

# Religion and the Environment: An Interview with Seyyed Hossein Nasr

**D**r. Seyyed Hossein Nasr's work in the field of environmentalism spans several decades, placing him at the vanguard of the modern environmental movement. His prolific writings on this subject include *Religion and the Order of Nature*, an anthology of his Cadbury Lectures delivered at the University of Birmingham in 1994. His views in this area are related to the principal foundations of a cosmology in which the physical environment of the phenomenal world are seen as a manifestation of the theophany rooted in the Sacred, and therefore connecting Man and Nature to God. On the occasion of his 80th birthday, *Sacred Web* is pleased to present this interview with Dr. Nasr on this important subject.



**Sacred Web (“SW”):** Why is it necessary to have a religious view of nature for the environmental movement? Why is not a secular view of nature sufficient for environmental activism?

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr (“Dr. Nasr”):** This is a hard question whose full answer would require a book. In fact I have provided an extensive answer to this query in two of my books, *Man and Nature* and *Religion and the Order of Nature*. But let me summarize here some of the reasons for the necessity of having a religious view of nature. The environmental crisis has come about as a result of the applications of a materialistic

and secularist science of nature and the solution to this crisis cannot obviously be found within the very paradigm that has caused it in the first place. We need another paradigm that views nature not as an “it,” not as a vast mechanism devoid of life, not only as merely a source of raw materials to be exploited by man, not as a material reality devoid of innate spiritual significance, but as a sacred reality to be treated as such. Furthermore, if we understand what the sacred is, we shall realize that such a paradigm cannot come from anywhere but the Sacred Itself and the traditional sacred cosmologies and worldviews that dominated the perspective of humanity over the ages until the rise of modernism. These are still alive for many members of the human family despite being marginalized in many parts of the globe through the spread of the secular view of reality accompanying the spread of modernism.

Let us remember the basic metaphysical teaching to which traditional religions refer and upon which they are based in one way or another, the doctrine to which the Western and Islamic traditions refer as the “great chain of being” or ladder of universal existence. According to this basic teaching both the macrocosm and the microcosm do not possess only one level of reality or being but consist ultimately of multiple states of being which have been summarized in our classical texts as *spiritus* (*al-rūb*), *anima* (*al-nafs*) and *corpus* (*al-jism*). Within ourselves as microcosms all three are present and can be experienced by us. Our spirit, which some confuse with the psyche, affects and is related to our psyche and our psyche to our body. Our total being is a whole, a wholeness that we realize when we are healthy both outwardly and inwardly. It is not accidental that wholeness, health and holiness are etymologically related. Nor is it accidental that the limitations of a secularist view of the body as a machine and the medicine based upon it are drawing so many to what is now called holistic medicine. Despite many achievements in certain fields, modern medicine is confronted with limitations even in the treatment of many physical diseases as a result of its imprisonment in a secularist view of the psycho-physical aspect of the human microcosm. The secular view of nature, as far as it concerns the human body, is inadequate because it is not based on the whole of reality and is therefore only partially real.

Now, the same truth holds for the macrocosm. Nature is not only a collection of objects to be studied only through observation and analysis and dominated for utilitarian ends. All levels of the reality of nature are

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