decision from global leaders and policymakers regarding curbing environmental problems. They should work in their own ways to mitigate the problems. They should cultivate awareness among people about the essentiality of environmental sustainability and the significance of the protection of local biodiversity. Then they should motivate and mobilize local people for a strong environmental movement to create strong pressure on national and international bodies to quickly decide to work collectively to mitigate the ecological crisis. Concurrently, local people should try by themselves to conduct their own activities in line with ecological balance. In this way, if local and global initiatives are taken, and if mutual understanding and cooperation are established between them, there will be some positive hopes for environmental sustainability.

### **Conclusion**

Both Cobb and Nasr connect eco-religious understanding with the present ecological crisis in their own ways. Nasr relates human responsibility with God and nature referring to the Islamic terms *khalīfah* and *amānah*, while Cobb refers to the biblical concept “image of God” and “caretaker” to make humans understand their responsibility to God’s creatures. Regarding the concept of “sanctity of life” and “sacredness of nature,” Nasr’s statements and arguments are seen as stronger than those of Cobb. As for eco-spirituality, Nasr concentrates on it more than Cobb. Since they identify human greed as a basic cause of environmental degradation, their common stance remains against the uncontrolled greed of modern humans in terms of economic and developing activities. In addressing the issue of over-population, Cobb’s voice is assertive and stronger than Nasr’s statement. Both scholars suggest that humans should treat the planet earth in a very careful way when they work in the land to fulfil their necessities from it. About using modern science

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<sup>64</sup> Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 2-11; Nasr and Iqbal, “Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis,” 75-78, 84.

and technology in reducing the ecological crisis, Cobb and Nasr hold two different views. Cobb wants to transform modern science and technology into ecology-based science and green technology to solve the environmental problem. But Nasr intends to see a complete revolutionary change of modern science into sacred science for a permanent solution to the present ecological crisis. Nasr does not seem to have confidence in Cobb's postmodern science model with green technology. Though Nasr recognizes some possibility of a temporary solution in Cobb's model, he sees a permanent solution only in the transformation of modern science into sacred science. Cobb and Nasr condemn governments for giving priority to economic development over environmental sustainability. In their proposals, they argue why governments should concentrate more on ecological balance than economic affluence. From their understanding, it is perceived that they want to compare ecological balance as the heart and economic activities as the body. Heart and body constitute a complete human; without either of them, there is no real person. Similarly, for survival, humans need both economic affluence and sustainable ecology, otherwise, their existence will be at risk. Therefore, in earning economic affluence, the ecological balance should in no way be ignored, rather it should be given priority over economic solvency like the heart is given priority over the rest of the body. They characterize the environmental crisis as both global and local and suggest that mutual understanding and cooperation of both sides will reduce the problem to a sustainable level.

With such understanding and suggestions for the issue of ecological equilibrium, both Cobb and Nasr involve themselves in bringing eco-religious guidelines before modern humans for shedding more light on moral obligations to non-human entities. Despite some subtle differences in their ways of analyzing the situation in terms of finding a solution, both of them commonly address the same crisis of human civilization. Thus, Cobb and Nasr have seriously attempted to motivate humans to concentrate on environmental sustainability. As eco-religious scholars, they have successfully laid religious moral foundations to address the present unprecedented ecological crisis.

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