

Interview

Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

MD. ABU SAYEM**

(The interview was taken on June 21, 2019 from 11:25 am to 12:35 pm at Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr's*** office at 2130 H Street, NW/Gelman Library, Suite 709 R, the George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052, USA. The interview was recorded by Mr. Halim Miftah, Professor Nasr's personal secretary, on the interviewer's personal phone).

Md. Abu Sayem: At first, I would like to thank you for giving me an appointment at your office. It is my honour and privilege to meet with you. I appreciate your valuable time and your kind opinions regarding the following quests, queries, and curiosities related to my ongoing PhD dissertation entitled "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A

* An earlier version of this contribution appeared as appendix II to my PhD dissertation entitled "Religious Perspectives on Environmental Issues: A Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr," in *Religious Studies* at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). I acknowledge the valued suggestions of my PhD supervisors, Professor Lai Pan-Chiu and Professor James D. Frankel of Religious Studies at the CUHK for interviewing Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr. I also express my deepest gratitude to Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr for giving a schedule from his valued time, reading the transcript carefully and correcting where it was necessary. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Ruslan Yusupov of the Centre for the Study of Islamic Culture at the CUHK and to Dr. Munjed M. Murad of Harvard Divinity School at Harvard University, USA for their valued cooperation in reviewing and proofreading this transcript. Since the CUHK granted a partial support for travelling to Washington DC for the interview purpose, I am also thankful to it.

** Associate Professor, Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

*** Professor, George Washington University, Washington DC, USA.

Comparative Study of John B. Cobb, Jr. and Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” in *Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong*.

Dear Professor Nasr, in your work¹ you mentioned that you were interested in observing the beauty of nature from your childhood and that you have been working on ecological issues from the time of your student life at Harvard University. You also mention that, in reading Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), you became more concerned with the present unprecedented environmental problems. Could you please clarify what event really inspired you to work on ecological issues from an Islamic perspective?

Seyyed Hoessin Nasr: *Bi ism Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* [In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful]. Mr. Abu Sayem, as you mentioned in your question, from my childhood I was very sensitive to the beauty of nature. The highest mountain of western Asia is Mount Damavand. This is nearly 19,000 feet high. It is outside of Tehran, about one and a half or two hours’ drive from the city. All of my childhood I spent my summers around the mountain, in beautiful gardens that surround it. Later on, I would go mountain climbing north of Tehran every Friday. So, I was in very close affinity with the beauty of nature, not only intellectually but I also experienced nature by being in it. I also hiked and walked a great deal in American national parks.

As far as intellectual awareness is concerned, as you know, I began my university studies in physics. I discovered soon that physics in the modern sense does not lead to real knowledge even of the physical world. I am not going to describe all the reasons for that complicated matter. I only want to say that one of the realities that I discovered was the ugliness that is produced by the applications of modern science in the form of modern technology. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, behind MIT where I was then studying, the buildings behind the university’s central structure were very ugly and that left a negative impression upon my soul which caused me to search for its reason. Ugliness produced by modern science had a lasting impact on me not only in its intellectual aspect but also in its existential aspect as related to the destruction of nature through the application of modern science. So, I turned to the study of traditional metaphysics and traditional writings, including works on nature. I continued to study physics and later on geology and geophysics at Harvard University. I knew something about modern sciences and yet decided to be concerned with the issues of the importance of nature and its traditional understanding and so did my doctorate in Islamic science. The conservation of nature became a major concern for me for the rest of my life.

¹ 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), 28-29.

I did read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. It is a very important book which described vividly what man was doing to streams and rivers in New England and by extension elsewhere. But she did not provide any philosophical and metaphysical explanations. The book described terrible images of what was taking place and fortunately it was influential. I too was interested in the environment, but I saw the existence of the environmental crisis as a result of the forgetfulness of metaphysical and philosophical principles, especially those principles that are related to nature, human beings, and the human relationship with God. I saw that, so far, those principles were not considered, or, at least, I had not seen them being present at that time in what was being written about the degradation of nature. I began to study avidly works about nature as much as I could. And to bring the issue of the environmental crisis to the forefront, I wrote my seminal work in this field, *Man and Nature* (1968), which was based on the Rockefeller Lectures that I delivered at the University of Chicago in 1966.

