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## Eco-Religious Teachings and Environmental Sustainability

An Analysis of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "Eco-Spirituality" in the Context of Bangladesh

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# ECO-RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: AN ANALYSIS OF SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR'S "ECO-SPIRITUALITY" IN THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

Md. Abu Sayem \*

**Abstract:** This research investigates why Seyyed Hossein Nasr's eco-Islamic understanding and prescription seem significant for Bangladeshi people and how these can be implemented to reduce the environmental issues in Bangladesh. In terms of methodology, it is an analytical study based on reviewing Nasr's eco-religious vision and examining its applicability in Bangladesh. As the project connects Nasr's eco-religious teaching with the present environmental problems of Bangladesh, its prime result will be motivating Bangladeshi people from grassroots levels to maintain ecological equilibrium by diverting their attention from the mechanistical and materialistic view to an organic view of the environment. Alongside these, the study will enrich the current discussions on the role of religions in environmental sustainability from a Bangladeshi perspective.

**Keywords:** *Eco-ethics, eco-Islam, ecology, environment, sustainability, environmentally friendly Bangladesh.*

## INTRODUCTION

The present unprecedented environmental crisis is a direct result of uncontrolled human actions in the natural world. From the Renaissance, humanists have been focusing on secular and scientific worldviews by detaching from traditional and spiritual worldviews, which promote humans to see nature like a machine for producing more comfort for them. Based on materialistic and mechanistical worldviews of nature, modern humans are ruthlessly dominating nature by using the power of modern science and technologies; consequently, ecological equilibrium is fatally hampered and the natural world is seriously degraded. Since the current ecological problem is mainly a result of the modern worldview, scholars like Seyyed Hossein Nasr suggest retrieving a traditional worldview, which is based on the eternal wisdoms and God–Human–Nature relationship. Arguably, modern science and technology do not

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produce value and virtue ethics or align with these; so, modern science and technology are being used as tools for human interests at the price of the natural environment. Though some scholars talk about using green technologies and renewable energy sources to tackle the current ecological crisis, this may present only some short-term solutions to the problems. A stable and sustainable solution lies in radical reformation in terms of worldview, human attitudes and behaviours with biotic and abiotic organisms of the environment, where religious worldviews and wisdom traditions can work as alternative ways to modify the present human perception of nature. If humans really want to see a sustainable environment, they should consider the world like a community not a commodity to use according to their selfish wishes; they should develop an organic view of the world by contending the present mechanistic and materialistic view of it; they should consider themselves as a guest not an owner of it, as the modern scientific worldview presents. These values and virtues are primarily found in religious and spiritual traditions of the world, which can motivate modern humans to reform their attitudes and behaviours in favour of ecological equilibrium. Once humans are convinced enough to realise the essentiality of balancing the relationship between humans and the environment, it will be easy for them to divert their ongoing unmatched activities in the natural environment and promote environmental sustainability.

Keeping this potential contribution of religions in mind, eco-religious scholars have been working from the 1970s to connect religions with the present environmental issues. Eco-religious scholars mainly attempt to grow deeper awareness among humans in terms of their relationship with non-human animal and plant species. They attempt to address the issue by using different approaches like apologetic, reformative and retrieval. Due to time constraints and feasibility, the present research narrows its subject matter by selecting Seyyed Hossein Nasr's retrieval approach. In this research, Bangladesh is selected as a case study to investigate the workability of Nasr's eco-spiritual understanding, sanctity of life and sacredness of nature. Though Nasr's works cover major religious and spiritual traditions of the world, he emphasises Islamic moral teachings and worldview for motivating humans to protect the natural environment. Since Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, Nasr's Islamic eco-religious understanding and prescriptions seem relevant here.

