Reclaiming a Sacred Cosmology: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Perennial Philosophy, and Sustainability Education

Almut Beringer, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Abstract

The question posed by the Canadian Journal of Environmental Education *volume 11, "where is the place for religion in environmental education?" is rephrased in this essay to become, "where is the place for a religious view of the order of nature in environmental education?" Relying on the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a proponent of the perennial philosophy and an eminent scholar of Islam and comparative religion, I use this paper to explore the notion of a religious order of nature and, in extension, sacred cosmology as an alternative worldview on the pathway toward sustainability. I maintain that environmental education, in particular, and environmental studies, more generally, bear responsibility to re-introduce, on a cultural level and global scale, lost dimensions of a religious-spiritual knowledge of nature. This includes reclaiming environmental ethics embedded in timeless metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological understandings of the cosmos, and validating non-scientific ways of knowing. To ensure true and lasting progress toward sustainability, it seems vital to address the global crisis of unsustainability more seriously as a crisis of worldview, and to strengthen a consequent transformation of perception. Providing alternative worldviews which hold promise for sustainability, with environmental education charting the path toward a paradigm shift, is particularly critical in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which so far is mostly silent on the deepest dimensions of unsustainability.*

Résumé

La question posée par le Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, *volume 11, « Quelle est la place de la religion dans l'éducation écologique? » devient, dans cet essai, « Quelle est la place pour un point de vue religieux de l'ordre naturel dans l'éducation écologique? » Se basant sur les écrits de Seyyed Hossein Nasr, un adepte de la philosophie pérenne et un éminent savant de l'Islam et des religions comparatives, je me sers de cet article pour analyser la notion d'un ordre naturel religieux et, par extension, la cosmologie sacrée comme une vision mondiale optionnelle qui conduit à la durabilité. Je soutiens que l'éducation durable en particulier, et plus généralement les études en environnement, portent la responsabilité de réintroduire, sur une base culturelle et sur une échelle globale, les dimensions perdues d'un savoir religieux-spirituel de la nature. Il s'agit de récupérer l'éthique de l'environnement intégrée dans une inépuisable compréhension métaphysique, épistémologique et ontologique du cosmos et de valider des façons de savoir non scientifiques. Pour s'assurer d'un progrès*

vrai et durable vers la pérennité, il semble vital d'aborder plus sérieusement l'ensemble de la crise sur la non durabilité comme une crise de vision planétaire et de renforcer la nouvelle perception qui s'ensuit. Présenter des visions du monde optionnelles garantes de durabilité, en même temps qu'une éducation écologique qui tracerait la voie à un changement de paradigme, devient particulièrement critique pour la Décennie des Nations Unies pour l'éducation en vue du développement durable qui, à date, est presque silencieuse sur les aspects les plus profonds de la non durabilité.

Keywords: perennial philosophy; Seyyed Hossein Nasr; religious order of nature; sacred cosmology; sustainability education; environmental education

> Without the rediscovery of this sacred science of the order of nature, its exposition in a contemporary medium without distortion or dilution and the formulation of the link between such a knowledge of the order of nature and the ethics of the environment, there is no doubt that what remains of order in the natural and human worlds will turn into further chaos ... that can destroy all human life on Earth. (Nasr, 1996, p. 7)

> [N]ature is hungry for our prayers. (Nasr, 1998a, p. 81)

The question, what is the place of religion in environmental education?, which this issue of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* investigates, provides an opportunity to reflect on metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological—in short, cosmological—dimensions of sustainability rarely addressed in the prevailing discourse on sustainable development. I have reworded the question to ask, what is the place of a "religious view of the order of nature" in environmental education?, and use this essay to explore this notion of a "religious understanding of nature." In this paper, I examine sacred cosmology as an alternative worldview to support environmental educators' goal of facilitating a sustainable future for all. Drawing on the perennial philosophy, I assert that a religious understanding of nature is indispensable in the global sustainability project. Furthermore, I suggest that the "religious order of nature" consequently has a place in environmental education, and that a task for environmental education is to reclaim a sacred cosmology. This seems particularly critical in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which occasionally has yielded calls for a paradigm shift to chart a more hopeful course toward sustainability (e.g., Rees, 2005), but where visions of what exactly such a new paradigm may be are to date sketchy, if not noticeably absent (cf. Goldsmith, 1998).