Abu Sayem: We know that your work *Man and Nature* was published simultaneously with another influential work by Lynn White (1967), who blames a monotheistic religious foundation for the ecological crisis. You, however, make the effort to retrieve the religious view of nature in order to address the crisis. What inspired you to work on a traditional spiritual way of understanding the natural world, especially in a period of highly technological and scientific development?

Nasr: Like myself, Lynn White spoke about the historical if not philosophical roots of the ecological crisis. He did so in his famous essay six or seven months after I had given the Rockefeller Lectures. He delivered his famous lecture here in the city of Washington, DC. In the lecture, he blamed monotheistic religions for the environmental crisis. It is partly correct, but while it claims to speak of monotheistic religions in general, it does not talk to any extent about Islam. It puts nearly all the blame for the crisis on Christianity. Since Christianity had to save a whole world (i.e., a Greco-Roman world), which was dying from naturalism, it turned away from the danger of the "worship" of nature. The early Christian followers were honest and sincere in following Christian doctrine but did not pay enough attention to the presence of the grace of the supernatural in the natural world. Not that it was totally absent but it was nevertheless not at the center of their attention. And that helped to create a very sharp line of distinction between the natural and the supernatural.

In Islam, the line between the natural and the supernatural is not as sharp as it is in Christianity. With all of my respect to White's analysis, as well as his great historical service and learning, I differ with him. He emphasized sharp distinctions too much, but there were also other factors involved, and I tried to modify them in my book, *Man and Nature*. In other words, White overemphasizes the Christian element behind the

environmental crisis, but I show that this is just one element and that there are others involved, such as the rise of mercantilism, the breaking of the simple relationship between man and nature, and the destruction caused by modern science. These were not emphasized enough by White.

As for the question about my inspiration to turn to the traditional spiritual way of understanding the natural world, I tried to understand the natural world—the charm and beauty of the phenomena of nature—and I grew in my interest and began to read everything on the subject that I could find, not only the works of scientists and historians. As a philosophy student, I read even poetic works on nature, as well as prose works, such as those of St. Thomas Aquinas. I also found profound knowledge in Islamic, Indian Hindu, and Chinese philosophies of nature. I love, for example, the Tao te-Ching, precisely because it speaks of nature as God's theophany, or the Divine Presence, to speak in its own language, as well as in the language of my own Islamic-Persian tradition. With some knowledge thus gained, I decided to enter this battle to try to revive the traditional understanding of nature. It is a metaphysical /cosmological and spiritual understanding of nature. Moreover, I did not begin my many criticisms of the environmental crisis with a discussion of cosmetic steps. For me, the deeper issue was not that you apply modern technology wisely to lessen its negative effects upon the environmental crisis. The solution must be deeper than that. I tried to present an alternative point of view, which was about the heart of our relationship with nature. At that time, I was a very lonely voice, but now, after sixty years, that perspective is getting much more attention.

Abu Sayem: We know that the eco-religious perspective is a relatively new discipline in religious studies. It gained popularity in the 1970's, nearly fifty years ago. If I am not mistaken, you have been involved in this field for the last fifty-five years. Have you faced any major difficulty in researching ecological dimensions of religions during this long period? What are the major challenges that the field faces now and what are the possible ways to respond to them?

Nasr: I understand that there are several questions that are put into the question you are asking. First of all, there is the question of comparative religion which in late nineteenth-century Germany was called the *Religionwissenschaft*. I do not argue with many of its findings, although it also has shortcomings. I myself have been involved in this field for some sixty years now, and very seriously so. As for the difficulty in researching eco-religious understandings during this long period, I have really not found any. Thanks be to God, I have been given scholarly ability, and nobody could really criticize my scholarship even if they oppose my worldview. I used sources from Arabic to Latin for my research and some criticized me for my perspective. When *Man and Nature* first came out, the Islamic world remained silent. Unlike my other books, it took over fifteen

years for it to be translated even into Persian, my mother tongue. And only a few months ago was it translated into Arabic. There are also many Turkish editions. But its impact on the Islamic world came later than in the West.

