

**‘Prometheus Man,’ Idea of Progress and Destruction of the
Natural Environment: Nasr’s Conception of Promethean Man
versus Pontifical Man**

Abstract: *This paper aims to discuss the current ecological crisis owing to the idea of progress that originated in modern Western world. This modern materialistic conception of progress played havoc with natural environment. For the modern ‘Prometheus man’, who invented the idea of modern progress, nature is a material thing, not creation of God. The modern Western world based on progress and material development has reversed or disturbed the natural relation between human beings and the environment. Significantly, this paper discusses the conception of Promethean man versus Pontifical man as elaborated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Nasr argues that modern promethean attitude towards nature that developed in early modern Europe, helped in rise of the modern conception of development and progress which, devoid of the development of soul and care of nature, contributed to the destruction of the natural environment. It examines how the rise of modern Promethean man, having no responsibility towards religion and God and devoid of spiritual life took nature as a ‘thing’ for material development.*

Key Words: Promethean man; Pontifical man; Idea of progress; Natural environment; Sacred nature

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Introduction:

After middle of the twentieth century, the two most influential authors who promoted and propagated the idea of destruction of nature at the hand of modern human beings were Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Rachel Carson. Carson in her book, *Silent Spring* published in 1962, wrote about the ecological damage caused by the commercial farming and materialistic American way of life. She especially focused on the destructive consequences of pesticide and industrial farming on the natural world. Her last words were prophetic regarding destruction of nature by the modern man who was disinterested in saving the natural environment, essential for his survival; "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth."¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his book, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* published in 1968, argues that the current environmental crisis is on account of the rise of the secular view of nature and decline of the sacred view of nature in the modern West. According to Nasr, today the world of nature has been destroyed due to man's absolute rights; the rights of man dominating over the rights of God and the rights of His creation, the nature.²

Modern human activities have rendered physical environment inhospitable. The natural environment is in deep turmoil because the essential elements that carry on life on this planet, such as sufficient water, clean air, and arable land, are at great risk.³ The human activities generating pollution of air, water and

¹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge: MA, 1962), p. 1-2, 16.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis in Modern Man* (London – Boston – Sydney – Wellington: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990, first published in 1968), p. 6.

³ 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.

land threaten the very existence of our life on this planet.⁴ The supporting life eco-system services are seriously damaged by the ever growing demands of natural resources by human beings.⁵ The effects of consumptive lifestyle are damaging natural environment. The growing population of the earth and especially the growing demands of the affluent are wreaking havoc on the natural environment.⁶ Daniel Maguire argues, if we continue moving on with the current economic, political and social trends, it would not be possible for us to continue living on this planet for a longer period.⁷ According to Ilhan Niaz, “the present grand design will reach a culmination, and human civilization will literally destroy the planet by 2100.”⁸ Because of the man-made ecological crisis, human beings are facing sixth mass extinction for which they are responsible.⁹ We live in age of ‘anthropocentrism’ where man is considered supreme creature on the planet with unparalleled and unbelievable power to remake, shape and destroy natural environment for his own benefits at the cost of the destruction of other creatures that are crucial part of the ecosystems on which humans rely for

⁴ P. Wesley Schultz, “Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors Across Cultures”, *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 8 (1), pp. 1-12, p. 3. Available at <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1070>

⁵ Stephen Mosley, *The Environment in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 1.

⁶ Nathan Gardels, *Want Not, Waste Not*, Interview, Climate Crisis, February 25, 2021. Available at <https://www.noemamag.com/want-not-waste-not/>. Vaclav Smil, the author of *Grand Transitions: How the Modern World Was Made*, argues if only two billion people on earth live with the level of consumption of the American people, there would be no earth.

⁷ Daniel Maguire, *The Moral Core of Judaism and Christianity: Reclaiming the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁸ Ilhan Niaz, *Downfall: Lessons For Our Final Century* (Islamabad: Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, 2022), p. 4.

