

Nature of nature in Traditional and Perennial Wisdom

Abstract: *Men in traditional time passed their lives under the guidance of religious wisdom and rejuvenated their lives with God. Every traditional religion created its own ambiance of the cosmic order and guided people to live peacefully with the world of nature. This peaceful co-existence was the result of wisdom of traditional people who trained their minds through revelation and traditional teachings. In the modern world, men and women are living in a turbulent and chaotic period in human history. They have joined hands with those modern secular and materialistic men who have rejected religious worldview which determined the matrix of their existence over millennia. Modern man has succeeded much in the destruction of natural environment and threatened cosmic order which was unimaginable a century before. Resultantly, it has created a threat of the total destruction of the life of species on planet. To avoid this crisis, it is essential to return to the wisdom of traditional men who saved the lives of species with their understanding of nature as sacred being.*

Key Words: Sacred nature; traditional wisdom; cosmic order; modern man; environmental crisis; resacralization of nature

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The Problem

Environmental crisis has emerged as one of the greatest threat to the life on this planet. It has encompassed the natural ecological system of the globe as well as the human ambience. The air we breathe, the food we consume, the water we drink, and even the inner working of our bodies, have been polluted by this crisis.¹ It has endangered the harmony of the whole fabric of life on earth and has disrupted the systems that make human life possible. Furthermore, Over-population, lack of breathing space, the coagulation and congestion of city life, the exhaustion of natural resources of all kinds, the destruction of natural beauty, the marrying of living environment by means of machines and its products, the abnormal rise in mental illness and thousands and one other difficulties are the outcome of the problem in the harmony of natural environment.² It is the outcome of the prominent views held in the second half of nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century by the positivist philosophy and scientific minded people who thought that science and technology could satisfy humans and solve their problems. They viewed that science and technology would solve the problems without the creation of further problems. Such people tried to convince the public that religions and all metaphysical propositions and speculations are meaningless and should be eliminated from that which concerns modern human beings. Resultantly, modern man lost the sacred

¹ Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, "Series Foreword", in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, Edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. xv-xxxii, p. xv.

² See Stephen Mosley, *The Environment in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2010)

dimensions of nature and alienated himself from it.³ This desacralized conception of nature emboldened modern man to dominate nature and exploit it for his selfish and unlimited want. This man's struggle to dominate over nature requires elucidation. Nature has become desacralized for modern secular men due to secular view towards nature and therefore men started treating it like a prostitute to be benefited from it without any obligation and responsibility towards it. But, the condition of the prostitute has become such as to make any further enjoyment of it impossible. Therefore, many people have become worried about it.⁴ However, due to growing ecological crisis, mankind is reconsidering the sacred cosmic view of nature and understanding that humans are not separate from nature; rather they are part of the web of life on this planet. Since the appearance of environmental crisis, humans are perceiving religion from a new standpoint. It is an ecological outlook of nature that everything is connected with everything else. Nature is seen as an organic unity. It is this type of rationale that has motivated members of all faiths to study and reevaluate their own tradition. Surprisingly, the environmental crisis has inspired the members of diverse religions to cooperate with each other and to see the problem in the real context. It seems that humanity is turning its mind, heart and face towards Transcendental Being to study it with the vision of a better future, not only for humans but also for all the creation of the world. All the religions of the world advocate for the sacred dimension of nature and urge people to see Divine manifestation within the world of nature. For this Divine

³ P. Odum, *Fundamentals of ecology*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders co., 1971), p. 3.

⁴ Syed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperback, 1968), p. 18.

manifestation, Traditional and Perennial wisdom provide a fruitful insight to see God in the world of nature.

This article focuses on the traditional and religious conception of nature prevailed in the traditional societies before advent of the modern world. However, this article does not present a holistic view of nature that those religious and traditional societies had. The author has divided this article into three sections. The first section is a brief introduction of Traditional and Perennial Wisdom. The second section deals with the indigenous people and their perception about the nature. In this second section, the religious and sacred view of nature of various religions such as The Egyptian Religion, Shamanism and Shintoism, Buddhism and Islam has been very briefly discussed. In the last section is conclusion of the study.