When the book came out in the Western world, first of all, most scholars were silent, but some British Anglican theologians who thought of a proof of the superiority of Christianity to be that modern science just arose in Europe wrote reviews against it. At that time, as I have said many times, many people argued that the superiority of Christianity, as opposed to other religions, lies in the fact that it gave way to modern science, civilization, and progress. Now, you can find hardly any single Christian theologian saying this nonsense because by saying that you claim that Christianity is also responsible for the environmental crisis and the industrialization of the West. So, people who presented that argument have backtracked now.

As a result of debates of myself and those who think in a similar fashion with these people from the 1980's onwards, Christians, especially Catholics, do not make such claims now. This was the main problem that I encountered, and I myself did not experience any other problem. When researching for *Man and Nature*, I worked on the manuscript in Tehran, but all the footnotes and rare books that I used as references I found in the Widener library of Harvard University and discussed my ideas with some people there. I spent a whole summer just working on it and did not experience an impediment or basic opposition from colleagues there.

As for the challenges that the field faces now, I think that the most important challenge is that even if people become aware of the environmental crisis, very few governments (and not just the American government) and NGOs understand that the environmental crisis is a result of a much deeper spiritual, psychological, and intellectual crisis within modern human beings. Instead, it is glossed over as a technological and sociological problem. I believe that the causes are much more profound than that. Of course, there are exceptions among Western writers concerned with the environment but I will not mention them.

In the Islamic world, Osman Bakar, who is one of my former students and a leading voice on religion and science in the Malay world, focuses on science, nature, and the environment and has done wonderful work on these issues. There are also some young scholars in Indonesia and Malaysia, and there are some good scholars among the Turks, Persians, and Pakistanis. So, things have changed. But the challenge that still remains is that those who deal with the environmental crisis in the West and many people in the East do not really understand that the philosophy of modernism and its effects have to die for the problem to be solved. To speak in a very stark language, we are in need of a sword that can slay the dragon. That sword is not for play, but we should be aware of it and use it

when necessary. We talk about issues but there is not much that actually happens on the ground. It is not to say that nothing happens, but rather that only little does in face of the enormity of the problem.

Abu Sayem: Well, in your eco-philosophical and eco-spiritual works, you discuss this matter in the light of the perennial philosophy and of wisdom traditions of the world. Some scholars may argue that it is really difficult to solve these problems only through being connected to spiritual vision and wisdom traditions without at the same time incorporating modern science and technology. How would you respond to these statements?

Nasr: First of all, modern science and technology are products of human cultivation. It is human beings who have created them and now must face their consequences in all honesty. Technologies such as engineering are not really interested in the ultimate questions but only in practical ones. Most modern scientists, if not all, are environmentalists to the extent that they would not throw garbage in the streets in front of their houses and are obviously against polluting the world around them, but the impact of what they do upon the environment, if they really think about it, would require them to rethink what they do. You might be a gentle physicist in the laboratory who waters trees and loves nature, but in working on atomic physics, you do not know what the consequences of your discovery will be for the environment. What of the increase in radioactivity, for example, and the myriad of other problems? So, although exceptions do exist, such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, by and large, many modern scientists do not take environmental responsibility for the consequences of what they do. Moreover, when these problems come about, they claim that they are not their problems but rather for social, political, economic, or religious organizations to deal with. In fact, however, it is impossible to divorce the ensuing problems resulting from the applications of modern science from that science. Suppose that there is a room with children playing inside it, and I make a revolver because I love doing so and then put the weapon I have made on a shelf in that room and say, "It is not my responsibility if someone takes it and shoots; my problem is only to make this revolver."

This is the paradox of the situation of many scientists, who can be very gentle and kind people but create things that pose danger. Many scientists are not very aware of the consequences of their actions. There are exceptions, however, such as Robert Oppenheimer whom I knew personally. I was at MIT shortly after he had been the leader of the group making an atomic bomb. He was fully aware of what he was doing. He would quote verses from the Upanishads depicting the enormity of the consequences of his actions. He cried for what he did and his soul was tormented. The same goes for Professor Friedman who was his assistant and my own teacher in physics at MIT and who was known as second to Oppenheimer. So, there are people like them. But, by and large, the

scientific enterprise does not accept the moral and spiritual consequences of what it does in the way that it should.