In this invitation to the community of environmental education scholars and practitioners to contemplate the dimensions of a religious-spiritual worldview and the domain of sacred cosmology, I draw heavily on the

writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in particular his book, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (1996). Nasr is an eminent American-educated Shi'ite Muslim scholar of Islam, Sufism, and comparative religion, who through his contributions to the discussions on religion and environment has broadened the debate which originated in a western, Christian academic setting (Foltz, 2003; *A Biography of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, n.d.). Despite being among the first in 1966 to predict the environmental crisis in a series of lectures, summarized in his book, *Man and Nature* (1966, 1968), Nasr is little known among environmentalists and environmental educators. Nasr warned about the impending global predicament, now upon us, based on his analysis of the human condition in the modern era, in particular the loss of spiritual-religious dimensions of cultural and individual life—including understandings of nature—as powerful forces regulating the human-nature relationship. Nasr's analysis and the contributions of his fellow perennial philosophers (in particular F. Shuon, A. Coomaraswamy, and R. Guenon) deserve more widespread and thorough attention within environmental education/studies and the sustainability discourse (see Figure 1) (cf. Nasr, 1996; Oldmeadow, 2000; *Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the context of the Perennialist School*, n.d.).

Timeless, eternal, or ageless wisdom; also known as *sophia perennis, cosmologia perennis* (Nasr, 1996), *philosophia perennis et universalis* (Nasr & Stoddard, 1991), *religio perennis; Lex aeterna, Hagia Sophia, Din al-Haqq, Akalika Dhamma, Sanatana Dharma* (Oldmeadow, 2000); and theosophy (cf. Versluis, 2003) or the Divine Wisdom

Philosophia perennis—the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions. (Huxley, 1944/1990, p. vii)

The Perennial Philosophy teaches that it is desirable and indeed necessary to know the spiritual Ground of things, not only within the soul, but also outside in the world and, beyond world and soul, in its transcendent otherness—"in heaven." (Huxley, 1944/1990, p. 2)

[The] *sophia perennis* is of supra-human origin and is in no sense a product or evolute of human thought; it is transmitted through revelation. (Oldmeadow, 2000, p. 60)

Figure 1. The perennial philosophy—*philosophia perennis.*

On Religion

Many individuals distinguish for themselves between religion and spirituality, spirituality usually being less contentious, for a variety of personal and cultural-historical reasons which I will not entertain here. Statements such as "I'm not religious but I do consider myself to be a spiritual person" or books such as *How to Pray Without Being Religious: Finding Your Own Spiritual Path* (Moon, 2004) reflect these sentiments of aversion to traditional religion. The distinction is also reflected in more formal writings (e.g., Nasr, 1998a). In their broadest sense, both religion and spirituality deal with issues of Spirit, the Divine, the sacred. Spirit, by definition, is of or emanates from the Divine, and the Divine, by definition, is sacred. Thus spirituality devoid of the sacred is not true spirituality; secular spirituality—which avoids and refrains from notions of Spirit and the sacred—is an oxymoron and the most extreme outcome of a secularism which is denying solid and authoritative understandings of the sacred, and its study (Beringer, 2000). In other words, because the particular concern of religion is to recognize and celebrate the sacred, the world's historically recognized faith systems are the time-honoured home of spirituality.