Tradition and Perennial Wisdom

Before the explanation of the nature as sacred being, it is essential to define the term “Tradition and Perennial Wisdom”. The terms “Traditional wisdom and Perennial Wisdom” is usually used synonymously. The term “Tradition” implies both the sacred as revealed to man through revelation and unfolding and spread of that sacred message in the history of the particular humanity. It implies horizontal continuity with the Origin and vertical Nexus which relates each movement of the life of tradition with meta-historical Transcendent Reality. In his book *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* Syed Hussein Nasr mentions that “Tradition” is like a tree. The roots of the tree are sunk in Divine Nature through revelation and its trunks and branches have grown over the years. Religion resides at the heart of the tree of tradition and its sap consists of *Grace* and *Barakah* (spiritual power) which Originates with revelation. It makes possible the continuity of the life of the tree. Tradition

indicates the Sacred, the Eternal and the immutable Truth which is known as Perennial Wisdom and continuous application of immutable principles to various conditions of space and time.⁵

Perennialist School of thought emerged in the beginning of 20th century. Rene Guenon (d. 1979), A.K Coomaraswamy (d. 1947) and Fritjof Schuon (d. 1998) are considered the founders of this School of thought. It focused on the expression of timeless truth at the heart of the great Religions of the world. Sometimes it is referred to as Philosophia Perennis or Perennial Philosophy. It finds its expression in the revealed scripture as well as in the writings of the great sages and artistic creation of traditional world. Martin Lings (1909-2005) a Perennialist author, pointed out that Perennial Philosophy concerns all that is more profound and common to all great religions. It lies at the heart of all the revealed religions. It is known as religio-Perennis or Perennial Philosophy.⁶ It is the idea that all religions of the world are rooted in major single Divine source and One Divine principle like Perennial flower which blooms every year. This one source of all wisdoms has blossomed forth in the world throughout history. The major Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are understood as flowers in support of that wisdom. Professor Harry Oldmeadow explains that Perennial Philosophy is a body of truths and principles which are timeless and available to mankind since the beginning of the time. They are not sort of ideas, reasons of particular historical formulation and production of any culture. They reflect the transcendent unity of all religions because

⁵ Syed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1987), p. 14.

⁶ Jennifer Casey, "Origins of the Perennial Philosophy School of Thought," World Wisdom Inc. Jan 12, 2018. YouTube video,49:21. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_CNg4dpU54.

there is only one Truth. This truth is obliged to manifest itself through different forms because these forms are possibilities like different languages, races and times.⁷

The immutable, unlimited and infinite Truth is thus particularized by the specific Revelation as well as characteristic of the people who are destined to receive it. This particularization of the Truth has a direct bearing upon the study of nature. The study of nature may be made for various reasons in traditional civilizations and societies. Nature was studied as a book of symbols or as an icon to be contemplated at a certain stage of spiritual journey.⁸ The symbols used to understand nature that relies upon the form of the Revelation or Idea which was dominant in a civilization. It emphasizes a particular set of symbols that are inherent in the nature of things. These inherent natural symbols are independent from the subjective whims of individual observer and based on the ontological aspects of things.⁹

Indigenous Religions and Ordered Nature

There are several million followers of Indigenous religions in Americas, Australia, Africa, New Zealand and India. They are still surviving despite their decimation in recent centuries as a result of European colonization. Despite their differences in myth and practices, these religions present structural resemblance in their

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Syed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine: Conception and Methods used for its Study by the Ikhwan-Safa, al-Biruni, and Ibn Sina* (Lahore: Suhail Academy Lahore, 2007), p. 2.

