

Book Review

**Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *RELIGION & THE ORDER OF NATURE*
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pages, 310.**

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Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr, throughout his book, *Religion & The Order of Nature*, focuses on the central question of how the spiritual crisis of man has become the very source and the reflection of the environmental crisis at the same time. The book takes the reader on a journey

through different traditional and religious worlds, whether they are indigenous or heavenly, within their scope of the order of nature. This study highlights the range of different religions' understandings of the sacredness of the natural world. Opposing to the modern point of view, Professor Nasr discusses the order of nature or the cosmological creeds of those worlds not as outdated and/or primordial beliefs but rather perspectives that present an understanding of cosmos intertwined with man's role within it. According to Nasr, man's perceptions have drastically changed over time about both the universe and himself. Professor Nasr in his other books— *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (1968), *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (1975), and *Knowledge and the Sacred* (1981), and *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (1987) makes a solid critique of modernity and the modern conception of nature consequently obliged to end up with environmental crisis.

Professor Nasr, in his book by criticizing the man-centered character of modernity, portrays a type of man, whom he calls

'Promethean', and suggested to be cultivated as a result of the Renaissance, diametrically opposed to the Islamic conception of man as 'Caliph' of God on earth. Hereafter, the central image of man as earthly god, maker of his own destiny, and conqueror of the nature, drew him apart from his traditional role as a *Ponte* (bridge) between Heaven and Earth, who was in total harmony with the nature and cosmic order. Such a dramatic

reversal of the role on an ontological level was doomed to result in a gradual desacralization of knowledge, secularization of nature and the current ecological crisis. Nasr provides an account of the rise of modern science and technology in Western Europe and traces how this has led to increased secularization and a diminishing of the sphere of the sacred. During sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the order of nature, once construed as created and sustained by God's grace, increasingly came to be viewed as a realm of resources subject to mechanical laws and open to transformation for human benefit. Once nature was viewed as a sphere of divine activity, now theological attention pulled away from nature to concentrate on the encounter with the divine in human history and in personal interiority.

In his book, Nasr, however, finds environmental ethics insufficient. He promotes 'perennial philosophy' to reveal the unity among traditional religions and 'sacred science' to restore a sense of nature's sacredness. Nasr is right that the environmental disaster is a spiritual crisis. It is because of the rebellion of the modern man against God that disrupts our relations with nature and our neighbors. His book eloquently shows how ecologically speaking, by turning back and recovering gems that we have for too long ignored in the world's religious traditions can help us to restore our relationship with the nature and to protect it.

Professor Nasr writes in the book: “The religious understanding of nature, which we can share only on the condition of conforming ourselves to the world of the Spirit... enables us to see the sacred in nature and therefore to retreat it not only with respect but also as part of our greater self.” The book, *Religion & The Order of Nature*, undoubtedly requires a careful reading for its multifaceted and intense structure and offers so much more than expected. The book is a masterwork and a must-read not only for scholars who study religion, Sufism, Islamic philosophy, but also for the ones who work in the field of ecology, anthropology.