⁹ Robert H. Cowie, Philippe Bouchet and Benoit Fontaine, “The Sixth Mass Extinction: fact, fiction or speculation?”, *Biological Reviews* (2022), p. 640-683.

their existence. Modern men have got incredible power and capacity to change the natural world to meet their needs and luxuries; that is why Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen has assigned the term, 'Anthropocene' to describe the present period in history of the earth.¹⁰ The modern inventions, even those that are not created for the destructive purposes, have caused various catastrophes, and have created various unsuspected disturbances in the physical environment. Rene Guenon warns that the modern world will cause its own end with these modern inventions, unless the modern world checks its course that leads to that direction of destruction.¹¹ Since the Industrial Revolution man has been continuously polluting and destroying the natural environment. This destruction of nature is certainly impracticable, immoral, and disastrous, according to Arnold Toynbee.¹²

The current environmental problem arose in consequence of the development of a particular view of the environment that developed with the conception of the modern science in the modern West.¹³ Ivan Illich an iconoclastic intellectual and critic of modernity argues that with the advent of modern science, the universe came to be understood as an energy generator; this understanding of the universe created energy intensive social arrangements that destroyed social, cultural and physical

¹⁰ Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind: The Anthropocene", *Nature*, vol. 415, (January 2002), p. 23.

¹¹ Rene Guenon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Translated by Marco Pallis, Arthur Osborne and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 91.

¹² Arnold Toynbee, "The Religious Background of the Present Environmental Crisis", *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, Vol. 3 (1972), pp. 141-46, p. 141, 145-46.

¹³ William C. Chittick, "'God Surrounds All Things': An Islamic Perspective on the Environment", *The World & I*, Vol. 1, Issue. 6 (June 1986), pp. 671-678, p. 671.

environment.¹⁴ After the fifteenth century, technological development, economic expansion, population growth and expansion of bad urbanization transformed the earth to an unprecedented level.¹⁵ Modern cities impacted natural environment on a larger scale as the ecological footprint of these urban cities, such as Chicago, Manchester, and Karachi is enormous. As compared to the early 'walking cities', modern cities are 'parasitic' living organisms that depend for their survival on inputs of clean air, clean water, fresh food, energy, and especially the removal of harmful waste, from outside.¹⁶

These developments in the early modern Europe greatly impacted the traditional lifestyle which was environment friendly. Giddens claims that it cannot be denied that "the collapse of the traditional family and community has in part created the disenchanted, fragmented, and narcissistic individual" who as the most central and prime creature played havoc with nature.¹⁷ The words of English philosopher Francis Bacon, best articulate the dominant attitude over nature of the man of modern Europe; he proclaimed, "the world is made for man, not man for the world".¹⁸ After middle of the eighteenth century, human being was capable of getting rid of the 'biological *ancien regime*'. As compared to the traditional agrarian societies, where humans mainly relied on the

¹⁴ Sajay Samuel, "Introduction", in Ivan Illich, *Beyond Economics and Ecology: The Radical Thought of Ivan Illich*, Preface by Jerry Brown, Edited and Introduced by Sajay Samuel (London – New York: Marion Boyars, 2013), p. 22.

¹⁵ Mosley, *The Environment in World History*, p. 3, 84, 113.

¹⁶ Joel A. Tarr, "The Metabolism of the Industrial City: The Case of Pittsburgh", *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (July 2002), p. 511-45.

¹⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 7-9, 171-174.

¹⁸ Mosley, *The Environment in World History*, p. 113.

renewable energy—wood, wind, water, human and animal muscles—for the modest living for many, the Industrial Revolution allowed human societies to rely on their invented mechanical power that accelerated the extraction of natural resources, production and consumption.¹⁹ The primary goal of pursuit of prosperity and material development of the Industrial Age occupied the central stage with no respect and care of the natural resources for a long term. The scale of destruction of natural environment through destructive economic and industrial processes is so great that we need an urgent radical rethinking in our ideas relevant to the myth of progress and the role of human beings in the evolutionary process.²⁰

Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that the modern Promethean man is responsible for destruction of natural environment. This man gave birth to modern science and technology which desecralized the sacred view of nature. He defines Promethean man as the type of man who rebelled against Heaven, God, some centuries back. For the modern Promethean man nature is a machine having no sacred qualities. This type of man has now forced humans into a situation in which what was once normal, natural and taken for granted has to be fought for. Humans now have to fight for fresh air, which humans used to breathe so easily, in order to survive.²¹ Nasr suggests that Religion, having moral authority, can play a significant role in reviving religious and spiritual aspect of nature as Religion

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6-10; Mosley argues that traditional agriculture protected even enriched soil over the centuries and maintained ecological diversity. But over the past five hundred years, because of induction of modern European scientific agricultural practices, technologies, and because of the rising consumer market, the world's soil has been degraded and we are going to leave earth as skelton for our coming generations. See Mosley, *The Environment in World History*, p. 79.

²⁰ Tucker and John Grim, "Series Foreword", p. xvii.

²¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man," Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ag-fIBXfnxo>

creates and shapes our worldviews, ethics and our primary attitudes and values towards other human beings and nature.²²

In this article, we shall first examine the origin and development of the idea of Prometheus man and the progress in the modern Western world. We will then discuss in detail how the idea of progress and development played a significant role in the destruction of the natural environment. We will also examine briefly the project of modernity in this section that how the modernity, that is development of human body and his or her material world, destroyed the natural world. We will then discuss the conception of Promethean man versus Pontifical man as elaborated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Nasr argues that modern promethean attitude towards nature that developed in early modern Europe helped in rise of the modern conception of development and progress which, devoid of the development of soul and care of nature, contributed to the destruction of the natural environment. We will conclude that the current environmental crisis is because of the materialistic attitude of modern man towards the nature. For the modern man, nature is a machine for the maximum use of material development and progress. For Nasr, religious understanding of nature is vital for deeper knowledge of the current environmental crisis and its solvation.

'Prometheus Man' and the Idea of Progress

In popular Greek mythology, Prometheus is the Titan who was honored for stealing fire from Zeus (king of gods; ruler of heaven) and giving it to humans in the form of knowledge, creativity, technology and intelligence. For this act of hubris, of stealing fire, Prometheus was punished by Zeus and chained in

²² Tucker and Grim, "Series Foreword", p. xvi.

the Caucasus Mountains for eternity.²³ Prometheus etymologically meaning 'fore-thinker' is said to be 'artful', 'full of various wiles', 'wily minded', 'helpful' and 'very knowing'. It also means, 'knowing before', 'predicting'; all of these, especially 'predicting' are powers of Prometheus.²⁴ Thus in Greek mythology, Prometheus is portrayed as an intelligent and clever figure that had empathy for humanity. This ancient Prometheus has been considered as the symbol of the present relationship between technology, modern science and humans.²⁵ In the contemporary world, the Promethean attitude has spread widely and reigns absolutely. The Prometheus characteristics such as creativity, technology, intelligence and domination have "resulted in a dispensation where exclusive pragmatism and habitual perception have steered human actions in directions that have resulted in an unprecedented ecological crisis."²⁶ The above mentioned Prometheus man gave birth modern idea of progress and development that equipped modern man with the ideas and tools to destroy the natural environment.

The idea of progress is invention of the modern conception of history as is discussed by Dawson.²⁷ For many modern historians, all history is an inevitable movement of progress that climaxes in the present state of things. The European Enlightenment gave new meaning, methodology and structure

²³ *New World Encyclopedia*, Available at <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Prometheus>

²⁴ Simona Chiodo, "Prometheus and the Evolution of the Relationship Between Humans and the Technology", *Studi di estetica*, anno XLVIII, IV Serie (1/2020), pp. 209-28, p. 210-11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

²⁶ David A. Pittaway, "Placing the Ecological Crisis in a Broader Context: The Orphic and the Promethean", *Phronimon*, Vol. 19 (2018), pp. 1-16, p. 1.