Abu Sayem: It is known that you are a critic of modern science and technology and a proponent of sacred science. Is it possible to work for sacred science and bring modern human beings back to the views of traditional and sacred sciences? What do you think of green science and technology for producing renewable energy sources and for solving present ecological problems, as Professor Cobb argues for?

Nasr: First of all, it is possible. But to do so, modern man has to go back to the traditional worldview. And I do not think that it will happen, unfortunately, until a major catastrophe takes place in the world. Moreover, let us remember that five thousand people died in India in an industrial accident and few cared about it in New York! No one in the West would care unless it were a major catastrophe that took place in the West, where the whole industrial complex has been born. Great tragedies have struck Russia and India, in which thousands of people were injured or killed, and only some much less drastic events have affected countries such as Germany, France, or the United States. By the grace of God, thus far we have been saved from major catastrophes, which would cause a radical change in how we view the natural world and our relation to it. What we have experienced in the West thus far have been small catastrophes compared to one, which would awaken modern man and prevent him from destroying the world that we share. Of course, environmentalists certainly should not try to cause or facilitate such an event for some idea of a greater good. These things should be left to God and we should not try to meddle in these matters but rather try to serve Him through protecting what He has created. Speaking as someone who has studied deeply the environmental crisis, however, it seems to me that a major natural catastrophe that affects the whole of humanity could be a wake-up call that could avert even greater tragedy for the world.

I do not have in mind here, for instance, water pollution, which kills people slowly, or the negative effects of Beijing's air pollution that kill a few hundred people a year. These are the stories we hear in the news every day, but nobody bothers with them. They are not life changing on a macro scale. There is a very interesting experiment that I want to mention: If you throw a frog into a pot of cold water that you then start to boil, as the water gradually heats up it kills the frog. But if you throw a frog into a pot of boiling water, it immediately jumps out of it. What we are doing is that we are suffering that slow death, dying slowly. That is why no one bothers with it, except for a few people of sagacity of vision, but they do not have the power to change the world, making this issue the very important topic that it is.

From this perspective, I do not agree with Professor Cobb that renewable energy is going to solve the problem, but at the same time I think that it will help to buy us more time to discover and put to practice real solutions. Any alternative to the technology that we have been using that would use energy less unsustainably gives us more time to grow wiser. In short, I agree with Professor Cobb that it will help but I disagree with him that it is the ultimate solution.

Abu Sayem: Do you think that your model, which focuses on the sanctity of life and the sacred features of nature, is perfect to address the ecological crisis? Or do you think we should consider some alternatives?

Nasr: The word “perfect” here seems odd, for no one and nothing is perfect except God. But I think it is very important to propagate the idea of the sanctity of life and the sacredness of nature, not only on an emotional plane but also in their metaphysical depth. You see, this phrase, “sacredness of nature,” is related to the idea that life is sacred. But this statement does not mean anything in modern science. In modern physics, “life is sacred” is a meaningless sentence. Moreover, I think it is very important to revive not only the idea of and belief in the sacredness of human life but the sacredness of all life in general. A lot of people in the West, for instance, who have never killed or even injured a human being can go hunting and kill other animals with impunity and without those animals posing any threat to them.

As for other alternatives, I can think of the teachings of other religious traditions, such as Taoism, but that cannot be propagated on a large scale in countries such as England and America. Fortunately, within Abrahamic religions themselves, the category of the sacred is very significant. I write in my book that all religions are important in this regard, especially the Abrahamic because of the category of the “sacred.” I would say, for example, that in the Taoist religion, the word “Tao” is itself sacred. As for us, the Arabic word *quddūs* and other terms in the Qur’ān related to it are very important and we have parallels in English and other European languages used by Christians.

Abu Sayem: Do you know Professor John B. Cobb, Jr. with whom I have compared you? Are you interested in a dialogue/conversation with him on environmental issues?

Nasr: Yes, I know him, I participated in a conference many decades ago in California, where he was present. I also know him personally. As for having a conversation with him on environmental issues, no. I have a lot of respect for him, but to be honest, I do not have the time to do that at this stage of my life.

Abu Sayem: The last one is John Hick.

Nasr: Have you seen the well-known book brought out by the Turkish scholar, Dr. Adnan Aslan?

Abu Sayem: Yes, I read the book *Philosophy of Religion*, by John Hick, but. . . .