Religion has also been described as a formal, organized pathway to the Divine (God). Broadly speaking, religion is a value system which constitutes all or part of an individual or society's worldview—the culturally constructed way in which one sees the world and one's place in it (Foltz, 2003). Nasr (1996, 1998a) asserts that religion, not spirituality, is the repository of the sacred and the means of access to it, a claim, I suspect, many who harbour negative experiences with organized religion but who have active and meaningful spiritual lives—perhaps in relation/kinship with the natural world—would contest. Be that as it may, as I have suggested elsewhere (Beringer, 2000), religious studies of the world's great faith systems can indeed supply an understanding of spirituality that has generally been left unexplored in discussions of sustainability and environmental education. To justify ignoring religion, critics may still juxtapose religion as faith with science as an empirically-based knowledge system (cf. Foltz, 2003; Nasr, 1997), but this distinction falls apart under closer scrutiny. Science, like religion, requires an adherence to root assumptions which cannot be proven empirically and which rely on faith (Barbour, 1990, cited in Maxwell, 2003; Nasr, 1997). While more could be said, for purposes of this essay I will focus on the notion that religions serve as the source of ethics involving the environment as well as a knowledge of the order of nature (Nasr, 1996, 1998a), both of which can be valuable resources for environmental education.

The Environmental Crisis as a Spiritual Crisis

In his keynote address to the 2005 Canadian Environmental Education and Communication (EECOM) conference, Bill Rees asked, *is humanity inherently unsustainable?* (Rees, 2005). Citing historical and cross-cultural evidence, Rees seemed to make the argument, based on socio-biological determinism, that the human species has little choice on the path toward annihilation. Rees made few, if any, references to social mores, moral-religious, or other cultural vectors which may govern and regulate the human-nature relationship. He made a strong case for a paradigm shift, for a new worldview which could lead humanity out of its present predicament of unsustainability. Yet what was noticeably absent from Rees' presentation was an outline of exactly what this worldview, or elements of such a new paradigm, may be. Rees' answer regarding the pathway to sustainability—*we have to educate the next generation*—would have been less than satisfying to many in the audience. It is by now so familiar a mantra in environmental education, becoming less and less convincing in light of the fact that the world has by now had environmental education for 30 or so years; nonetheless, the planet is still in decline (e.g., IPCC, 2003; UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005; WWF, 2004).

Rees' presentation confirmed for me that many educated in the scientific worldview are unable to provide even so much as a sketch of an alternative worldview which may lead humanity out of its claimed "inherent unsustainability"—because the scientific worldview, on principle, seeks to address the ecological crisis from within its own domain, and, on principle, does not have room for alternative ways of knowing, including religious-spiritual understandings of nature. Nasr (1996) proposes that "[t]he Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant strife with the terrestrial environment" (p. 3) and that "[t]he crisis of the natural environment is an external reminder of the crisis which the souls of men and women who, having forsaken Heaven in the name of the Earth, are now in danger of destroying the Earth as well" (p. 6). Walsh (1993) advises all of the contemporary global crises have psychological origins and mirror humanity's collective consciousness; the global environmental crisis is at its core a spiritual crisis (Berman, 1981; Berry, 1988, 1999; Foltz, 2003; Kinsley, 1995; Maxwell, 2003; McGrath, 2002; Nasr, 1966, 1981, 1996, 1997; Sherrard, 1992). Less familiar is Nasr's explicit reference to the environmental crisis being a symptom of humanity's misguided and misplaced spiritual yearning, and the loss of what he refers to as "a harmony with Heaven" which can loosely be translated as the loss of a sacred cosmology.

Many environmental educators would be familiar with understandings of the sacred quality of nature, on an experiential basis of powerful and transformative experiences in and with the natural world. At issue here is not the loss or lack of spiritual-religious experience in/with nature on an individual

level, but the loss of religious (spiritual) knowledge and understandings of nature as an intervention in the human-nature relationship and as a regulatory mechanism on a cultural level and global scale. This, most fundamentally, includes the loss of an understanding of the universe and life as embedded in and sustained by the Divine. As Nasr explains (1996, 1998a), religions serve as both environmental ethics reference systems and as knowledge systems of the human-nature relationship which are not captured by modern science. Where the sacred—however this may be understood—guides and directs the affairs of humanity, in interpersonal relationships as well as *vis-a-vis* nature, certain questions simply do not arise. The fact that our society can ask questions about genetically-modified crops, the use of atomic energy as a legitimate source for meeting increasingly insatiable demands for energy, and others—and that it responds to such challenges with a technology of irrevocable consequences without adequate ethical contemplation and debate—is evidence for the loss of spiritual-religious understandings of nature. Such understandings acknowledge nature as a reflection of the sacred/Divine having moral force, and being humanity's moral-spiritual teacher (Nasr, 1993, 1996; Sherrard, 1992). In the absence of such regulatory mechanisms, including an adequate application of well-founded ethical knowledge, questions of "should we do what we can do?" hold little sway.

