

THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

*Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal*

In this conversation, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal discuss various aspects of the environmental crisis. Beginning with identification of various aspects of the crisis, they explore human responsibility in the making of this crisis, its internal and external dimensions and how it is linked to greed, envy, and other diseases of the human heart. They focus on the relationship between modern technology and the environmental crisis, stages of this crisis since the Industrial Revolution, and the current state of the world. The conversation then moves to the Muslim world and its dilemmas in relation to the environmental crisis. The framework for their conversation is Muslim responsibility toward God and His creation. Islamic civilization has a rich history of love and respect for the natural world; Muslims can resuscitate that tradition to offer solutions for the current crisis. Muslim scholars, especially those who specialize in sciences dealing with the Qurʾān and the Prophetic

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This is the transcript of a conversation between Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, recorded in Sherwood Park, Canada, on February 19, 2007. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is the University Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University, Washington DC and President of the Foundation for Traditional Studies. Muzaffar Iqbal is the President of Center for Islam and Science, Canada.

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Sunnah, can play greater role in dealing with this crisis. Their work can raise awareness about how Islam views the natural world and create a powerful framework for finding comprehensive solutions of this global crisis.

**Keywords:** Environmental crisis; science, technology and the environment; Islamic perspectives on environment; Scientific Revolution; Western civilization; Muslim world.

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*Bismi' Llāhīr-Raḥmānīr-Raḥīm (In the Name of Allah, the most Gracious, the Most Merciful).*

**Iqbal:** Perhaps we should begin by defining what we mean by environmental crisis; in fact, we should talk about “crises” rather than “crisis”, for we now have multiple dimensions of this issue about which you have written so extensively during the last fifty years. We could begin by pinpointing various dimensions of this crisis, for what is generally called the “environmental crisis” is not merely the crisis of the environment; it involves both the natural world as well as the microcosm within us. There are integral links between these dimensions. We have even corrupted the food that we consume! Then there is the role of science and technology in the making of this crisis. Could we, then, begin with definitions and then go on to details?

**Nasr:** When one talks about crisis, it means of course that things are not in a normal state but in one that is dangerous and in disequilibrium. If everything were in crisis all the time, there would be no crisis. For example, if you have waves at the edge of the sea, you do not say there is a crisis because you have waves all the time—but if you have a tsunami, then there is a crisis. A crisis implies already that a normal state has been disrupted in a dangerous direction and manner and that we are aware of what has happened. Otherwise it does not appear to us as a crisis. When we speak of the environmental crisis, therefore, we mean that a crisis in this sense has been created in the natural environment; one that has upset the balance and harmony of the natural world which has surrounded and nourished human beings for as long as they remember, as long as history records,

as long as they have lived on this earth. Not that there was no contention or strife between man and nature before, not that ten thousand years ago when man was becoming agricultural, that shift had no impact on the natural environment, but such shifts did not create a crisis for there was a remarkable ecological harmony which continued. Had there been a crisis of the dimension we have now at that time, it is most likely that we would not even exist today.

So, there was a remarkable harmony in the workings of nature, in the coming and going of seasons, in the alteration of cold and heat, in winds and calm air, in oceans and deserts, in how animals and plants existed. Now what is called the environmental crisis is a “crisis” because, as a result of modern technology and its applications driven not only by need but also greed and the creation of artificial needs over the globe, that balance has been destroyed. This is obvious; it can be observed in the extinction of many species and in the destruction of their natural habitat. Global warming—about which everyone is now talking—is, in fact, only one aspect of the environmental crisis, but it is so acute that it has finally caught the attention of everyone, whereas other aspects, especially the loss of species, has more or less been neglected by most people. As long as their cats and dogs are around, ordinary people do not realize what is happening to the diversity of life forms in the natural order. And of course, now, this pollution of the world of nature has entered into the food chain, into our bodies—through chemical and bio-technological technologies as well as the air that we breathe and the water we drink. This process has become so widespread and “normal” for many people that we even do not recognize it as yet as a crisis, because we do not feel its full impact upon us until someone we know falls seriously ill or dies due to causes obviously related to the pollution of the environment. Otherwise, those who think that there is a connection between all kinds of cancers and various chemicals which have polluted our internal environment through the corruption of the food chain do not seem to be concerned enough to take any action, there being of course some exceptions. Some people at least now recognize that we do not have any knowledge of the long term effects of bio-agricultural or bio-engineered agricultural products, and we should not, therefore, assume these products as being safe to consume,

without having any knowledge of what consequences they will have on human health in the long run. But few listen to such reservations. So the environmental crisis, in a sense, involves both the external natural environment and also the inner environment within us, the human body, which in itself has a remarkable harmony, being a marvelous microcosm which is in a sense a part of nature, while also complementing the external world, the macrocosm.