²⁷ Christopher Henry Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954), p. 16.

to the conception of history and progress. In many cultures and civilizations, history has been endowed with eschatological structures and with moral lessons. While the European Enlightenment structure was determined by the essentially liberal Universalist postulate that the experiences of countless societies and cultures of the past represent a collective phenomenon (indeed a monolith) driven by a certain intent (or spirit or *Geist*) and directed towards a particular purpose, namely progressive improvement."²⁸ The Enlightenment idea of progress became the most powerful idea or doctrine in the modern world and it has shaped every other institution. It has become a god with its own standard of values, moral principles, characteristics, giving no place to other religious and traditional moralities and ethical standards that have shaped for centuries the human societies and particularly human relationships with nature.²⁹ The theory of progress is established on the supposition that time has a homogenous teleological structure, that "this structure is inevitable, and that therefore the earliest phases of history were preparatory for the later phases, which were in turn simply the means to reach the intended summit of real human progress: Western modernity."³⁰

The project of modernity that is based on quantitative life and consumption focused more on the preservation of people rather than on the preservation of the earth and of the natural environment that is essential for the life of the people.³¹ In pursuance of getting the most advanced stage of progress, the modern Western Civilization, is producing as much as possible.

²⁸ John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age* (London and New York: Rutledge, 1995), p. 64-65.

²⁹ Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 18.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³¹ Illich, *Beyond Economics and Ecology*, p. 93.

For this civilization quality matters little, it is only quantity that is important. Thus the modern civilization is called the quantitative civilization and material civilization.³² Modern human civilization has fallen to the lowest level of selfishness, wastefulness, and senility because of the self-aggrandizing and degenerate behavior of the global elite. The global elite have manipulated the political and economic systems for heaping up wealth and getting privileges.³³ The contemporary man has been running after achieving the utmost standard of living through the cult of economic growth backed by economists and politicians. The avaricious and egocentric disposition of modern man has contributed a lot to destroying the natural environment.

The modern project has disastrous effects on the natural environment in which we live. Modernity, as argued by Hallaq, is a self-centered system that always cares for itself on its own terms. Despite having "impressive and unprecedented canvas of knowledge and technical sophistication," modernity continues to destroy the natural world.³⁴ While criticizing modernity Hallaq argues, because of the lack of strong moral foundation, it has produced a number of problems; for instance, the collapse of organic social life unit, community life, family, and most importantly the destruction of natural environment.³⁵ Perhaps, there is nothing more derogatory for the modern man and woman than this modern project of progress, and resultantly, destruction of the natural environment.

Nasr while tracing the root causes of current ecological crisis argues, in modern West, it was rationalism and humanism of Renaissance that made possible the scientific revolution and that revolution played significant role in destruction of the

³² Guenon, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, p. 87.

³³ Niaz, *Downfall*, p. 21.

³⁴ Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, p. 15.

³⁵ Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, p. xiii.

natural environment. Renaissance promoted the modern conception of science; the main function of this science, according to Francis Bacon, was to dominate nature, to dismantle its sacredness and “force her to reveal her secrets not for the glory of God but for the sake of gaining worldly power and wealth.”³⁶ Bacon promoted and popularized idea of the material aspect of nature. He stressed upon controlling and harnessing nature with the development of mechanical arts to attain human progress. The seventeenth century mechanical philosophers took nature as a ‘matter’, ‘inert’, ‘devoid of spirit’; for them, its purpose was only to serve man.³⁷ This modern European mechanical view of nature helped modern man to dominate nature and to use natural resources insanely.

During the colonial period, the Europeans were confident that with the help of modern scientific knowledge and technology, they could effectively control nature. For these early modern Europeans, “the world offered unlimited richness that could be developed and tapped for ever.”³⁸ The idea of development and progress was so deeply ingrained in the modern man’s mind that when Columbus reached America, though he found huge amount of gold and metals, he stressed that he had “come upon a natural environment that was ideal for development.”³⁹ Thus, in the fifteenth century and beyond, the most important thing that drove the next cycle in the global history was the pursuance of profit and progress. This idea of pursuit of progress greatly shaped political power, altered ecologies and ultimately brought ecological crisis.⁴⁰ In the post eighteenth century era, there

³⁶ Nasr, *Man and Nature*, p. 6.