Suggesting a universalist solution to the crisis of unsustainability via recovery of sacred cosmology seems hubris in a pluralistic, multicultural, and relativistic world (cf. Sherrard, 1992). Yet a look at history provides leverage points that living without knowledge of a sacred cosmos is a cultural misunderstanding and historical aberration that western society would do well to review. As Nasr (1996, 1998a) points out, the transition from living within a sacred cosmos to living within a scientific universe took hold in the West in the 16th/17th centuries and now spans the globe (cf. Oldmeadow, 2003):

> [The western world] moved away from the almost universally held view of the sacredness of nature to one that sees man [sic][1] as alienated from nature and nature itself as no longer the progenitor of life… . It also divorced, in a manner not to be seen in any other civilization, the laws of nature from moral laws and human ethics from the workings of the cosmos. (Nasr, 1996, p. 4)

Several historical developments contributed to the loss of the sacred, most notably the rise of secular humanism during and following the Renaissance, which, in Nasr's words, led to the "absolutization of earthly man" (1996, p. 4) and the development of a reductionist secular science within a Christian civilization (p. 5). As Nasr puts it, "religion lost its claim to the cosmos, and religious knowledge of the order of nature ceased to possess any legitimacy in the new paradigm of science, which came to dominate the scene" (p. 5). All these contributed to the loss of metaphysical frameworks which accorded humanity and nature spiritual, sacramental qualities (Nasr, 1997).

In sum, cosmology was displaced by a reductionist science which no

longer linked the phenomenal reality with a profoundly developed metaphysics. As Nasr (1997) explains, what is today referred to as cosmology has nothing of the original, traditional (i.e., pre-modern) meaning:

> Cosmology is a science dealing with all orders of formal reality, of which the material order is only one aspect. It is a sacred science which is bound to be connected to revelation and metaphysical doctrine in whose bosom alone it becomes meaningful and efficacious. … A cosmology which is based solely on the material and corporeal level of existence however far it may extend into galaxies … is not real cosmology. … The disappearance of a real cosmology in the West is due in general to the neglect of metaphysics, and more particularly to a failure to remember the hierarchies of being and of knowledge. The multiple levels of reality are reduced to a single psycho-physical domain, as if the third dimension were suddenly to be taken out of our vision of a landscape. (p. 22)

Neglecting the significance of the religious understandings of the cosmos (Nasr, 1996) and the "sacred science of nature" (Nasr, 1996, p. 5) has led to abandoning environmental ethics and a type of knowledge which may well be critical in the global sustainability project. What this religious perspective may be, and what a sacred cosmology might entail, is the focus of the next part of this paper.

> The traditionalist perspective [is] the age-long worldview of all pre-modern peoples. The traditionalists, by definition, are committed to the explication of the *philosophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind the manifold forms of the world's different traditions. … [T]raditionalism constitutes a militant and powerful critique of the modern Western *Weltanschauung* … . (Oldmeadow, 2000, pp. viii-ix)
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> Tradition: short-hand for a whole worldview; timeless wisdom which is formless and beyond all conceptualisations; universal wisdom which has been in existence since the dawn of time and which is the spiritual patrimony of all humankind; synonymous with a perennial philosophy which is eternal, universal and immutable, though not static; primordial truth. (Oldmeadow, 2000, pp. 58-67)
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> A formless and immutable Truth which finds expression in the myths, rituals, symbols, doctrines, iconographies and other manifestations of different primal and religious civilisations. (Oldmeadow, 2000, p. 60)
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> … tradition is far beyond being merely an accumulation of human endeavour and invention even if it does have a history. … to equate tradition with a form of historical continuity is to ignore its supra-formal essence in the name of which it remains free and objective in relation to spatio-temporal determinations. (Keeble, 1977, cited in Oldmeadow, 2000, p. 61; cf. Nasr, 1981)

Figure 2. Tradition and traditionalism.