**Iqbal:** You have mentioned in many articles that there is a relationship between modern technology and the environmental crisis, that modern technology has a great deal to do with the emergence of this crisis and the destruction of the natural world, and just now we have spoken about bio-engineered food that goes into our bodies; can we go back into history and pinpoint the emergence of this dimension of the contemporary crisis? This is important because there seems to be a time gap between the actual appearance of the crisis and its realization.

**Nasr:** We are always faced with a delayed reaction: days have already grown longer since December 21, the middle of the winter, but we experience that the earth is receiving more heat from the sun only many weeks after the lengthening of sunlight. This is how it is with historical events. Actually the environmental crisis began with the Industrial Revolution, but since the Industrial Revolution was carried out in only a small part of the globe, predominantly in the Western world—in England, the middle of New England, and in certain parts of Germany—and it then spread to other places, therefore its environmental impact was not initially felt worldwide; it was local.

This does not mean that it went unnoticed; many writers and poets were very sensitive to the ugly ambience created by environmental pollution. Charles Dickens, for instance, writes about the contrast between the beauty of the vales and dales of England and Scotland which were not touched by the new industries and those parts which were turned black by industrial development. However, that did not prevent the spread of Industrial Revolution, because of what the new technologies seemed to offer and also because of man's greed and also the new possibilities that science and technology provided for governments and influential persons and organizations seeking wealth and power. And it took a long time

for the negative effects of the modern industrial processes from becoming a crisis that would be recognized as such by the public at large. If the rest of the world had not participated in this process, it may have taken even longer time, perhaps many centuries, maybe even millennia, for those few places on earth to have a serious and strong impact on the total ecological conditions of the globe. But this is not what happened.

So one sees from the nineteenth century onward the spread of these new technologies to other parts of the West where they had not been present at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Agriculture in many parts of Europe was still traditional in the early part of the nineteenth century. But soon, the technologies created during the Industrial Revolution spread into all parts of the West and then into the non-Western world, the Islamic, Indian, Chinese civilizations. This transformation led in a most amazing way to the industrialization of Japan, resulting in the growth of its economic and military power combined with the pollution of its environment. Its military power was destroyed by the Second World War but its economic power continues to grow remarkably. Let us not forget what role this industrialization has had on the destruction of forests as far away as Malaysia and Indonesia. Such has been the result of the adaptation of these technologies by non-Western societies where such adaptation has been successful. But the rest of the non-Western world, the three major civilizations—Indian, Chinese and Islamic—and also non-Islamic Africa and much of South America, did not participate in this process until quite late. It is only in the last fifty or sixty years, during the last half century—except in a few large cities where modernism came earlier—that the impact of new technologies is being felt globally. We only need to look at present-day China.

**Iqbal:** Now we are in a very advanced state of the crisis. You have pinpointed its beginning to the time of the Industrial Revolution and blamed modern technology (in combination with the new image of man that developed in the West, the man who carried out the Industrial Revolution as you have written elsewhere) as its major cause. But it seems to me that this crisis was inevitable, because either we could have the pristine world of the pre-Industrial Revolution era and no Industrial Revolution or the Industrial Revolution and the

destruction of the natural habitat. They come in a package and there seems to be no choice here: technologies produced during the Industrial Revolution were inevitable, so to speak, they had to be invented for the kind of change that was then taking place in the Western world, there was no other way. And of course, once invented and made operative, these technologies could not but destroy the sanctity of the natural world. Now we cannot go back in time, so could there have been another way? Had there been this kind of awareness, had there been more awareness about the impact of these technologies on the natural world, could we have avoided the crisis?

**Nasr:** I do not believe so; as soon as the concept of nature changed and nature became a secularized mass, just an “it”, and what I have called elsewhere “Promethean man” was born, there was bound to be this destruction. I do not think that if wiser economists had sat around in Boston and London and planned things differently in the eighteenth century, the crisis could have been avoided, because this kind of planning is not strong enough to be a dike against the greed of human beings and the avariciousness which this technology accentuates and makes possible. I believe that this battle was lost the moment nature became secularized, the moment the Hands of God were cut off from nature. After that change, man no longer felt any responsibility for nature. Nature served only as a source of materials; it could be dominated and used for whatever purpose and in whichever way without having any rights of its own. I wrote in my book *Man and Nature*<sup>1</sup> that in traditional societies, nature was seen as one’s “wife”, but the modern West turned it into a “prostitute”.

**Iqbal:** I want to now draw this conversation toward this nexus between the concept of nature—the environment both within us and outside—and the present crisis. You have written extensively about this nexus in *The Need for a Sacred Science*<sup>2</sup> and several other works, this concept of nature and the removal of the Hands of God, as you have often called it, from the equation. So, where is the turning

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1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Encounter of Man and Nature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), reprinted as *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International, 1997).
  2. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

point? Where is the beginning of a real turning? It seems to me that not many people are interested in looking into this matter in any depth; the vogue is to keep measuring levels of carbon monoxide. Calculate this or that value, discuss percentages and ratios, talk about the reduction of greenhouse gases and the like, but there is seldom a discussion about this aspect of the crisis which you have pointed out so many times: the removal of the Hands of God from the equation. And then, if we could go into the concept of nature in Islam and the responsibility of the Muslim world.