There are few works on environmental problems in Bangladesh from socio-economic aspects, which do not connect faith traditions with the issues.<sup>1</sup> Md. Abu Sayem's "Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> M. Feroze Ahmed, Saleh A. Tanveer and Ahmed Tanveer (Eds.), *Urbanization, Traffic Jam and Bangladesh Environment* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon and Bangladesh Environment Network, 2010); Mohammad Alauddin and Samiul Hasan (Eds.), *Development, Governance, and the Environment in South Asia: A Focus on Bangladesh* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Dipen Bhattacharya, M. Feroze Ahmed, Nazrul Islam and Mohd. Abdul Matin (Eds.), *Climate Change and the Tasks for Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon and Bangladesh Environment Network, 2009); Md. Nazrul Islam and Andre van Amstel (Eds.), *Bangladesh I: Climate Change Impacts, Mitigation and Adaptation in Developing Countries* (New York: Springer, 2017); Naznin Islam, "Environmental Issues in Bangladesh: An Overview," *Pakistan Journal of Social Science* 3, no. 4 (2005); A. Atiq Rahman, Rana Haider, Saleemul Huq and Eirik G Jansen (Eds.) *Environment and Development in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1994).

Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh: A Case Study”<sup>2</sup> connects some Islamic environmental ethical teachings with the present environmental destructions in Bangladesh, but it cannot explore Nasr’s eco-spiritual teachings in the context of Bangladesh. So, it becomes explicit that there is a vacuum between the present initiative and existing works. Keeping this research gap in hand, the present study covers this unexplored field.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on a textual analysis method, this article mainly consults relevant works by Nasr to establish some conceptual frameworks of eco-religious understanding, then reviews recently published journal articles and reports on environmental issues in Bangladesh. Though the research attempts to apply Nasr’s eco-religious vision to the context of Bangladesh, it will not blindly support his ideas, but be critical of his understanding. Similarly, it will have a critical approach to current human attitudes to nature and their uncontrolled activities in the global environment in general and particularly in Bangladesh.

## SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR’S ECO-SPIRITUALITY

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-) is an influential Islamic philosopher in today’s world. He sees environmental issues from a deep-rooted level of spiritual, religious and philosophical understanding. Nasr’s intellectual contributions to developing the traditional worldview of nature is based on the eternal wisdoms.<sup>3</sup> Having considered the present ecological crisis as a spiritual crisis for modern humans,<sup>4</sup> Nasr works at growing spiritual feelings in the human mind for the natural world. The modern worldview is highly attached to the secular approach to nature, where there is no place for spiritual thought. Spirituality mostly comes from religious traditions, but the modern scientific worldview negates such knowledge treasures. This could pave the way to grow awareness and deeper attachment to the natural world, thus motivate humans to prevent the present ecological crisis from further damage. On the other hand, the traditional way of education and understanding, where there is scope for spiritual teaching, has disappeared from the world, which makes for a challenging issue to spiritual feelings for the natural world. Without deeper spiritual feelings for nature no human can work for environmental sustainability. Thus, Nasr integrates religious spirituality with the natural world and shows a potential correlation between environmental degradation and spiritual crises.

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<sup>2</sup> Md. Abu Sayem, “Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh: A Case Study,” *Quest: Studies on Religion and Cultures in Asia* 3 (2018).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of his intellectual works, see Mehdi Aminrazabi and Zailan Moris, *A Complete Bibliography of the Works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Malaysia: Islamic Academic of Science, 1994); Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier and Lucian W. Stone Jr. (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2001), 833-964.

<sup>4</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London, Boston, Sydney: Unwin Paperbacks, 1990), 7, 9.

## SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURE

In his works, Nasr emphasises the spiritual significance of nature<sup>5</sup> for environmental sustainability. In his metaphysical view, humans are deeply connected with God and the natural world. A spiritual view of nature cannot see humans as the owners of the world, but this reminds humans they are part and parcel of nature. While the modern scientific worldview sees nature as a machine, the spiritual worldview considers nature like a living body.<sup>6</sup> When humans realise they are not foreign to the order of nature, they cannot perform any activity that massively affects the natural system.