³⁷ Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, p. 77.

³⁸ Peter Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed: An Untold Story* (London – Oxford – New York – New Delhi – Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023), p. 490.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

emerged radical ideas in Western thought about nature, land and the environment; they reshaped the environment in accordance with their wishes. As argued by Peter Frankopan, "the natural world became something to be tamed and defeated, a notion fuelled by the conviction that human ingenuity, hard work and new tools could now shape and repurpose ecologies better and faster than ever before."⁴¹

Since the early nineteenth century, the conception of natural resources, and their unlimited use became pervasive of politics, science, learning and development, which ultimately denuded nature of all value. Nineteenth century European philosophers believed that "If nature is 'brute' and 'inert' one can deal with it without any moral restraint."⁴² Most importantly as Hallaq argues, Modern West left Christian God, and took new gods; the god of earthly political power, the god of wealth and progress; having this power, the West unleashed war against nature to gain more power.⁴³ In late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the dominant view held by the positivists and the scientific minded philosophers was that science and technology could satisfy humanity and solve all its problems, without creating new problems. Furthermore, such people tried to persuade humans that "not only religions but also all metaphysical propositions and speculations were meaningless and should, therefore, be eliminated from that which concern modern man."⁴⁴ Later on, one of the notions of modern worldview that developed was that "nature is a machine that it

⁴¹ Frankopan, *The Earth Transformed*, p. 463.

⁴² Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, p. 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁴ Ibrahim Ozdemir, "Toward an Understanding of Environmental Ethics from a Qur'anic Perspective", in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, Edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 3-37, p. 4.

has no value and expresses no sense of purpose."⁴⁵ This secular and materialistic view robs nature of all its inherent qualities and values.

During the twentieth century many modern political leaders were highly impressed by the modern Western ideas of development and progress, and domination of nature. Mao Zedong (d. 1976) of China was fascinated by the idea of progress and modernity and conquering of the nature when he said, "Man Must Conquer Nature."⁴⁶ Nature could – and should – be forced to obey the will of its human master. "When we ask the mountain to bow its head, it has to do so! When we ask the river to yield the way, it must yield!"⁴⁷ When Mao declared war against four insects, especially sparrow, to uplift the hygiene standard, as modernization of China was going on, between March and November 1959 almost 2 billion sparrows were killed across China.⁴⁸ The revenge of the sparrow or nature was more cruel as between 1959 and 1961 about 40 million people were killed by hunger and starvation.⁴⁹ However, there were voices that were critical of this modern life style and profit making world of colonialism and ravaging of nature. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948). For Gandhi, modernity had brought oppression and unhappiness to the world.⁵⁰ Gandhi believes that true happiness could only come from living "simple peasant

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 4-5.

⁴⁶ Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 67–8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁴⁸ Bao Maohong, "The Evolution of Environmental Problems and Environmental Policy in China: The Interaction of Internal and External Forces", in *Environmental Histories of the Cold War*, Edited by J. R. McNeill and Corinna R. Unger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 323-43, p. 328.

⁴⁹ Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature*, p. 75, 89.

⁵⁰ Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi: 'Hind Swaraj' and Other Writings*, Edited by Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), p. 131.

life and rejecting modern technology, and the consumptive life style.⁵¹

The idea of progress and development has completely changed since the eighteenth century, since then it has connected to the materialism. Most of the pre-modern societies, even of the West, the moving force which governed human existence and its history were non-material. In the old traditional societies, the important domain has been the development of moral education, and moral upbringing in the world. Whereas in the nineteenth European technical age what counts as progress, as a true achievement, is "is economic and technical progress."⁵² The modern Western world based on 'progress' and material development has exactly reversed or disturbed the natural relation between different orders of things. This human-created imbalance between various orders of things became cause of the current environmental crisis.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Conception of Promethean Man versus Pontifical Man

"Promethean man, on the contrary, is a creature of this world. He feels at home on earth, earth considered not as the virgin nature which is itself an echo of paradise, but as the artificial world created by Promethean man himself in order to make it possible for him to forget God and his own inner reality. Such a man envisages life as a big marketplace in which he is free to roam around and choose objects at will."⁵³

⁵¹ George Morton-Jack, *The Indian Empire at War: From Jihad to Victory, the Untold Story of the Indian Army in the First World War* (London: Little Brown, 2018), p. 58.