**Nasr:** Yes, I will be glad to do that, but first I want to make a comment upon what you said. It has been nearly fifty years since I began to write on this subject. It has been over forty years since the appearance of my *Science and Civilization in Islam*,<sup>3</sup> and my book on cosmology,<sup>4</sup> which was based on my PhD thesis at Harvard and which was published a few years after I received my doctorate degree. So, I was aware of this crisis even as a young scholar and thinker long before I became established as a well-known scholar. When I gave the Rockefeller Series of lectures at the University of Chicago in 1966, later published as *The Encounter of Man and Nature*, and since then reprinted several times and translated into many languages, I was deeply conscious of this crisis. That book addresses this question explicitly. What I had said in that book, which predates the other works you have mentioned, is that the environmental crisis has deep spiritual, philosophical, and religious roots and causes. It is not merely the result of bad engineering. It is these causes that need to be addressed, but—as you said—unfortunately most people do not want to listen to this matter, especially in modernist circles, because if you accept what I have said, then you have to change the paradigm that dominates over how modernized human beings live today. That is something that no one wants to do. Of course, I do not literally mean “no one”, for there are always a few courageous souls who want to bring about a radical change based on principles, but by and large most people are not willing to change the way that

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3. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), reprinted as a new edition (Chicago: ABC International, 1999).
  4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), revised edition, published by the State University of New York Press, 1993.

they live and think.

I do not believe that any cosmetic change can cure the crisis; it is as if a cancer patient is dying of cancer and you put powder on her face so that she looks pretty. That is not going to save the patient. We need a deep transformation of our understanding of nature and of the human state, of who we are, of what our relationship is with God and the natural environment which is His creation. And all of this implies a radical change in the worldview that dominates much of the globe today. We need to reexamine this dominant view of nature and of man, not only in the West, but also in the Muslim world, where people are still tied to their faith, but as far as nature is concerned, most of them have lost the traditional understanding of it and are just aping what is happening in the West.

**Iqbal:** There is a practical aspect to all of this, especially in relation to the Muslim world. You walk into Tehran, Cairo, or Lahore today and the whole city is like a big parking lot. The number of vehicles on the road, the pollution, the quality of air—it is impossible even to breathe. Yet, the practical aspect of this situation is that people need to have the so-called modern means of transportation; the structure of the contemporary society has become so dependent on these technologies that one cannot even imagine cities without cars and other motorized vehicles. So what you are saying may sound to many people like an idealistic approach to a very real-life situation. People would criticize this position and say, “Well these are good dreams, pious words, but what do we actually do?”

**Nasr:** I wish they were only dreams. It is like a ship that has a hole in it—like the story of Moses and Khiḍr in the Qurʾān—a ship with a hole in it.<sup>5</sup> In the Qurʾānic story Khiḍr says we have to change the course of the ship, so he himself drills a hole in it. Moses who is accompanying him on this journey does not recognize the deep significance of this action, and does not realize what it would mean to plug the hole. Had the hole been plugged, the ship would have gone directly into the hands of the wrathful ruler waiting ahead and everyone would have been killed. Likewise, it is absurd that anyone who proposes a real solution to these problems which

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5. *Al-Kahf*: 71-75. The name Khiḍr is not mentioned in the Qurʾān, but tradition gives this name to the “*abd*” mentioned in the Qurʾān, who was given a special kind of knowledge by Allah Most High.

implies a change of direction rather than plugging holes here and there is a dreamer. Anyone who wants to apply cosmetics is seen as a practical person. I do not accept that at all. It is true that we have to take some immediate practical measures; there is no doubt about that: have more public transportation, use natural gas rather than petroleum, etc. The quality of air in Istanbul has improved incredibly during the last ten years. Istanbul used to be like Tehran or Lahore, but now you can see the blue sky in the middle of the day, just because of this one action of the government: the change of the type of fuel used by cars. Such actions are all fine, and one should do what one can along these lines, but that is not going to solve the problem in the long run. Such actions are going to give us more time in which to try to really solve the problem. So I am in favor of all immediate solutions on a technological or economic level, but I do not believe that is going to solve the crisis if we insist on pursuing our present course.