Nasr regrettably notes that modern humans are disconnected from their spiritual contemplation and treat such spiritual attachments as superstitions or backward aspects of human life and experience. Nasr connects such transformation – from a spiritual insightful view to secular outlook – with destruction of the natural world.<sup>7</sup> In many places of his works, Nasr labels such problems as a spiritual crisis of modern humans.<sup>8</sup> For him, a spiritual worldview can save humans from this pervasive crisis.<sup>9</sup> In Nasr's view, religious and spiritual traditions of the world should cooperate to enhance spiritual feelings for the natural world in their own ways.<sup>10</sup>

## SPIRITUAL FEELINGS FOR AND RESPONSIBILITY TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

As Nasr understands, the present ecological crisis has a spiritual crisis from the side of modern humans, so he suggests a revolutionary reformation in human thought regarding the natural world. Nasr proposes feeling for nature from the human spiritual mind, which can motivate humans to bring substantial change in the present form of economic activities and power practicing competitions between/among nations. Without a deeper spiritual attachment with nature, other activities will only work superficially for the time being. To do work for a permanent solution regarding ecological sustainability, humans need revitalised spiritual minds for the non-human world.

For Nasr, in some ways, modern humans talk about the ecological crisis but they do not avoid the things that are creating problems for the planetary environment.<sup>11</sup> Nasr describes such

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<sup>5</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 119.

<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford Universe Press, 1996), 4, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, revised ed. (Chicago: ABC International Group, Inc., 2001), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Nasr, *Man, and Nature*, 7, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 7-14, 201-223, 270-280, 284-288.

<sup>10</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 13-14, 86.

<sup>11</sup> As Nasr states: "Everyone talks today of the danger of war, over-population or the pollution of air and water. But usually, the same people who discern these obvious problems speak of the necessity of further 'development', or war against 'human misery' stemming from conditions imposed by terrestrial existence itself. In other words, they wish to overcome the problems brought about by the destruction of the equilibrium between man and nature through further conquest and domination of nature." Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 13.

things for modern humans as a dilemma,<sup>12</sup> which is created by ignoring spiritual feelings for the environment so humans can have a deep intimacy with every component of the natural world. Until this kind of spiritual feeling for the environment returns to the human heart, the ecological crisis continues.

Nasr reiterates human responsibility to the planetary environment by advocating a deeper spiritual feeling for the natural world. For Nasr, if humans can realise they have a profound responsibility to the natural world, it can motivate them to reform positive change in their own capacity. In his view, without such a radical transformation in human feeling and their activities, the present situation cannot be reversed. It requires a society with obligations toward the natural environment,<sup>13</sup> where consumerism must be limited and controlled by a deeper understanding of the reality and profound sense of responsibility.

## **RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW AND SPIRITUALITY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

The religious worldview shows a deeper relationship between humans and the natural world in terms of following the same law. Humans should follow the law of nature in the way as it is being followed by others. In a religious understanding, nature is not seen as alien to humans, as the modern scientific worldview considers. Religious beliefs connect angels, spirits or souls with the natural world. For Nasr, if humans can see nature with this deeper realisation, they cannot accept the scientific worldview of nature, which has developed a mechanistic-materialistic approach to the environment.

A simple religious spiritual teaching can motivate humans to consider themselves in others, which can create a participatory and cooperative approach.<sup>14</sup> If humans just think about their own creation, they can easily understand that in their bodily formation there are many compound amalgamations of natural objects that came into being through a geochemical process, which implies humans are inside nature and nature is inside humans. This understanding can instil an idea in the human mind that there is an inseparable and inevitable relationship between humans and non-human creatures. Nasr prompts humans to grasp nature in this way and hopes this realisation can prevent humans from exploiting the natural environment in the name of endless human comfort.

For Nasr, religious spirituality promotes a spiritual feeling for the environment around humans, so modern humans should come back to it. In Nasr's view, every authentic religious tradition of the world imposes some obligations over its followers for spiritual contemplation, which should be followed by practitioners with due emphasis. Even textual indications of religious scriptures regarding the natural world cannot be understood without deeper spiritual realisation. All prophets were spiritual persons and they emphasised spirituality first. Without

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<sup>12</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis," *The Ecologist* 30 (2000): 20.