The Religious Studies Perspective and Sacred Cosmology

"It must never be forgotten," asserts Nasr (1997, in Foltz, 2003, p. 21),

> that for non-modern man—whether he be ancient or contemporary—the very stuff of the Universe has a sacred aspect. The cosmos speaks to humans and all of its phenomena contain meaning. They are symbols of a higher degree of reality which the cosmic domain at once veils and reveals. The very structure of the cosmos contains a spiritual message for humans and is thereby a revelation coming from the same source as religion itself.

If, indeed, the modern, secular worldview, including scientism—the ideology that science is the only source of knowledge and the only valid, authentic way of knowing—is the root cause of the environmental crisis—and cross-cultural and historical data support such a hypothesis (Berman, 1981; Berry, 1988, 1999; Foltz, 2003; Kinsley, 1995; Maxwell, 2003; McGrath, 2002; Nasr, 1966, 1981, 1996, 1997; Sherrard, 1992)—then a pre-modern (traditional), religious alternative may provide promise for healing environmental ills and setting humanity onto a more sustainable path (see Figure 2). What is needed, asserts Nasr (1996), is to reclaim an understanding of the Earth and the cosmos (Heaven) in their traditional metaphysical and cosmological sense. A "religious science of nature" (Nasr, 1997, p. 23) needs to complement modern science; modern science being not "the" science of nature but "a" science of nature making certain assumptions as to the nature of reality, time, space, matter, etc.:

> …[S]cience is limited by its methods and cannot apply itself to a solution of metaphysical problems. … The knowledge of the whole Universe does not lie within the competence of science but of metaphysics. … One must realize the different forms of knowledge and place each within its own bounds. … Metaphysical doctrine, or that gnosis which alone can be the meeting ground of science and religion, has been forgotten … (Nasr, 1997, p. 25)

Fortunately for humanity in the 21st century, every major religious tradition—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam—contains within it schools of thought on the spiritual-ethical significance of nature, the relationship between religion and natural worlds (Nasr, 1996) and "the religious understanding of the order of nature" (Nasr, 1996, p. 4; cf. Gottlieb, 2004; Nasr, 1998b). Furthermore, indigenous, traditional (in the sense of pre-modern) wisdom is still available which can contribute to such understandings (Nasr, 1996; Oldmeadow, 2000, 2003). In charting the path toward a new metaphysics, what is needed, according to Nasr (1996) are religious views/understandings of the cosmos which stand in contrast to prevalent perspectives on nature, and furthermore, "to develop a path across religious frontiers without destroying the significance of religion itself" (1996, p. 3). To cite Nasr (1996):

> Each tradition has both a wealth of knowledge and experiences concerning the order of nature, which, once resuscitated, can bring about a situation in which religions all over the globe could mutually enrich each other and also cooperate to heal the wounds inflicted upon Earth on the basis of a shared perspective of the sacredness of nature. Despite differences in the understanding of the meaning of the sacred and its source in various religions, they still share a great deal more in common and with each other than they do with a worldview in which the sense of the sacred has disappeared completely. Furthermore, such a resuscitation would not only make possible the serious implementation of ethical principles concerning nature, but it would also affect deeply many in the secularized West who are searching desperately for a spiritual relation with nature … (p. 6)

The method available to recover traditional metaphysics and a more profound and comprehensive understanding of cosmology is the perennial philosophy, also referred to as the *philosophia perennis et universalis* (Nasr & Stoddard, 1991). The eternal wisdom or *sophia perennis* lies at the heart of every authentic religion, and has guided the affairs of humanity for millennia (Nasr, 1991). While there are many variations within sacred cosmology, the underlying metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological principles are shared (see Figure 3).