⁹ Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine*, pp. 1-3.

relation with Earth and the world of nature.¹⁰ They guarded the natural environment for millennia with their nature friendly messages toward Earth. Their views were very profound about the preservation of natural environment. Many people are reexamining the views of these guarding of the environment amid the threat of environmental crisis. They are truly reviving the teaching about the meaning of the order of nature to counter environmental threat which is threatening human life and other species on earth. The view of primordial religions can be woven together to revive a spiritual view of nature to protect nature from the onslaught of modern mindset which destroys the very fabric of life on Earth.¹¹

Shamanism, Shintoism and Sacred Nature

Shamanism is an ancient religion practiced in Asia and North America. It sees nature as sacred and interconnected. The universe has three parts according to Shamanism; The sky (upper world), the earth (middle world), and the underworld (lower world), all connected by the axis mundi, or "Golden Pillar."¹² In Shamanism, everything in nature is alive and conscious including the world tree. Shamans can travel between these parts of the universe and act as mediators between humans and spirits. They respect the balance and harmony of the cosmos, which is essential for their spiritual journeys. In Shamanistic worldview of nature, there is no separation between the sacred and the natural. Nature is an extension of the sacred, and every element has spiritual meaning. Shamans

¹⁰ Syed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), pp. 260-61.

work to maintain this sacred balance, showing deep respect for the natural world.¹³ Shintoism also values harmony and cooperation in the world. It sees the universe moving from chaos to order through mutual help. Everything in nature, living and non-living, exists through the *kami* (spiritual beings) and contributes to the well-being of world. Shrines of Shinto are closely connected to nature. The natural beauty around shrines helps people feel closer to the *kami* and lifts their minds from everyday concerns to the divine. Certain natural objects, like trees, mountains, rocks, and caves, are considered sacred and are believed to house the *kami*. These ideas show that Shinto believes in the strong connection between nature, humans, and the divine and focus on balance and harmony in the universe.¹⁴

The Egyptian Religion and Divinely Ordered Cosmos

Egyptian religions also defined natural order as a reflection of the realm of Principles or *Neteru* (*a word which is conventionally as gods*). Man also carries it within his being as a result of his central position in the cosmic order. Ancient Egyptians view humanity as a microcosm of the universe. It is reflected through Temple of Luxor; the architecture of the Temple symbolizes the connection between human beings and the cosmos. It highlights the belief that the physical structure of humans is intricately linked to the greater cosmic order. This cosmic design emphasizes the Egyptians' understanding that Divine principles manifest in both the universe and humanity. It illustrates a profound interconnection between man and the cosmos. Egyptians applied universal laws of proportion and

¹³ Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁴ Sokyo One, *Shinto: The Kami Ways*, (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1962), pp. 95-96.

harmony in the design of their temples. The architecture embodies the principles which represent truth, balance, and cosmic order. By aligning the temple's design with these universal principles, the Egyptians aimed to create a sacred space that resonates with the natural order and reflects the harmonious relationship between humanity and the Divine.¹⁵ The hidden esoteric roots of both, civilization and individual can be seen in Ancient Egypt where man contained within himself the entire universe. Psycho-Spiritual growth was wedded together to precise intellectual and physiological discipline within the Temple of Egypt. It acted to increase the influence and transformative effects of Spirit over matter. It reflected the embodiment of spiritual knowledge and expression of spiritual power in the corporeal world. The Temple was the culmination of the collective life in Egypt. It guided the long lived civilization of Nile Valley towards gestation of a Divine humanity out of transitory human forms.¹⁶

Buddhism and Religious Order of Nature

In Buddhism, the emphasis remained upon the existence of order of nature. It possessed religious significance. This order is inseparable from the moral order which is related to human life, and dominates it. *Dharma* (the universal truth common to all individuals at all times) constitutes the nature of all the things in Buddhism. It is both religion and the universal order or "natural law" by which the world functions. The Buddhists discovered that Buddha (d. 483 BC) was among those rare beings who

¹⁵ R.A. Schwaller De Lubicz, *The Temple in Man: Sacred Architecture and the Perfect Man*, (UK: Simon & Schuster, 1981), pp. 21-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13

realized the nature of things or their “Suchness”. Buddha did not create *Dharma* but discovered and revealed it. *Dharma* has always meant “Principles” and “Law” in Pali text. It is a law which dominates the universe and bestows order upon it.