**Iqbal:** So ultimately, the solution would emerge through a change in our view of nature itself?

**Nasr:** Yes, exactly. Our view about nature itself and of human life, of what responsibilities we have. As Muslims we know that we have a responsibility toward God; so we do not eat bacon for breakfast. That is fine and very important. But our responsibility toward God is not limited to what the *Shari'ah* bans in our dietary regimen. It also involves a responsibility toward His creation, and creation is not only man. One of the greatest tragedies of modern times, which made modern technology possible, is the humanism of the Renaissance era which is anthropocentric, which makes man the measure of all things. Man is in the center of this new system of thought or worldview, not God. This secular humanism changed the views of people about all things, from a theomorphic to an anthropomorphic or anthropocentric one, and, therefore, now everything revolves around man. For example in the West, when the Industrial Revolution began, why was no attention paid to technology's impact upon plants or animals which were dying, or to rivers that were being polluted? The reason given was something like the following: "oh, but our efforts are serving man. Human beings are now better off; they are less sick and not hungry," and so forth and so on. And so the earthly welfare of man became

the absolute criterion for all action and the welfare of the rest of nature was totally disregarded. This kind of selfishness is a modern phenomenon. Modern people usually like to say, “well, man has always been like that.” Man has not, however, always been like that. In traditional societies, there were parts of sacred mountains where no one would even climb, even if they needed wood from it. In this regard, I often give an example that shocks many people in America. I say, look, every night a large number of people in Delhi die of hunger, but you have all these cows wandering around the city. All they would need to do is to take one of the cows, kill it, and for days the whole street would eat meat. But they do not do such a thing.

The idea that human beings have always been like that, have always sacrificed everything else for their own use and well being, is not true. It is simply not true. But no one wants to face this reality. So what we have to do is change the way we look upon things. First of all, modern man has become accustomed to enjoying life only if there is continuous consumerism. I do not mean everyone, but most people. And now the East is learning to be a good consumer society. If you are a Turkoman even today, in the Turkoman Sahara in Northern Iran, you have a tent, a few beautiful carpets, and your sheep, your horses, and your goats and you are happy with the small things in life as well as with your husband or wife and with your children. If you have enough sheep that give milk and you can feed your family you are happy. But now in the big cities, what is it that makes us happy? Craving endlessly for more and more material things.

Technological innovation without thinking of its consequences is the murderer of nature. Of course, less polluting technologies will help; I am not denying that. What people like Al Gore and others are saying is correct to a large extent. There are technologies which can reduce pollution, but I do not believe that those technologies alone will save us from this crisis. We have to have an inner transformation. We have to have another way of looking at ourselves, at what the purpose of human life is, at what satisfies us, what makes us happy, and not turn over to consumption as the only way to be happy, seeking satiation of our never-ending thirst and satisfaction of endless wants that are then turned into needs.

**Iqbal:** I would like now to move the conversation towards Islam and Muslims, but here is the dilemma: the environmental impact of modern technologies is no more local—everything has become globalized; it affects the entire globe. So, even if Muslims were to change, that would not produce a solution to this multi-dimensional crisis now in its advanced stages. But even to say that “if Muslims were to change” is too much; in fact, the Muslim world is fast traversing the same path as the West has done, and perhaps more blindly. So, even though we can say that Muslims should have an understanding of the sacredness of nature because of their beliefs, the ground realities are very different. Even if we were now to concentrate on the Muslim world and the environmental crisis, can we say there are solutions which Muslims can adopt in their own traditional lands that will produce any significant results? I say this, because you are suggesting a fundamental shift in our view of God and nature and that, I think, may be very difficult for the general populace in the West. It may be asking too much from a Westerner to change his or her views about God and His relationship with humanity and nature. What you were saying about the nature of the change that took place in the West during the Renaissance is, after all, a significant historical development that has affected the course of Western civilization to such an extent that to ask for such a radical change—the kind of change you are suggesting—is to ask for a total re-orientation of the belief system—from homocentric to theomorphic, and that may be too much. So, that is why I am saying that it may be easier for the Muslim world to recognize the roots of the environmental crisis, for it would not involve such a huge step for them. Muslims already have a certain set of beliefs which they partially apply—like not eating pork—and perhaps it is easier for them to take the next step and say: “Well, the natural environment is also sacred, and I am going to respect it and treat it as sacred, as God’s creation.”

**Nasr:** First of all, it is very interesting that although this disaster came from the West, it also produced awareness about its impact first in the West. The environmental movement is much stronger in the West than in the Muslim world. I teach here in America, and I have also taught in the Islamic world. There are a lot more young people in my classes here in America who relate to this subject than there would

be if I taught the same course in the Muslim world. Right now, I am teaching a course entitled “Man and the Environment”, and there is a lot of interest among the students. If I were to teach a similar course in, say, Pakistan, there will be less interest. There is no doubt about that. That is however a paradox, for the Muslim world is still not that alienated from its own traditional understanding of nature. The West in general (and of course not every Westerner) has been removed from the way of looking upon nature as God’s creation imbued with sacred character for four or five centuries now. And even before that, in medieval Christianity, there was not as much religious emphasis upon nature as in Islam. There is no sacred scripture that speaks about nature as much as the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān even takes the various entities of the cosmos as witnesses, and speaks about how they glorify their Creator, *yusabbihū mā fī’s-samawāti waāl-ard*;<sup>6</sup> (*whatever is in the heavens and earth glorify Him*). This and many other verses tell us that everything worships God, praises Him, adores Him, *waāl-najmu waāl-shajaru yasjudūn*.<sup>7</sup>