> The study of the order of nature, as envisaged in various religions, which display the infinite richness of the Divine Nature, reveals remarkable correspondences and similarities… . All religions in their deepest teachings, and despite important formal differences, relate the order of nature to the order within human beings and envisage both orders as bearing the imprint of Divine Reality, which is the Origin of both man and nature. (Nasr, 1996, p. 24)

A religious view of nature, or the religious order of nature, then, awards sacredness to nature, with nature expressing the Divine (Spirit). Across religions and cultures—with the exception of post-Enlightenment, scientific western culture—nature has been recognized as a vessel of the sacred (Divine), and has been treated and revered as such.

Nature is a book of symbols through which the Divine may be discerned; esoteric study—in its true meaning as the study of phenomena veiled by the external, perceptual world—can reveal these hidden, symbolic meanings. It is in this sense that in medieval times, nature was considered "God's book" which, when studied closely and long enough, can reveal much of what one needs to know about living a life of moral quality and meaning. Because the order of nature relates to and corresponds with the spiritual order that characterizes human "being," studying nature can give insights to and reveal important lessons regarding a well-lived, harmonious human life. Meditative gardens in monasteries of the east and west reflect this notion:

A sacred cosmology posits:

On the cosmos:

- The material-physical world known by and via modern science—the world of sensual phenomena and perception—is only one world among others. These "other" worlds are known as the spiritual world/s, and can be appropriated by non-sensual, equally valid and authentic ways of knowing, in particular intuition. "The whole of the physical level of reality is, however, only one level of reality that, despite its vastness, is like a pebble before the Sun when compared to the psychic and beyond it the spiritual worlds" (Nasr, 1996, p. 283).
- Material-physical worlds originate from spiritual worlds, and are sustained by these. The material-physical world exists only and because of the spiritual world—it cannot exist independently of it.
- A single Divine Reality exists—and it is in itself unknowable: "Divine Reality is beyond all conceptualization and all that can be said of It ... ." (Nasr, 1996, p. 12).
- The Divine Reality is the creator of the cosmos (material-physical plus spiritual worlds), the cosmos is sustained by Divine Reality.

On nature/the natural world:

- The natural order resides in the Divine order and is a reflection of it (Nasr, 1996). A sacred cosmology distinguishes between the order of nature and the Divine order, with nature reflecting the Divine order.
- "[E]very being in the world of nature not only issues from the Divine Principle or the One, but also reflects Its Wisdom" (Nasr, 1996, p. 289), which gives rise to the notion that nature at once veils and reveals divine messages and teachings.

On humanity:

- Humanity is the intermediary between material-physical and spiritual worlds; one of humanity's tasks is to uphold the cosmic order.
- Human beings have a soul—which is the vessel for Spirit/the Divine. The "organ" with which humans may know the Divine/the sacred is the soul. It is through the human soul that the Divine can enter into the human form, and can be transmitted into the physical realms.

Figure 3. Sacred cosmology.

> Nature has not only displayed the wisdom of God through her order and harmony but has also carried out incessantly a discourse about those spiritual realities that constitute the very substance of our existence. ... It is this lesson that the religions have taught over the ages in a hundred languages ... (Nasr, 1996, pp. 24-25)

Because nature is a reflection of the Divine containing spiritual teachings which can assist humanity in living a moral and spiritual life, interference into this timeless and sacred system should be approached with caution. Irrevocable changes to the natural order—via GMOs, atomic waste, irre-

versible climate change, ecosystem degradation and associated species extinction, and the like—constitute a transgression not only against ethical imperatives issued from the Divine and reflected in the natural order, but also destroy knowledge of spiritual realities and moral qualities (cf. Goldsmith, 2000; Nasr, 1998a). An irreplaceable body of knowledge, accessible through intuition and esoteric study, is threatened in the process. Yet where, within sustainability education/environmental studies, is the disappearance of esoteric knowledge ever mentioned as part of the crisis of extinction?