*That which the Buddha preached . . . was the order of law of the universe, immanent, eternal, uncreated, not as interpreted by him only, much less invited or decreed by him, but intelligible to a mind of his range and by him made so to mankind as bodhi: revelation, awakening. The Buddha is a discoverer of this order of Dharma, this universal logic, philosophy or righteousness ("Norm"), in which the rational and ethical elements are fused into one.*¹⁷

The nature had been viewed as sacred especially in the beginning of Buddhism in Japan. Kukai brought the teachings of Buddhism in Japan. He understood the ultimate Buddha as “Buddha nature that shines like a great light within all things.”¹⁸ Hence, Dharma signify both immanent and transcendent reality of all things. The nature is sacred in Buddhism and preaching of Buddha elucidates towards sacred order in the world of nature.¹⁹

¹⁷ From *Pali-English Dictionary*, T. W. Rhys Davids and W. Stede (eds.) (London: Pali Text Society, 1921), p. 171, quoted in Edward Conze, "Dharma as a Spiritual, Social, and Cosmic Force," in P. Kuntz (ed.), *The Concept of Order*, p. 240.

¹⁸ David E. Shaner, "The Japanese Experience of Nature," in J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (eds.), *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 167.

¹⁹ Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, pp. 46-48.

Islam and Nature as God's Sacred Creature

Islam did not reject religious understanding of the order of nature. In the Islamic perspective, the order of nature is seen to derive according to Divine Wisdom. Therefore, the order of nature reflects and issues from the order that exists in the Divine Realm *al-Lawh al-mahfuz* (the Guarded Tablet).²⁰ It is mentioned in the Quran that everything is created according to measure. It is essential to note that the root of the Arabic word for "measure" (*miqdar*) is related to *Qudrah* or power. God as (*al-Qadir*) the All-Powerful has determined the "measure" of all of Creation.²¹ Esoterically, the Noble Quran is the archetype of creation. The structure of the Quran parallels with the created order. It was first revealed during *laylat al-qadr* or "Night of Power." The very Power that created the world of nature and revealed Quran is in fact the Source of order and harmony throughout the creation. The order and measure of things derives from His *Power* and *Qudrah*. This *Power* and *Qudrah* is inalienably related to the very source of order because ultimately all the Names are One in the world of the Divine Names and Qualities. *Qudrah* or Divine Power is none other than *Hikmah* or *Divine Wisdom*, To express it somewhat differently—God as the Powerful (*al-Qadir*) is also God the Wise (*al-Hakim*). The very act of the creation of nature indicates the truth of imposing an order inseparable from the Creative Power that has created the universe.²²

²⁰ Reference to the Pen and the Tablet is found in the Quran (such as LXVIII: 1 and LXXXV:22).

²¹ Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, pp. 60-61.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

The Quran states, " In Whose Hand is the dominion (*malakut*) of all things " (23:88). This verse indicates the truth that God not only governs all things but the existence of the metaphysical root of all things is in the "Hand of God". The term *malakut* means at once the spiritual state of existence transcending the physical world (*al-mulk*) and also the spiritual principle of beings constituting the world of nature. Many perspectives of Sufism reveal the presence of God in everything. A Sufi axiom holds, "*Wujud* descends with its soldiers". *Wujud* is not designated as only the being of God. It also designates his finding, consciousness, awareness and joy. It is the life of God himself which is reflected in all the things of the universe in diverse degrees. God bestows reality upon the universe when He creates the universe. In Islam, God is simply *Wujud*, nothing else -pure being, sheer finding , undiluted consciousness, utter bliss, infinitely effulgent light. God creates the universe with His infinite wisdom. Wherever anything finds and is found, it is nothing but the refracted light of *Wujud*. The soldiers of *Wujud* are its attributes; the qualities of the Divine through which He manifests himself. When God names himself through his attributes, he does so in scripture, in the cosmos and in our own souls. Its manifests that He is alive, Knowing, Powerful, Merciful, and Wise. Every name leaves it traces in the universe, even if we fail to understand them. These names are omnipresent because the *Wujud* is present. Without it, the things would not be found.²³ God is present in all things because of his imminence, infinity and similarity. He alone establishes our reality and realities and rights of all things. Man has the responsibility to respond to the rights and realities that we face. God's presence

²³ William C. Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, science of the soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern world*, (Lahore: Suhail Academy, Lahore), pp. 92-93.