Nasr: No, the book that concerned a debate between myself and John Hick on the environment. He [pointing to Mr. Halim Miftah] can help you learn more about it.

Abu Sayem: Alright, I appreciate that.

Abu Sayem: On my request, you have read a draft version of a chapter of my dissertation on Cobb's understanding of the ecological crisis from a Christian eco-theological perspective and provided me with some feedback. Thank you for all of your comments on my ongoing research project. Do you think of Cobb's approach to environmental issues, especially his ecological model of life and development (i.e., biospheric vision and bioregionalism), as a viable way to address the ecological crisis?

Nasr: First of all, I have respect for Professor Cobb and I think he has given much serious thought to this matter. But I think the ultimate model that will work entails understanding the presence of life, its ubiquity throughout the world, its interrelatedness, its relation with higher orders of being, and ultimately God.

Abu Sayem: Do you agree with Cobb's statement that economism is a main cause of the present ecological disequilibrium? Do you support Cobb's arguments that the current ecological crisis is a result of economic activities bearing upon the natural environment?

Nasr: It certainly does, but that is not the ultimate cause. Two hundred years ago, there was no word for "economics" in the modern sense in English. We do not find a seventeenth-century text that uses the word "economics" as we understand it today. In Arabic, we have the word *al-iqtisād*, which is now used for economics. But did you know that al-Ghazālī used it in the title of one of his works on ethics and creed, which is a basic text in Islamic theological thought? So, he was not talking about Islamic economics as understood today. It is not that there was no economic activity in the Islamic world. Of course, there were bazaars in Cairo hundreds of years ago, as well as in Banaras in Hindu India, as well as throughout the rest of the world. That would be an absurd thought. The idea of a "science of wealth," however, as a separate discipline and in the form which we know today is completely modern.

What we call by "economism," the way I understand it, is emphasis on the centrality and influence of economic activity over everything else in human society. Of course, this is a totally false view and is very dangerous, not only for ecological equilibrium but also for morality and spiritual life,

as well as for practically everything value laden from art to ethics. Economism, however, is not the cause but the consequence of what we see today for it is an effect of the prevalent modern worldview. Modern economy is based on a Newtonian model of physics and a rejection of all non-material causes and elements. Following the domination of this kind of physics, we began to get modern economics, in which all motives are material, and there is no significance to altruism or self-sacrifice.

Now, of course, a number of Muslims write about Islamic economics and discuss the issue. This is a bit removed from your thesis, but I mention it in case it is of interest to you; I do have one student, Waleed El-Ansary, who works on this topic. He is a leading scholar of Islamic economics and he was sitting here where you are just a couple of months ago when we talked about this very issue. He gave a talk on this matter in Cairo and is in fact there now. He is very critical of some of the assumptions of so-called Islamic economics and pointed out its non-Islamic presumptions. Yes, this is a very important issue, but I do not think that this kind of modern materialistic economic activity is the ultimate cause, because it itself is an effect of a false worldview. It is not the case that there was no cheating, no jealousy, no stealing, no greed and so on in traditional societies. Yes, these are not modern inventions, but they all functioned within and were outweighed by an ethical world in which economic activity was one form of ethical activity. In Islam, economics is a part of the *sharī'ah*. But the Western notion of economics does not relate to ethics in an integral way nor to the Islamic worldview in which human reality is not confined to the material plane. This, however, is a long discussion that has practically no end. So, let us focus on the next question.

Abu Sayem: Professor Cobb has based his eco-theological thought on process philosophy, which supports the interdependent, interactional, and interrelated relationship of God and human beings, in which human beings are dependent on God just as God is dependent on them, and in which the pain and pleasure of creatures are a matter of God's concern. Could you comment on such methodological issues and approaches of Cobb to address the present ecological issues? Is it possible to develop a process philosophy/theology in connection with Islamic religious traditions?