<sup>14</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 24.

spirituality, religion cannot work and without religious spirituality, common people cannot come to a spiritual outlook. If humans are to address the ecological crisis in a more effective way, religious spiritual feelings for nature should be promoted as an influential agent.<sup>15</sup>

## SACRED COSMOLOGY AND THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF MODERN HUMANS

By the term “sacred cosmology,” Nasr never rejects the existence of the material-physical universe. He emphasises categorically the existence of the spiritual universe over the physical universe, by arguing the material-physical universe is not independent of the Divine Reality (God) but is sustained by Him.<sup>16</sup> Nasr’s sacred cosmology connects revelation and metaphysical doctrines in its scientific analysis of the orders of nature and all other physical realities. According to sacred cosmology, the physical worlds cannot exist independently of spiritual worlds; the spiritual world is associated with the single Divine Reality and humans are an intermediary level between the physical and spiritual worlds, which implies an important objective of human life is to uphold the cosmic order in their understanding and feeling.<sup>17</sup> Nasr argues a real cosmology cannot deal with the material and corporeal stages of existence without linking revelation in it. Nasr notes, when secular scientists remove revelation from cosmology, it loses its sacred character and grants humans a naked licence to exploit nature.

For Nasr, modern humans talk about the environmental crisis, but do not feel for the ecological equilibrium in their mind.<sup>18</sup> They lack a deeper spiritual feeling or insightful love for the environment, which allows Nasr to reiterate the present ecological problems as a spiritual crisis of modern humans. In Nasr’s view, if a spiritual worldview of nature is developed and followed world-wide, humans can reverse the present ecological crisis: “The solution of the environmental crisis can come about only when the modern spiritual malaise is cured and there is a rediscovery of the world of the Spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

## THE GOD–HUMAN–EARTH HIERARCHICAL RELATIONSHIP

According to this model, humans are located between God and nature, and they are bound to play their responsible role as God’s custodian on earth in protecting the natural world. For Nasr, the God–Human–Earth relationship model makes a responsible relationship of humans with non-human creatures, which does not support a human-centric relationship. In Nasr’s

<sup>15</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 9-24; Nasr, “The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions,” 18-20.

<sup>16</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam and the Environmental Crisis” in *Islam and the Environment*, ed. A. R. Agwan (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997); Almut Beringer, “Reclaiming a Sacred Cosmology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Perennial Philosophy and Sustainability Education,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 11, no. 1 (2006): 35.

<sup>18</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, “Islam and the Environmental Crisis,” in *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue—An Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Stephen C. Rockefeller and John C. Elder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 106; Liza Wersal, “Islam and Environmental Ethics: Tradition Responds to Contemporary Challenges,” *Zygon* 30, no. 3 (1995): 458.

view, the modern scientific worldview separates God from humans; after then, it separates humans from nature, which eventually makes humans the criteria for measuring all things. As God is not an important entity in the modern scientific worldview, humans are no longer responsible for their actions to God, which discourages them from taking care of nature in one hand and encourages thinking of their own earthly benefits from the others.

For Nasr, in the eyes of a spiritual person, every organism of the natural world reflects the Divine Reality by observing that they can reflect about God's wisdom in the creation. If nature works as a reflection of the Divine Reality, there is no scope to underestimate any constituting substance of nature, even if it is an abiotic ingredient of the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Since all the components of nature are created by God, being a responsible creature of the same God, humans should be very careful when taking services from them. To disrespect them means to disrespect its Maker. On the other hand, human love for God implies love for God's creation as well. A believer in God cannot produce any potential harm, which would destroy a symbol of the Divine reflection.