⁵² Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, p. 7.

⁵³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), P. 145.

Nasr while criticizing the Promethean man argues, for the modern Westerner Promethean, nature is not being, it is a property to be enjoyed and exploited, or an enemy to conquer. Promethean man sees himself as earthly human beings, having no relationship with God. He has no knowledge of his origin and has no purpose. He is a thief who has stolen the celestial fire; he has rebelled against God and is a man who has lost his spiritual path and purpose. For such a man, this life on earth is a big marketplace in which he is free to roam and to do what he or she likes to do with nature.⁵⁴ The modern Promethean man is suffocated by his own artificial living conditions, "wary of the destruction he has wrought upon the natural environment and the vilification of the urban setting in which he is forced to live."⁵⁵

Against the above discussed notion of Promethean man, Nasr posits Pontifical man who plays the role of a bridge between the Earth and the Heaven. Pontifical man is the vicegerent of God (*khalifat Allāh*) on earth, to use the Islamic term; responsible to God for his actions; custodian and protector of the earth of which he is given dominion on the condition that he remains faithful to himself as the central terrestrial figure created in the "form of God", "a theomorphic being living in this world but created for eternity."⁵⁶ Pontifical man is always conscious of his Origin, and he strives to reach back his Origin. For him, "life is impregnated with meaning and the universe peopled with creatures whom he can address as thou"⁵⁷. Thus, the pontifical man is the 'sacred man' who unites spiritual and physical realms contrary to the Promethean man who strives for material perfection and progress.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 144-45.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

In the Islamic tradition, humans being considered the noblest of creatures (*ashraf al-makhlūqāt*), is the supremely humbling quality. In the Quran, it is stated that the creation of the nature, the rest of the cosmos is a matter greater than the creation of the human being.

“Assuredly the creation of the heavens and the earth is [a matter] greater than the creation of the human beings: yet most people understand not.”⁵⁸ God has not given human beings exclusive claim to the earth rather “the earth He has assigned to all living creatures.”⁵⁹ And the all living beings are communities of God like human beings, they have their own laws, their own habitat, and their own sacrosanct natural rights. As is mentioned in the Quran; “And there is no animal in the earth nor bird that flies with its two wings but that they are communities like yourselves.”⁶⁰

As far the rights of man and other creatures are concerned, we can (remind ourselves of a) learn from a medieval Arabic fable written by the fraternity, called itself (*Ikhwan al-Safa*), in the tenth century. In this colorful story (as depicted in painting 1 in the art section), a company of animals present their case before the king of the *jinn* (genies), and question whether human beings superior to other creatures, animals, and if so in what respect:

“A group of humans landed on a remote island inhabited by a great variety of animals. Acting on premise that human beings are masters and animals slaves, the humans began to exploit the

⁵⁸ *The Study Quran: A New Interpretation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper One, 2015), 40-57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 55-10.

⁶⁰ *The Study Quran: A New Interpretation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Harper One, 2015), 6-38.

animals. Unwilling to endure such treatment, the animals brought their dispute with the humans before the king of the *jinn*, whose folk also inhabited the island. The animals gathered while representing a great variety of creatures—domestic animals, birds, aquatic animals, insects and crawling creatures—and challenged human presumptions of superiority. The animals presented their case before the king of the *jinn* (genies), raising the question of whether human beings are superior to animals, and if so in what respect. The king *jinn* responded; 'Let man not imagine ... that just because he is superior to the animals they are his slaves. Rather it is that we are all slaves of the Almighty (Allah) and must obey His commands ... Let man not forget that he is accountable to his Maker (Allah) for the way in which he treats all animals, just as he is accountable for his behavior towards his fellow human beings. Man bears a heavy responsibility. ...'⁶¹