To destroy any species or for that matter creatures in general without a reason condoned by God is to destroy voices that reach God in hymning His praise. Now, our literature and philosophy are full of this truth. Persian literature is replete with verses reflecting this truth that many people know by heart. Sa‘dī (1184-1283 or 1291) and Rūmī (1207-73) wrote about it, as did so many others. I do not want to quote Persian poetry here, but you know this truth, as your mother tongue is Urdu, which is also replete with verses reflecting the same understanding of nature. In Turkish, Yunus Emre (1238-1320), has many beautiful verses on this subject, as has much of Arabic poetry. It is part and parcel of our Islamic culture. In fact, in order to succeed in becoming completely industrialized, the champions of industrialization and modernization are destroying that culture. We are negating much of our heritage. Many reformers in the Muslim world thought that in order to reform that world and in order for it to come out of its current position of weakness, Muslims had to go against their own traditional culture—a culture that was imbued with love of nature in a spiritual sense.

In almost all languages spoken in the Muslim world, there is a

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6. *al-ḥaṣhr*: 24.

7. *Al-Raḥmān*: 6; *The stars and the trees adore [God]*.

very rich tradition of love of nature in poetry and in aphorisms which deal with this subject. And there are also explicit commands in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* about our treatment of God's creation. Then there are the works of Muslim philosophers and Sufis on the philosophy of nature. I have written so much about this matter that I feel I should put the pen aside and let others take up the task, *inshā Allāh*. But we have to resuscitate this tradition which has been partially forgotten only recently. This heritage can be resuscitated much more easily for us than Western tradition for contemporary Westerners.

Governments, of course, do not want to pay attention to this matter, even when they are paying lip service to Islam, because they want to become masters of modern technology as fast as possible for political, military, and economic reasons. And they say, "why did the West "develop" at the expense of spoiling and polluting nature? We want to do the same." This view is, of course, catastrophic, because while the West was doing those things, the rest of the world was not going through such drastic changes. The jungles of Amazon, Indonesia, and Malaysia had not yet been destroyed. The lung of the earth was still functioning. But now if the rest of the world wants to industrialize at the expense of the natural world as did the West, if you want to turn the Amazon jungle into what the Europeans did to the forests of Europe centuries ago, the ecological balance of the earth will be destroyed.

**Iqbal:** That is so true.

**Nasr:** It is as simple as that. But non-Western governments such as those of India, China, Indonesia, or Malaysia will not listen. I think that deep down they think, "It is not really our responsibility; the Westerners did what they wanted to and in the process became rich and powerful and were able to dominate over us; now it is our turn." This is what creates a lethal combination, a very dangerous situation for humanity as a whole. And the West, which was the first civilization to desecrate and pollute the natural environment and which plundered much of the wealth of Africa and Asia for centuries, is not going to say, "well, we will give you your wealth back; please do not do what we did because it will endanger us." That is not going to happen. To see this matter clearly needs a certain amount of wisdom, which, as I can see, no government has

at the present moment.

**Iqbal:** Right.

**Nasr:** I am speaking of the wisdom to forgo certain false notions of power and domination, of mindless acquisition of modern technology, and so forth, for the sake of having a safer, saner, and healthier society in the future. I said in the interview I did with you on Muslims and technology,<sup>8</sup> that there are many alternate technologies that we can use to reduce the impact of our activities on the environment. For instance, in the Muslim world, there is still some possibility and hope to preserve our traditional way of agriculture. When I was a child growing up in Tehran, all the agriculture in the countryside was traditional. They used oxen driving a simple wheel to crush wheat and so on, and everything was based on human effort and animal energy or energy drawn naturally from nature such as falling water and wind. There were no machines; there were no tractors; nor were there chemical fertilizers. Now of course, chemicals and tractors and so forth are fast destroying the whole traditional method of agriculture in the name of increasing productivity and for economic advantage. But this is a wager that we may lose. We cannot be sure of even productivity in the long run, not to speak of the rate at which the soil is being depleted, and other factors, such as chemicals entering the water system. There are many things that the Muslim world can do, without threatening the health of its populace, by clinging to and reviving traditional technologies. But as I said, I see no government in the Muslim world—whether they are leftist or rightist, republics or monarchies, secular or Islamic—that is paying attention to this question at a serious level.

**Iqbal:** So the only solution that remains possible is to increase this awareness, this consciousness, this wisdom that you talked about, through some kind of intellectual effort at the level where it may create a pressure group or slowly increase awareness in general public. But here is the dilemma: you talked about the Qur'ānic revelation so intimately connected with the concept of sacredness of nature, but our religious scholars do not write about it anymore. We do not hear our '*ulamā*' linking this crisis to the lack of Islamic practices which require that we respect nature and do not violate its rights. They speak about moral decay, of course, of degeneration of

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8. *Islam & Science*, Vol. 3 (Winter 2005) No. 2, 109-28.

values and the erosion of ethics, but hardly speak about the decay of the environment and our plunder of nature in terms which are Islamic, which belong to the sciences of religious law. It has become a secular debate, as if Islam has nothing to do with it.