All things are created by the same creator, so everything is related. If humans can think in this way, they will find a deeper attachment with every component of nature. For this reason, there is an urgent need for deeper spiritual understanding through which humans can imagine themselves in a transcendent unity of being with all other creatures of God, which motivates them eventually to be more tolerant to non-human animals and acknowledge their rights to live on the earth with them. This sort of deeper spiritual contemplation, as Nasr argues, is essential for restoring the human–nature relationship.<sup>21</sup> For Nasr, without a deeper understanding of the unity of existence, no initiative can work for environmental sustainability.<sup>22</sup>

## TRADITIONAL WAY OF AGRICULTURE AND BUILDING HOUSES

Nasr criticises modern agricultural systems, because they alter the quality of the soil and destroy the ecological system through killing biotic organisms like earthworms and other insects by using pesticides, herbicides and chemical fertilisers in farming lands.<sup>23</sup> These chemical ingredients gradually enter the human body through consuming food items resulting in some forms of cancer and other health issues. While modern agricultural systems provide humans with sufficient foods to meet their appetites, in the long run they can be a health risk and destroy the environment.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, Nasr urges reviving traditional technologies when cultivating farming lands to produce healthy and environmentally friendly foods.<sup>25</sup>

Nasr advocates building houses and roads using traditional methods, which have less impact on the environment. For Nasr, though these methods are not completely free from damaging

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<sup>20</sup> Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Nasr, *Man and Nature*, 20, 135-136.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Muzaffar Iqbal, "The Islamic Perspective on the Environmental Crisis: Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 87-88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76-77, 87-88.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 92.

the environment, they carry fewer dangerous effects in the natural environment compared with the modern methods of building houses and roads.<sup>26</sup> The Great Wall of China, Pyramid of Egypt and Qutub Minar of Delhi are the best examples of building in the traditional ways.

## CONTROLLING HUMAN GREED AND CONSUMPTION

Despite being aware of the present ecological crisis, modern humans are continuing their uncontrolled activities in the environment for fulfilling their desire of more economic affluence and military power. Modern science and consumerism based economic systems have triggered such greed in the human mind.<sup>27</sup> Everything in the current world is being measured by an exterior achievement in terms of economic prosperity, which has turned modern humans into greedy and selfish animals. The current economic system lacks a solid foundation to reduce human greed. Similarly, modern science and technology are totally disconnected from any moral or ethical guidance to grow a controlling capacity in the human mind.

In his view, it is unfair to consume excessive amounts because of availability, easily accessible or our attraction to foods.<sup>28</sup> Nasr sees, if the harm of any consumed items weighs more than its benefits in terms of ecological equilibrium, the item should be avoided. Nasr calls for balanced consumption matching the readjustment system of nature.

## RELEVANCE OF NASR'S "ECO-SPIRITUALITY" TO BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is facing many environmental problems.<sup>29</sup> Some problems are a result of global warming or world-wide climate change, over which the Bangladeshi people make few contributions; but other problems are of course created by the Bangladeshi people. Though Bangladesh is heading toward industrialisation, mainly it is an agriculture-based country. Nowadays, the agricultural pattern has reversed from the traditional methods to the modern methods. The country's farmers use agro-chemicals in farming lands for more production,<sup>30</sup> which degrades the soil quality. The urbanisation process and construction also reduce available farming lands. People are levelling hills and cutting trees for farming and housing;<sup>31</sup> consequently, the country experiences deforestation and desertification. As a developing country, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) prioritises setting up industries without proper systems of regulation and justification to the sustainability of the country's ecological system. Since most of these factories do not have enough disposal methods, their chemical and toxic effluents are thrown into the open soil, water and air. On the other hand, water, soil and air are

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>29</sup> For details, see Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-14.

<sup>30</sup> Department of Environment (DoE), *Bangladesh Environment and Climate Change Outlook 2012* (Dhaka: Department of Environment, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2012), xviii; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-10.

<sup>31</sup> Department of Environment, *Bangladesh Environment and Climate Change Outlook 2012*, xviii; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-10.

also being polluted by agro-chemicals like chemical fertilisers and pesticides, solid household and medical waste, and industrial waste.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the country's poor waste management system cannot properly handle such uncontrolled amounts of waste. Bangladesh is completely dependent on fossil-based energy sources like natural gas, oil and coal. All these non-renewable resources are burnt for generating energy by the country's numerous motorised vehicles and industries, and their emissions are polluting the environment. The GoB will soon launch two nuclear power plants for producing electricity. Despite these two power plants, the country may experience other sorts of environmental destruction. Due to world-wide climate change and global warming, the coastal areas of Bangladesh, which cover one-third of the country, may end up under the sea.<sup>33</sup> In the meantime, people residing there are facing increasing salinity. Other parts of the country are facing problems with arsenic in the drinking water. In addition to all these disturbing situations, regular natural calamities like floods, cyclones, tornadoes, earthquakes, storm surges, drought, heavy rainfall, hailstorm lighting, etc., compound the environmental problems.