Nasr: First of all, I do not accept process philosophy, which came from Alfred North Whitehead, as an ultimate philosophy. He was a British philosopher who taught in Britain and later a professor of philosophy at Harvard University. He was a very gifted Western thinker of the twentieth century, a mathematician as well as a philosopher with many correct intuitions and criticisms. Cobb's works seek to deal with reality in its philosophical as well as theological sense, but only from our point of view of process. What Cobb does not envisage and what we criticize is that there is a supernal world beyond change and process. For us, this is the world of the higher

levels of reality and the archetypes that are beyond process and change in the ordinary sense of the word. The archetypal world is called in Islamic philosophy *'ālam al-a'yān al-thābitah* and in certain contexts *'ālam al-mithāl*. In the world of change, yes, everything is in the process of becoming, in fact, in such a way that God affects the world and our action affects the creation of God rather than God Himself. So, the relationship of dependence does not go both ways.

Abu Sayem: What do you think about inter-religious/multi-faith dialogues and initiatives on ecological issues?

Nasr: I think, that they are very important in this day and age. I myself have participated in many of them, including in events with Catholics, many of whom, including leading cardinals, at first were not very happy about these initiatives. I have also participated in dialogues with Protestants and Jews. I think that the environmental crisis is one that should bring religions together rather than distancing them from each other. All religions are involved in this matter whether they like it or not, and religions can contribute a great deal to resolve the problems arising from the environmental crisis. Western Christianity had for the most part forgotten until recently its principal intellectual concerns with nature. While there is a lot of beautiful poetry on nature in English literature, for example, the spiritual and theological implications of nature have to be rediscovered. Eastern religions can also teach a great deal about nature to the West. Religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism can help Christianity remember its own forgotten tradition. Christianity, in turn, can help those religions by showing the scars it had received combating modern science and technology for the last three hundred years. It can show them both success and failure so that they avoid similar mistakes.

Abu Sayem: What is the Confucian attitude towards ecology?

Nasr: Research shows that Confucianism does not talk much about nature, but Taoism does to a great extent. Twenty-three or twenty-four centuries have passed from the times of Lao-Tzu and Confucius. Both lived in about the same age and founded two distinctive Chinese religious traditions. Ninety nine per cent of Chinese science and the study of nature comes from a Taoist background. Confucianism is the religion especially concerned with ethics in human society, with social, economic, and political order. It is concerned with the operations of social life rather than nature. These comments concern Confucianism and not Neo-Confucianism, which arose in the thirteenth century.

Abu Sayem: The environmental crisis is a vast issue for the current period, which necessitates collaboration from people of all walks of life. Some scholars propose a compromising and apologetic approach by religious

scholars, even if it includes working with secular views and the modern scientific understanding of nature. Could you support, in turn, such an approach and collaborative programme with secular people and atheists for the greater cause of ecological equilibrium? What do you think about dialogues and cooperative action plans on/for environmental sustainability beyond multi-faith/interfaith collaboration?

Nasr: I think that two different issues are involved in your question. One concerns principles: Can people who base their defense of nature on religious principles agree with atheists? Obviously, no. But then there is a question of practice. Suppose that there is a fire in a building and all the neighbours come to put water on the fire. Nobody says, "No, I cannot do this with you because you are a Christian, a Jew, a Zoroastrian or a Muslim" or vice-versa "because you are an atheist." So, in practical matters, if Muslims, Jews, Christians, agnostics, and atheists can put out the fire, or prevent the trees in the park from being cut down, then why not? They should work together. The worldviews of most of them are not that different on a certain plane in the sense that one group believes in the immanence of God and not His transcendence even if they do not speak of God, while the religious group believes in the Divinity's transcendence and for their sages also immanence in light of transcendence. Most people have a sense of the sacred. I know some people in Sweden who do not believe in any religion and say that they are not Christians, but who also are willing to die for the sake of protecting trees in a park. There is a crypto-religious aspect involved in this very complicated matter.

Abu Sayem: In your works, you have not associated the present population size with the current environmental crisis, while Professor Cobb advocates for reducing it and matching it with the environment. Do you consider overpopulation a problem for environmental sustainability? What do you think about Professor Cobb's support for a one-child policy or for forcing people to control births? Do you suggest any other option for sustaining the population size?