**Nasr:** That is a major problem. We have had one or two ‘*ulamā*’ aware of the environmental crisis, Shaykh Aḥmad Kuftāru, the late grand Mufti of Syria, for example. He used to give wonderful *khutbahs* in Damascus about the environment. But in many places even to talk about the environmental crisis becomes threatening to governments. Many governments discourage this kind of discourse. They do not like this issue to be discussed publicly and they crack down on those who do so. Therefore, the only thing to do, the only thing possible to do, as you say, is to increase awareness by whatever means at our disposal. Let us not forget that this whole process of secularization of nature began with a few people in Europe. Only twenty or thirty people started it in Europe; if they had all been removed from the scene at the time, we would not have the present situation now. The rise of this modern paradigm of nature in Europe is due to a few people. From those few, it gradually seeped into the rest of the society. As the Latin adage states, “*corruption optima pessimi*”, (the corruption of the best is the worst), or “*māhī az sar begandad nay zedom*”, as it is said in Persian, that is, “a fish begins to stink from its head not its tail”. We can now do the same in reverse, that is, have a truly intellectual and spiritual elite (*khawāṣ*), in the traditional sense, who are fully aware of the crisis and who can then influence the larger public. This elite group would of necessity include some ‘*ulamā*’.

The effort to change minds in the Muslim world needs to be carried out on two different levels. At one level, we need to increase awareness about this issue among people who understand both the modern world and Islam in a deep manner. They will then in turn transform the minds of general populace. Secondly, at the popular level, we need to have more small action groups, people who are committed to protecting the immediate environment, who can begin organic farming and take other measures—small-scale steps to protect the environment around them as we see in England already. There are fortunately a few such groups in the Muslim world as well, such as certain circles in Egypt which

have established eco-villages, but unfortunately these are mostly for tourists. Nevertheless, it is a beginning. I did not have time to go visit one of these oases based on traditional framing and technologies and being environmentally friendly this year but I was told that in these eco-villages in Egypt, everything is environmentally safe; everything is done in a traditional manner. There is even no electricity. Yet, it is very beautiful and they use candles for light, that sort of thing. I do not want to imply that such practices can be carried out for the whole of Egypt but they can be very important models for developing saner ways of living. I think Prince Charles visited one of these villages last year. He is a great champion of environmental issues, a person who understands the deeper elements that are involved. But the irony is that these villages in Egypt are mostly for foreign tourists, not for Egyptians! This fact itself is very disturbing. Nevertheless, we are talking about increasing awareness among various people. There has to be more local action for this purpose; ironically, there is a lot more local action in the West in this domain than there is in the Muslim world.

**Iqbal:** So, practically speaking, there is the need for increasing awareness about environmental crisis at two levels and to concentrate on local action?

**Nasr:** Yes, but this has to be complemented by yet another action that is ultimately far more important—namely, the education of a group of people who are environmentalists and also hold a view of nature that is rooted in Islam. It is this group that may have the same kind of impact on the Muslim community as a whole as those people had on the Muslim world who went to the West, say a hundred years ago, to study medicine and engineering, and returned to India, Turkey, Iran, or Egypt to start the process of Westernization of those societies, except of course the impact would be in the reverse direction.

**Iqbal:** In a way, we are now speaking of a process we discussed in that other conversation we had about modern technology and its impact on the Muslim mind. You had said “we must not be like a sleepwalker who accepts whatever comes along without even thinking about its consequences”.<sup>9</sup>

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9. *Islam & Science*, Vol. 3 (Winter 2005) No. 2, 117.

**Nasr:** Absolutely. I have spoken about this matter before, but the principle that should always be kept in mind is that just because something is there does not mean you have to use it, even if it is attractive. It is as if you go to a restaurant and there are all these different enticing dishes, but you cannot eat all of them; you have to eat what is good for you if you want to remain healthy. But we have this tendency now to devour whatever comes along, because of the economic pressures to buy and sell—of course, whatever is made and invented, the makers try to sell it to us at all cost. And we are at the end of the receiving line, and therefore the pressure is there to buy and participate in the whole cycle of economic activity without having a choice to act wisely. This is indeed very unfortunate.