The GoB is concerned about all these problems,<sup>34</sup> but lacks sincerity and moderation with other relevant activities.<sup>35</sup> Some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies, Wildlife Trust of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, Proshika, Building Resources Across Communities and Simple Action for the Environment are active in environmental issues.<sup>36</sup> From the volunteer organisations, Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon and Doctors for Health and Environment are actively working for the preservation of a healthy environment to all.<sup>37</sup> Issue-based movements are also saving the environment from further degradation. Through publishing and broadcasting news related to environmental issues, the media and press also attempt to wake up people to be conscious about the ongoing environmental crises.

Despite all these policies and actions implemented so far by the GoB, NGOs and voluntary civic movements, no significant or satisfactory progress has been made.<sup>38</sup> The glaring gap is evident in their theoretical discourses and actions as they cannot grow any inner consciousness in the human mind that there is deep intimacy between humans and the natural world, which cannot be separated. The natural world is not only a matter of externally visible phenomena but also a matter of spiritual feeling. Unfortunately, modern humans, due to so-called scientific and secular education, have forgotten the significance of a spiritual approach and application to nature, which allows Nasr to consider the current environmental crisis to be a spiritual crisis

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<sup>32</sup> Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-10.

<sup>33</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Country Environmental Analysis-Bangladesh* (Manila: ADB, 2004), 15; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 12.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Environment, *Bangladesh Environment and Climate Change Outlook 2012*, 10-11.

<sup>35</sup> For details, see Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 15-16.

<sup>37</sup> Nazrul Islam, *Protecting Bangladesh's Environment: The Role of the Civil Society* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Environmental Network, 1999), 14-15, accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.eng-consult.com/ben/papers/paper-nislam.pdf>; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 16-17.

<sup>38</sup> Islam, *Protecting Bangladesh's Environment*, 15; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 18-19.

of modern humans.<sup>39</sup> It is equally true for the Bangladeshi people. Though most of them are involved in the Islamic faith tradition, their mental setup remains attached to the secular or scientific understanding of nature. According to the modern scientific worldview, nature has no sacred character, but works like a machine for serving humans. This worldview suppresses the spiritual approach to nature, which inhibits modern humans' spiritual feelings. Without addressing this explicit problem of modern humans, the environmental crisis cannot be solved. When humans regain certain spiritual feelings for the environment, they can decide what to do for sustaining the environment. That is why a religious approach to the environment is essential. Because of this, Nasr's eco-spiritual understanding is relevant to Bangladesh. Now, we will see how Nasr's eco-spirituality can work to reduce the environmental problems created by Bangladeshi people.

Nasr's eco-spiritual approach to environmental ethics can be applicable in Bangladesh. More than 90% of Bangladeshi people follow the Islamic religious tradition.<sup>40</sup> For Nasr, the natural environment is sacred and humans should not disrespect other creatures. The natural world is not monopoly for human use; rather, it is a sharing place for all living things. Since humans are a micro part of nature, they should respect other parts of it. As humans are made a responsible animal, they should treat other animals in a very responsible way. As humans have a deeper intimacy with nature, the natural world is not alien to them. To harm any part of the environment means to inflict harm on the entire natural world. If the Bangladeshi people are taught these eco-spiritual understandings reconstructed by Nasr, perhaps there will be a significant change in their thoughts, feelings, behaviours and activities in terms of the natural environment. With such beneficiary knowledge, people may be more conscious about the essentiality of environment sustainability and they can attempt to control their own activities that are harmful to the environment. All these theoretical understandings are crucial for the Bangladeshi people to reform their perceptions of nature and control their destructive activities on the natural environment.