Concomitant with the various realities which a sacred cosmology posits and the symbolic significance of nature, the perennial philosophy teaches about ways of knowing to discern those realities. Contained in the timeless wisdom is the understanding that humans possess three different modes of knowing with which the various levels of reality can be discerned: the "eye of the flesh" (i.e., the physical senses) which discloses the material world, the "eye of the mind' (the rational faculty) which discloses the symbolic, conceptual world, and the "eye of contemplation" (the spiritual faculty) which discloses the spiritual, transcendental, transpersonal world. The three different aspects of the cosmos are revealed by different modes of perception, and neither can be reduced to the others (in Maxwell, 2003, p. 263).

Nasr (1996) distinctly summarizes the principles and elements of a sacred cosmology with respect to nature/the natural world—the kind of cosmology, I have argued, which deserves contemplation in imagining preferred futures and a sustainable world (see Figure 4) (cf. Sherrard, 1992). Nasr (1996) concludes these principles regarding the religious view of the order of nature are humanity's universal heritage. As an aspect of the *cosmologia perennis*—i.e., being timeless and transcending cultural differences—they merit very serious attention.

1. The order of nature is related to an order "beyond" itself, to what might be called spiritual principles. The reality of nature has significance beyond its appearance; there is a "sacred" quality within nature, however the term "sacred" may be understood, including its formal manifestations in different religions. (This reality can not be known by modern science, but can be known in scientific [systematic] ways via esoteric studies and intuition.)
2. The order of nature has a purpose, a meaning, and this meaning has spiritual and moral significance for human beings.
3. The human and natural orders are intertwined in a bi-unity in such a way that their destinies are interrelated.
4. The [moral-spiritual/Divine] laws of man and the laws of nature are not totally distinct but are closely interrelated.
5. The Earth is man's teacher and man can learn from the order of nature not only quantitatively but also morally, intellectually, and spiritually (cf. Nasr, 1993).

Figure 4. Principles of a sacred cosmology (Nasr, 1996).

Recovering the Sacred as a Pathway toward Sustainability

Having sketched the outlines of a sacred cosmology and provided a synopsis of what may be meant by the notion of "the religious order of nature," the task now, for this last section of this essay, is to apply this understanding to the environmental crisis, and to contemplate how a religious-spiritual perspective may provide leverage points out of this crisis, putting humanity and Earth on a pathway of healing toward sustainability. As I have tried to make clear throughout this essay, I believe environmental education as a field and as a discipline, and as a subset of environmental studies, has a critical role to play in including this previously neglected aspect of sustainability education.

The lost sacredness of nature somehow needs to be recovered in the western worldview. Sustainability, if taken to its deepest core, in essence requires transcending the modern as well as the postmodern worldview toward what could then again be called a spiritual worldview. The transformation of the western worldview toward the re-enchantment of nature (Berman, 1981; McGrath, 2002) would see the relativism and nihilism paramount today replaced by universally accepted metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological teachings. This worldview includes but transcends the ecological worldview some ecologists and philosophers have called for (e.g., Goldsmith, 1998) in that it makes traditional metaphysical understandings and their significance for the human-nature relationship explicit. More specifically, by recovering religious understandings of nature, humanity on a global scale stands to benefit from an environmental ethics rooted in and intertwined with spiritual understandings which can give guidance and regulate behaviour. Furthermore, it would mean recovering lost esoteric knowledge which can fill the yearning for meaning that troubles modernity, and to which some social dimensions of the environmental crisis have been attributed.