Let me give you one example regarding building materials. Hasan Fathi, the great Egyptian architect, always used to speak of it. By using our own mud, bricks, and stone and all the other traditional materials that we have, we can create remarkable architecture which is also environmentally very friendly. So, instead of metals that are so extensively used today in buildings, we can use natural materials in many instances. Nature abhors metals and we do not see metals in their pure metallic state in virgin nature. Rather, we see them as compounds, with the exception of a few inert metals such as gold. If you ever go and see all those wonderful buildings in northern Pakistan, you will never see metals. Of course, metal existed before modern times. People talk about the Iron Age. The first signs of metallurgy of iron has been in fact found in the Iranian plateau and later in China, going back thousands of years; but the usage of iron was on a small scale. Traditional people did not have an environment full of metals. Once you have an environment that is full of metals, whether it be aluminum, iron, or steel, you have already created an ambience that is totally alien to nature, and then nature becomes alien to you.

**Iqbal:** Let us now focus a little on the inner environment—the crisis within us. We began by mentioning this crisis, mostly produced by chemicals and genetically modified products that we have started to consume, and you also just mentioned the greed and the pressure to sell. I was astonished to see genetically modified fruit coming from the northern areas of Pakistan—a region where farmers have grown traditional crops for centuries! Even such remote areas are

no longer safe. The delicious apricots of the Hunza valley are no more delicious. Farmers are changing the ways of their forefathers. They are all turning toward genetically modified products, which are like sugar-coated edible synthetics, and they are doing this for the lure of higher yields and money.

**Nasr:** I have seen this happening all over the Muslim world. This is a global crisis. When Theodore Roszak wrote his famous book, written in such beautiful English, *Where the Wasteland Ends*—which, in fact, echoes in many ways my book *Man and Nature*—he said that the pollution of the environment is kind of an eleventh hour externalization of the pollution that is within us.<sup>10</sup> There is no doubt about the truth of that assertion. If we were all reinvigorated spiritually, our attitude toward everything would change, including ourselves in relation to nature. That is why simple cosmetics and good engineering will not in themselves solve the environmental crisis. But the fact that the apricot growers in the Hunza valley are changing their methods is because there are people in the big cities of Pakistan who are advocating this sort of thing. First of all, there is a change in the thought process in big cities where people begin to see the cultivation of apricots merely as an economic activity. Then they come across these newer methods, developed in the West, which promise higher yields without regard for quality and they bring these techniques to the Hunza valley—to people who would not have changed anything otherwise. They would have had no knowledge of mechanized agriculture. They are in a sense innocent. It is the people who have the knowledge of these methods resulting in greater economic gain without the least regard for quality and who introduce these things to the far corners of the earth in order to make more money who are guilty. They are the ones who are responsible. And why are they responsible? Because supposing you are the agriculture minister of Pakistan or some official in the ministry, and your duty is to increase apricot production; if you do not, you will be kicked out. So to keep your job you do not care what is going to happen to the quality of fruits from the Hunza valley. You just want to keep your job and make good money and have your wife go to parties at night and so on.

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10. Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1989).

And so to achieve your goal, you find experts in the new methods of agriculture, people who are in a sense even more responsible than the minister or his equivalent in some company for the negative changes taking place.

All these elements are tied together—new technologies, political systems, economic systems, and social structures—to affect the way things are changing. Knowledge brings power and the way to change things is also through knowledge. Those who have the correct knowledge of what is going on, who also practice what they preach, can bring about positive change. I know, for example, that in certain parts of the world farmers are being taught to preserve their own traditional methods by those who have more authentic knowledge and also more power than them. In India, for instance, there is a strong movement to preserve traditional agricultural methods and preserve trees. It is quite amazing, really amazing, since it this movement was initiated mostly by a few women. So it is not impossible to do something. If a person like you were to go to the Hunza valley and tell the farmers there that, first of all, your product tastes like sugar-coated plastic and in the long run nobody is going to buy it, they would listen. Secondly, they need to be told that this is going to ruin the soil. In five years they will be poor, because nothing will grow on their land anymore. They will be working in some bazaar in Lahore. They would again listen. The simple peasants and farmers of the world are in fact the least greedy of all the people involved in this process.

Whether it is in South America, Pakistan, or anywhere else in the so-called developing world the situation is more or less the same. There is a movement going on today on the basis of creating awareness from above and thereby influencing ordinary farmers, builders, etc. The journal *Resurgence* published in England, and the Schumacher School in Devon, England can be given as examples. As I said, the attempts to build environmentally sound villages that preserve traditional agriculture and traditional architecture use much less energy than modern villages and towns. On this level we in the Muslim world need to learn what is going on in the West and to some extent in India and even China.

**Iqbal:** Yes, we mentioned this paradox at the beginning of our conversation: there is more awareness in the West about the environmental crisis

than in the Muslim world although the crisis originated in the West.

**Nasr:** You know what many leaders in the Muslim world say about it; it is really comic, comic and tragic at the same time. They would say that the West has gone through a full circle—they started the environmental crisis through industrialization, and now in this post-industrial society, they have come to the realization of the existence of the environmental crisis and there is now some awareness of this matter. Once we follow and complete this cycle, then we will do the same. They do not realize that the earth will not allow that, that God will not allow such a thing.