in the human image bestows upon people a certain freedom, and results in the right of the soul and rights of the others. The moral and spiritual responsibilities give meaning and direction to our world and the world of nature. Men have no choice but to try to live according to Divine attributes that are found in us and the Cosmos. The king and his soldiers are present in all things, in all objects.²⁴

The religion of Islam got not simply about the creation of nature by the hands of God but also provide human being an approach to live in harmony and peace with the world of nature. Nature is a fabric of symbols in Islam as it is viewed in the text. It must be read according to the meanings of the symbols. Quranic text expresses the same functions in human words. Like the phenomena of nature, Quranic verses are called "ayat" ("signs") and both Nature and the Quran speak forth the presence and the worship of God: We shall show them Our portents on the horizon and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth (41:53). In Islam, The Quranic text is also symbolic, just as all of Nature is symbolic for the gnostic or a Sufi.²⁵

Conclusion

In the traditional understanding of the world, nature was perceived as sacred and deeply intertwined with the Divine. Every major religious tradition held that nature was not only a resource to be exploited but a manifestation of a Divine order in the cosmos. Religion like Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism and

²⁴ Ibid.,97

²⁵ Syed Hossein Nasr, *Science and civilization in Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001), p. 24.

Indigenous religions, or the spiritual frameworks of Ancient Egypt followed the same principle. This worldview promoted a sense of responsibility and reverence for the natural world. Humans were seen as part of a larger web of life and it was obligated to respect the balance and harmony that allowed all beings to thrive. However, the environmental crisis of modern times reflects a stark departure from this sacred view of nature. The materialism and secularism that define modernity have led to the desacralization of nature. Humans are obsessed with dominating the natural world for material gain. It has abandoned the traditional wisdom that once guided human interaction with nature.

The philosophical and religious frameworks that once connected humanity to the divine order were replaced by a belief in science and technology as the ultimate problem-solvers. Although, this approach is yielding significant technological advancements yet, it has also led to the current environmental crisis. It has been characterized by pollution, resource depletion and a profound disruption of natural ecosystems. This crisis highlights the fundamental disconnect between humanity and nature that has emerged in the modern era. The loss of the sacred dimension of nature, along with the rejection of religious and metaphysical understandings of the cosmos, has left humanity alienated from the very world it inhabits. The natural world is no longer seen as a reflection of Divine wisdom but as a commodity to be exploited. This shift in worldview has not only led to environmental degradation but also contributed to a growing sense of disillusionment and spiritual crisis in modern society. Nonetheless, there has been a revival of interest in traditional wisdom and religious teachings as sources of guidance for addressing the environmental crisis.

People of various faiths are recognizing the need to return to the perennial wisdom that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life and the sacredness of nature. The ecological awakening of the modern age is inspiring a reevaluation of religious traditions and their teachings on nature and urging humanity to reconsider its relationship with the environment.

For example, nature is viewed as a creation of God and reflection of His wisdom and power. The Quran emphasizes the divine order present in the natural world and human beings are reminded of their responsibility to maintain the balance and harmony established by God. Similarly, the concept of Dharma in Buddhism highlights the moral and natural order that governs the universe. Traditional Indigenous religions such as Shamanism and Shintoism also emphasize the sacredness of nature and the need to live in harmony with the earth. The survival of the life on Earth is at stake due to environmental crisis in modern time. And the wisdom of these religious traditions offers valuable insights into how humanity can restore its relationship with nature with balance, respect and reverence for the natural world. To address the ecological challenges of today, it is essential to recognize the limitations of a purely materialistic worldview and to reintegrate the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of existence into our understanding of the world.

Ultimately, the environmental crisis is not just a physical problem but also a spiritual one. The destruction of nature reflects a deeper crisis of meaning and purpose in modern society. Humanity can find a path toward healing both the planet and itself by reconnecting with the traditional wisdom that sees nature as sacred and life as interconnected. This return

to a sacred understanding of nature is not only necessary for the survival of the earth's ecosystems but also for the spiritual well-being of human beings. Humanity can rediscover its place within the cosmic order and work to restore the balance and harmony that have been lost in the modern age.