Nasr: This is a complicated matter. Of course, overpopulation contributes to environmental degradation but it is not the only problem. The truth of the matter is that before the advent of modern medicine, and I have a country like yours in mind, each family had seven or eight children. A couple of them survived, while the rest would die at childbirth or soon thereafter; such was the mortality rate. Modern medicine stopped this process completely, but in doing so it destroyed the balance between man and other creatures in terms of numbers. Now, it is of course morally not possible to refuse to treat a baby that is born in Dhaka that would otherwise die to malaria. One would not do that if the means to cure are there. Let us remember this truth when we talk of the dangers of overpopulation. My answer to your question is that I am not in favour of

the global rise in population, and believe that governments should act in response to the matter to try at least to keep the population steady. However, as I have said before, a single American has over twenty times more impact on the environment than a Bengali. So, it is not just a one-to-one matter. There are three hundred and fifty-five million Americans, which is less than five percent of the population of the earth, but they produce twenty percent of the world's pollution. Yes, it is important to stop the growth of the global population, but that is not the only problem. The problem is the manner in which we live.

Abu Sayem: I am interested in publishing some of my works on your eco-religious understanding, but both reviewers and journal editors expect to provide a critical analysis of your works. If I am to be a critic of your works, please suggest which sides of your scholarly works I should focus for criticism and further analysis.

Nasr: This I cannot answer, but he [pointing to Mr. Halim Miftah] can help you, and the decision depends ultimately on you.

Abu Sayem: I think that you as an individual have also contributed to sustaining the environment by controlling your own effect on nature and your lifestyle. Can you share with me a few of your habits? I hope that your lifestyle, behaviour and personal relationship with the environment would motivate us to follow an ecologically friendly lifestyle and behavioural attitude towards the environment.

Nasr: Now, when I lived in Iran, where I had more possibilities in my hands, I was more careful about this matter. But at the same time, I could not heat my house but with gas. And solar heat was not enough in the winter as it was very cold, and without regular heaters my family and I could not survive. These were some essential things that I could not change and in which I had no choice. The same is true now that I live in America. I cannot ride a horse to my work or even a bicycle, and I have to rely on a car. What I do, which is what I can do, is never to waste anything if possible, from my clothing to my personal affects. In any way possible, I avoid the destruction of nature. My contribution to the issue, however, is to bring about awareness about the problem on the deeper level.

There is a difference in kind and grade between the negative effect of, for example, picking a flower out of the garden of The George Washington University, and writing an essay that I wrote which helped save wild areas in Brazil. Concerning this issue, there is an interesting story in my life concerning my book *Man and Nature* that helped save a whole forest in Brazil. So, I try to practice what I preach, as they say in English, to the extent that I can but in this domain of contingency things are not ideal, because not all aspects of various practices are in my hands, not all elements are in my control. In all my actions, I try to keep the

environment in mind, and, for example, I try not to waste clothes and avoid unnecessarily buying new ones, as well as do my best to give my older clothes to the poor and not to throw them away. I also try not to waste anything at home as much as possible, and so forth, but my main impact is on ideas and principles concerning the environment.

We must work on a much larger scale, of course. My students and others often repeat that we should think globally but act locally. Although not all of us can act globally, I myself can because I write essays that will be read by thousands of people and that might influence indirectly even the way people in Cairo dump their garbage. Others, however, who cannot act globally, must try to act locally.

Abu Sayem: What do you suggest for young researchers and scholars of religious or theological studies on researching or studying environmental issues?

Nasr: Seek depth. First of all, we need depth in the understanding of what the issues are. Secondly, we need it on the level of finding solutions to these issues. These are the two sides of the equation. We must not be superficial. Fortunately, there are many young people now who are committed to the environment. Some of their insights are profound and deep, but some of them are not because they have no adequate knowledge, even if they have good intentions.

It is important for those of us coming from the Islamic world to learn from both the errors and the successes of the Western environmental movement. Of course, we cannot emulate the West completely because we come from a different civilization. The Islamic world has its own view of nature. Its traditional architecture, for example, was completely environmentally balanced. Our traditional city planning, agriculture, and irrigation are astounding from this point of view. I myself know a lot of examples. There are, for instance, traditional methods that considered evaporation techniques that took into consideration the heat of the sun and used underground streams until they reached the valley. Such practices are remarkable, and have to be preserved and sustained. I have written four or five articles on such matters in the last few years.

Abu Sayem: Thank you so much for giving of your valuable time and for speaking with me.

Nasr: I wish you all the best. I pray that your thesis contributes to greater awareness of these issues.

• • •