**Iqbal:** That reminds me of 1995, Islamabad, when you delivered that wonderful inaugural keynote address at the International Conference on Science in Islamic Polity in the Twenty-First Century<sup>11</sup> which I had organized and the President of Pakistan set aside his pre-written speech and spent an hour telling us how beautiful your words were, but why they were not practical, why the Muslim world needs to acquire modern technologies and so on.<sup>12</sup> But, let us set that aside for now. You just mentioned the eleventh hour, which reminded me of Martin Lings' *The Eleventh Hour*,<sup>13</sup> and the connections between cosmic history and the environmental crisis. If we are indeed living in the eleventh hour and the cosmic cycle is going to close soon, then the environmental crisis has yet another dimension. For Muslims this awareness of the coming of the Last Day brings a certain amount of urgency for action I am thinking of the saying of the Prophet that if you have a seedling in your hand and you see the Hour coming, plant it.

**Nasr:** Exactly. I have spoken about this matter in several places. But there is another side to it as well. There are people, both in the Muslim world and in the West, Muslims and Christians, even Jews and Hindus—in fact people everywhere—who are the most adamant opponents of the environmental movement, who in the case of Christians believe that soon Christ will come back to earth and all non-Christians will be destroyed, and God will rejuvenate His

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11. March 26-30, 1995.

12. For the text of this keynote address, see the forthcoming *Islam, Science, Muslims and Technology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal* (Sherwood Park: Al-Qalam, 2007).

13. Martin Lings, *The Eleventh Hour* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987).

creation. So let us not worry about it now and go on drilling in Alaska and let the wildlife refuge be destroyed. As you know, this is a very powerful movement in America. In the United States paradoxically many of the most devout and active Christians have until recently—though they are now changing somewhat—been on the side of being indifferent to what is happening to the natural environment, while the secularists have for the most part been on the side of preserving the environment; everything has become reversed in a certain sense.

In the Muslim world, it is the same. There are people awaiting the coming of the Mahdi. In Iran, in Iraq, in certain regions of Africa such as Nigeria and West Africa, there are people who believe that very soon the Mahdi will appear, and they look at eschatological teachings only from the human perspective. They think that oppression and injustice will be soon overcome and so forth. They do not look at the world of nature at all, whereas the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* teach us that our duty toward the world of nature does not change whether we are living in the eleventh or the first hour, in the same way that our duties toward God and ourselves do not change. For example, we cannot commit suicide because the Mahdi will appear soon because the committing of such an act was and remains against Islamic law. We do not get up in the morning and say our prayers with the eleventh or the tenth hour in mind. There are certain duties which God has placed on our shoulders which we have to perform irrespective of into what moment in history we are born. The Hour is in God's Hands, and we do not know what God's plans are. We do not know when the Mahdi will come. The Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said that whoever tells or predicts the Hour is a liar—the Hour, that is, the *Sā'ah*, when time will come to its end and *al-Qiyāmah* comes. He said such a person is a liar. So we do not know when the world as we know it will end, and we have to live our lives in concrete time, in the duration in which we exist, and live according to the *Shari'ah*, by praying and fasting, as if nothing were going to happen and life would go on.

We have to do the same vis-a-vis the world of nature. God has made us His vicegerents on earth, *khalīfatu'llāh fi'l arḍ*, with a responsibility to protect His creation at all times, including the Eleventh hour. There is no way of escaping that responsibility. And

it is the duty of our *‘ulamā* to increase this awareness. We have in fact to educate a whole new generation of *‘ulamā* who will be aware of these matters. All they have to do is to read the verses of the Qur’ān or study *ḥadīth*—they can be totally indifferent to what al-Rāzī or Ibn Sīnā said or what Ibn ‘Arabī wrote about these matters, but they cannot ignore the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*, which are so explicit about the environment. Let us remember Qur’ānic references such as *mufsidūna fi’l arḍ* in *Sūrat al-Baqarah*, that is, the corrupters of the earth, in reference to the creation of man. Now, this term *mufsid* is often interpreted as having to do with injustice and oppression, but most of all it means corruption, what we are doing now; for we are literally corrupting the earth. And God says to the angels *I know what you know not*. That is, there is another aspect of man, as *My khalifah, My vicegerent on earth*. If we do not fulfill that function, then—we are not God’s vicegerent on earth; rather we are trying ourselves to take the place of God, *astaghfiru’Ilāh*.

Having forgotten their vicegerency today men are trying to act as gods, and they will be punished in the most severe way for this sin. I have always said that however powerful we may appear to be as we try to destroy nature, nature will have the final say. Nature has direct contact with God; it is not responsible to us. It is we who are responsible for its protection, because of the function that God has given us. He has given us intelligence, free will, and other powers which we must use rightly, always remembering that we are His vicegerents. We are not “our own man” as the Americans would say; we are God’s man. And in the same way that God makes the sun rise and set every day, we must try to preserve the harmony of nature instead of destroying it.