If Nasr's eco-spirituality is accepted in Bangladesh, people can be more conscious about taking care of all living forms in the natural world. They can easily know that the environment is not dead or a machine, but is alive and sacred. When people realise that all abiotic components of the natural world supports life, they can be emphatic while behaving with non-living things. When people understand that all biotic and abiotic organisms are interconnected and interdependent, they can give more value to the ecological system. Such understanding of the natural world can drive people to create an ecology-based society where a participatory attitude will give space for all living forms and non-living things will not be misused or abused.

If Nasr's simple lifestyle is followed by the Bangladeshi people, there may be a quick reverse of increasingly destructive activities in the environment. It is essential for country people to follow hard practices to improve the degraded situations. In this regard, Nasr's

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<sup>39</sup> Nasr, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis," 18.

<sup>40</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Population and Housing Census-2011* (Dhaka: Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011), xiii; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 3.

encouragement of simplicity is very relevant for the Bangladeshi people, because it is about a responsible lifestyle giving priority to an ecological sustainability. If the Bangladeshi people are habituated with this dedicated lifestyle, they can prevent themselves from degrading the environment. By following this sort of lifestyle, Bangladeshi people can meet their basic needs from the natural world without placing pressures on the environment. People can dramatically reduce their dependency on fossil-based energy and welcome green technologies to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide. They can also be convinced to compromise and sacrifice their present lifestyle for the greater cause of environmental sustainability. In this way, people can be a protector of their country's environment instead of a destroyer.

By practicing simplicity in their lifestyle, the Bangladeshi people can construct an ecology-based society where all living organisms in the natural world are considered significant members. According to Islamic ethical teachings, the Bangladeshi people can ethically be very sensitive to take animals as their foods. They can apply virtue ethics, kindness and mercy, for instance, when slaughtering animals for food purposes. Their treatment of animals can be promoted as gentle as possible. They can be more conscious and have concern for animals' pain and suffering. They can maintain the habitats of other living things, leaving them undisturbed without proper cause or justification. They cannot interrupt the way living organisms naturally grow and survive. By doing such things, the Bangladeshi people can be custodians of the biological world. In addition, Nasr's ecological spirituality can help the Bangladeshi people to relate themselves with other creatures of the world, where they can easily see their intimate relationships with non-human animals and plants. When they see the unity and intimacy of all creatures, they cannot generate any potential situation to kill off a species.

As a developing country, Bangladesh is heading towards industrialisation.<sup>41</sup> Due to cheap labour costs and availability of some raw materials, many multinational companies are investing in Bangladesh. Though some people are getting jobs and the country is achieving some economic affluence from such industrialised initiatives, the country's natural environment is becoming worse day by day. However, with such ongoing facts, it is difficult, not impossible, to effect Nasr's eco-spiritual vision. If most people are conscious about the essentiality of the human–nature inseparable relationship and convinced for the necessity of environmental sustainability in regard to the quality of life, they can create strong pressure on the country's government to realise the possible consequences of the present trend of industrialisation at the price of the natural environment. As a result, the government and general people can work together for development without making huge pressure on the environment. According to an ecological model of development, the calculation of the fiscal economic growth is condemned, because it deals with the economic interest of a particular year and ignores any ecosystem collapse of that growth. Nasr is not against the basic economic development, but that development should not be beyond ecological interest. For Nasr, the present ecological crises are a result of over-development activities not because of core

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<sup>41</sup> Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-10.

development. He suggests, for sustainable economic development, ecological interest is articulated in human economic functions, and a deeper and insightful relationship with the natural environment can go in a parallel way. If a cost-benefit analysis and holistic approach are considered, Nasr's suggestions can inspire the Bangladeshi people to concentrate on a development process that can match with the country's biodiversity resources.

