

From Sacrilege to Sacralisation: Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Perspectives on the Ecological Crisis in the Light of the Holy Qur'an

By Reza Shab-Kazemi

In his seminal work, *Man and Nature: the Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, written in 1968, Seyyed Hossein Nasr succinctly expresses 'the problem' underlying the ecological crisis:

That the harmony between man and nature has been destroyed is a fact which most people admit. But not everyone realizes that this disequilibrium is due to the destruction of the harmony between man and God.¹

This statement of fundamental importance can be read as a comment on a verse of the Qur'an which deserves deep meditation in relation to the contemporary ecological crisis:

Corruption has appeared on land and at sea because of what the hands of men have wrought; in order that God may make them taste a part of what they have done, so that they might return (30:41).

To the sacrilege wrought by men's hands on earth and at sea must respond a re-sacralisation which can only come about, according to Nasr, through individual spiritual effort, on the one hand, and the grace of God, on the other. This remedy is in harmony with the principle expressed in the following Qur'anic verse:

Truly God will not change the condition of a people until they change the condition of their own souls (13:11).

¹ S.H. Nasr *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London, 1968), p.20.

The change in question—the re-sacralisation of our view of the universe — is one which, to return to Nasr’s formulation of the ‘problem’ cited above, ‘involves a relationship which concerns all knowledge’. If, as we propose to demonstrate in this necessarily brief presentation, Nasr’s perspectives on the ecological crisis can be read as so many commentaries on the Holy Qur’an, this should come as no surprise.

For the Qur’an refers to itself as ‘a clarification of everything’ (16:89). If the fundamental cause of the ecological imbalance between man and nature is a spiritual disharmony between man and God; and if an understanding of this disharmony concerns what Nasr calls ‘all knowledge’, then it should be possible to discover in the Qur’an a ‘clarification’ of the essential principles in the light of which the present ecological crisis can be correctly diagnosed, and for which a remedy can be effectively proposed. Nasr’s comprehensive diagnosis of the ecological malady, together with his compelling presentation of its remedy, can indeed be seen as an extended commentary on certain crucial principles which the Qur’an either expresses explicitly in its literal teachings (*ibāra*) or implicitly through allusion (*ishāra*).

We could substantiate our argument with many examples, but as our time is limited today, let us focus on two key, complementary themes of Nasr’s perspective on the ecological crisis: how the sacrilege or profanation of Virgin Nature came about in the first place, and how to respond to this sacrilege by a re-sacralisation of our conception of, and attitude towards, the natural world.

Turning first to the causes of the crisis, I would argue that the Qur’anic symbolism of the Fall of the first couple helps us to see the reason why Nasr places so much emphasis upon locating the roots of the ecological crisis in Renaissance Humanism; conversely, Nasr’s exposition enables us to appreciate more deeply the spiritual significance of the Qur’anic symbolism of the fall from grace.

It is self-evident that the Qur’anic account of the fall of Adam and Eve from their celestial Garden can be read as a symbolic prefiguration of our current crisis: through heedlessness, disobedience and sin, human beings have progressively slipped from a state of harmony with God, Heaven and earth, into a state of disharmony on all levels, thereby as it were re-creating the world in its own disfigured image.

However, Nasr gives us a hermeneutical key which helps us to dis-

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