According to the above mentioned fable, human beings are superior to the animals because of being the guardian of the earth, and their hefty moral burden. Yes, they are superior to animals, but not because they enjoy any higher moral authority or functional status. Human beings as God's deputy (*khalifat Allāh fi'l-ard*) are accountable for their acts, whereas non-human animals are not.⁶²

Promethean man mirrors the perception of Western man who presents himself as a 'little god' who disobeyed the divine authority and stole from heaven that which does not belong to

⁶¹ Ikhwān al-Safā', The case of the animals versus man before the king of the Jinn: A tenth-century ecological fable of the pure Brethren of Basra, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Boston: Twayne, 1978)

⁶² S. Nomanul Haq, "Islam and Ecology: Towards Retrieval and Reconstruction," in *Islam and Ecology: A Bestowed Trust*, Edited by Richard C. Foltz, Frederick M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 121-154, p. 133

him.⁶³ He is plunged into impermanence and transience and has lost his or her sacredness. He has become slave of his lower self (*nafs*). Contrary to this, for the Pontifical man, who as vicegerent of God on earth plays the role of a mediator between Heaven and the Earth; for the Pontifical man, the universe has its Creator, Origin and Center. Importantly Nasr points out,

“Renaissance man ceased to be the ambivalent man of the Middle Ages, half-angel, half-man, torn between heaven and earth. Rather, he became wholly a man, but now a totally earth-bound creature. He gained his liberty at the expense of losing the freedom to transcend his terrestrial limitations. Freedom for him now became quantitative and horizontal rather than qualitative and vertical, and it was in this spirit that he went on to conquer the earth and with it to open new horizons in geography and natural history.”⁶⁴

Modern man is running after the material perfection in this finite world. His real perfection is the perfection of the soul which only Religion and spirituality can provide.⁶⁵ Importantly Nasr suggests, it is only Religion that can discipline the soul to live ascetically, and to live a life of simplicity and frugality which are the ornaments of the soul. This type of ascetic life will be careful towards the natural world considering nature as being and sacred as was considered among the traditional religious societies. Nasr writes,

⁶³ Gai Eaton, “Knowledge and the Sacred: Reflections on Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Gifford Lectures”, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 15, No. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1983), pp. 1-10, p. 7. Available at:

http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com/public/articles/Knowledge_and_the_Sacred-Reflections_on_Seyyed_Hossein_Nasr%E2%80%99s_Gifford_Lectures-by_Gai_Eaton.aspx

⁶⁴ Nasr, *Man and Nature*, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 272.

“The crisis of the natural environment is an external reminder of the crisis within the souls of men and women who, having forsaken Heaven in the name of the Earth, are now in danger of destroying the Earth as well. The environmental crisis requires not simply rhetoric or cosmetic solutions but a death and rebirth of modern man and his worldview. Man needs not be and in fact cannot be ‘reinvented’ as some have claimed, but he must be reborn as traditional or pontifical man, a bridge between Heaven and Earth, and the world of nature must once again be conceived as it has always been—a sacred realm reflecting the divine creative energies.”⁶⁶

Conclusion:

The current ecological crisis is because of the Promethean attitude of modern man towards nature. For the modern man, nature is not a ‘being’ rather it is a machine for the maximum use of man and for the material development and progress. New ugly modernization and industrialization of the nineteenth and present century has destroyed the natural environment to a great extent. The materialistic conception of nature and the domination over nature combined with the sense of greed and lust increased the demands by the humans which ultimately played havoc with the natural environment. Fundamentally, Nasr argues that the current ecological crisis is because of the forgetfulness of the modern man of his Origin or Roots and even God. Religion can play a significant role in understanding the root causes of the current environmental degradation and also it is the religion that has an extensive doctrine about the nature of the world in which we live. For Nasr, religious understanding of nature is vital to deeper knowledge of the current environmental crisis. Religious doctrine can help a lot in reviving

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 6-7.

the natural environment as Religion provides authentic knowledge of the natural world and human being. Thus to save the natural environment, it is essential to have deeper knowledge about human and nature and the relationship of the former with the later and most importantly the relationship of human being with the creator of humans and nature.