By following the Western methods in agriculture, farmers are using agro-chemicals including fertiliser and pesticides to produce more crops.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the country's soil quality is rapidly degraded and the environment is destroyed. If Nasr's traditional agricultural system is restored, it will be an environmentally friendly agricultural system. Instead of chemical fertilisers they can use organic fertilisers. If it is necessary to drive dangerous insects from the land, they can apply natural methods for this.

According to Nasr's suggestion, Bangladesh should give up on nuclear power plants and fossil energy (gas, oil and coal)-based electricity production industries because of their threats to the environment. The GoB should move to alternative energy sources like solar power, biogas, windmill, sea wave, river current, etc., for electricity production. Instead of using private cars, people should prefer using public transport. Even the GoB should promote riding bicycles and walking for short distances.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Nasr's eco-spirituality advocates an intimate relationship of humans with all living forms of nature. It is explicit from the preceding discussion that, as an eco-spiritual philosopher, Nasr addresses environmental problems from a faith perspective with his own understanding of spiritual traditions of the world and perennial philosophy. He reconstructs an eco-spiritual understanding to respond to the current environmental problems. Truly, he proves that the spiritual traditions of the world have enough resources to address the present ecological crises. Suffice to say, his ecological spirituality talks about a responsible and simple lifestyle in consideration to the sustainability of the ecological system.

Bangladesh is facing numerous environmental problems created by the activities of its inhabitants and global climate change. Though the GoB and some NGOs have some concerns, their policies and activities are not enough to reverse the ongoing ecological problems; rather, they need more support and knowledge from outside Bangladesh to achieve satisfactory progress. As a Muslim majority country, the Bangladesh government and non-government organisations should incorporate the Islamic faith tradition to develop a sympathetic approach to nature through which they can easily motivate people to reform their present behaviours with the environment. It is true that without cooperation from world religions the global ecological problem cannot be solved. Similarly, no country can solve its environmental problems until its faith communities cooperate. Therefore, Nasr is relevant because his eco-

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<sup>42</sup> Asian Development Bank, *Country Environmental Analysis-Bangladesh*, 9-13; Department of Environment, *Bangladesh Environment and Climate Change Outlook 2012*, xviii; Sayem, "Islamic Teaching and Practice of Environmental Ethics in Bangladesh," 9-10.

spiritual understanding can help Bangladeshi Muslims to develop Islamic eco-religious understanding to address the environmental problems.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that Nasr relates the ecological degradation with a spiritual crisis of modern humans, which is not a dominating part of the modern environmental ethics. This is why he talks about religious spirituality through which humans can feel the problem and be convinced to treat the natural world in a very modest way. He also proposes the perennial philosophy in the place of materialistic philosophy and suggests reviving the traditional metaphysical understanding for thinking deeply about the intimacy between human beings and the natural world. By connecting the wisdom traditions of the world with the environment, Nasr grows a positive sentiment in favour of ecological equilibrium. Secular environmentalists or atheist philosophers may criticise Nasr's eco-philosophical understanding of nature as a backward vision, but they cannot completely deny the significance of the philosophical and spiritual insightful motivations Nasr brings to address the present ecological crisis. Remarkably, Nasr shows the traditional understanding of nature as a supporting factor to environmental sustainability. He emphasises how the traditional science and religious spirituality, accompanied by sacred sciences, worked in the past for the sustainability of the environment. Using this example, for a long-term solution of the ecological problem, Nasr suggests a paradigm shift from the modern scientific worldview to a spirituality-based worldview of nature. As far as economic development is concerned, Nasr connects it with the environment and supports a wise economic policy that can fix economic activities in consideration of a stable environment.

If Nasr's insightful view of the human–nature relationship is seriously considered for Bangladesh, I argue it can promote the Bangladeshi people to work in favour of environmental sustainability. If the GoB wants to keep national development progress at a sustainable level, it should bring revolutionary reform to its present perceptions of nature by accepting an organic view of the environment, making people of the country more conscious about the necessity of ecological sustainability and growing a deeper spiritual realisation in their minds. If Bangladesh can rectify its current economic policies and activities in line with the ecological balance, it is possible to keep the country in a more sustainable phase.

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