Environmental education can actively push this spiritual worldview forward by arguing against and rejecting the monopoly enjoyed by modern and postmodern worldviews in the education system, including higher education, instead placing them alongside teachings about traditional metaphysics, the limitations of modern science, and cultural analyses of the ecological crisis. Nasr (1996) believes that studying the principles of the *philosophia perennis* and working toward a spiritual worldview in which the *cosmologia perennis* once again holds a central place demands a change in human self-perception:

> The environmental crisis requires … a death and rebirth of modern man and his worldview. Man need not be and in fact can not be "reinvented" as some have claimed, but he must be reborn as traditional or pontifical man, a bridge between Heaven and Earth, and the world of nature must once again be conceived as it has always been—a sacred realm reflecting the divine creative energies. (pp. 6-7)

Paraphrasing his words, what Nasr is asking of us as a culture is to remind ourselves of our spiritual nature and, in extension, to include spiritual education and exposure to religions, wisdom teachings, and the variety of spiritual paths as fundamental elements in an environmental education for sustainability.

How do we approach the resacralization of nature? As it turns out, resacralizing nature is not so much a task of intervening and "doing" in nature but much more a task of self-transformation, a way of "being" relying on humility. Nasr (1996) writes:

> To preserve the sanctity of life requires remembering once again the sacred quality of nature. It means the resacralization of nature, not in the sense of bestowing sacredness upon nature, which is beyond the power of man, but of lifting aside the veils of ignorance and pride that have hidden the sacredness of nature from the view of a whole segment of humanity. (p. 7)

> Nature needs to be resacralized not by man who has no power to bestow the quality of sacredness upon anything, but through the remembrance of what nature is as theatre of Divine Creativity and Presence. (pp. 270-271)

This, as we know, can be done by seeking spiritual experiences in, with, and through nature. Ironically, such experiences in today's world are frequently an individual quest—at times and in certain places supported by a formal environmental education program and/or a supportive community, and at other times and circumstances rather lonely. What is needed in this United Nations Decade, and what is desperately lacking on a wider cultural level, is to conceive and develop local, regional, national, and global engagement strategies toward the transformation of perceptions of self and nature.

Where can we as individuals and as a field/community of scholars and practitioners turn to for guidance? Environmental educators already consult non-western indigenous wisdom teachings, the Gaia hypothesis, deep ecology, and the New Age for spiritual education. As Nasr (1996) alerts, with the exception of indigenous spiritualities, none of these can compare and stand up to the *cosmologia perennis*, for none of them contain explicit metaphysics and therefore fall short for a revival of the sacred and the necessary transformation of worldview/s:

> There are those individuals who take recourse to a new philosophy in the current sense to save the natural environment, but such philosophies are not sufficiently powerful to sway the human community on a global scale at this moment of acute crisis. Nor do they have access to the Sacred, which alone can enable us to reassert the sacred quality of nature and can therefore realize its ultimate value beyond the merely utilitarian. (p. 271)

Even for those who may contest Nasr's apparent preference for limiting Divine revelation to traditional religions, the worldwide influence of spiritual

traditions underscores the point that such perspectives on nature are a rich and unparalleled resource for sustainability.

This essay on the place of religion in environmental education would fail its topic if it did not address one of the most central aspects of religion and faith, namely prayer. Prayer—or communication with the sacred/Divine—in its many forms as ritual, meditation, contemplation, sacred music, and others—honours the relationship with the sacred Other and serves to build this relationship to ever deeper levels. In spiritual living, prayer is of the highest importance, as attention to the centre of the human being (Spirit) but also as an invocation for divine intervention to restore and maintain the order of the cosmos. Across faith traditions and cultures, prayer not only has utilitarian function for the individual, but serves to uphold the order of the cosmos and to restore cosmic harmony (cf. Goldsmith, 2000; Nasr, 1996, 1998a).

In light of the severity and urgency for transformation, the path of Earth healing toward a sustainable future for all can and must consciously and overtly include any and all methods which hold promise in preserving the ecosphere, its ecological functions and services. On the basis of an understanding transmitted through sacred cosmology that spiritual dimensions are as real as what western science teaches about the phenomenal world, environmental educators can invoke spiritual energies and can make use of prayer and spiritual healing to the same extent as celebrated scientific and technological innovations. The state of the planet demands that humanity leaves no good means of Earth healing untried and untested. In its final analysis, then, a call for including a religious view of the order of nature in environmental education contains the call for prayer in its many and varied forms as perhaps the most critical method of Earth healing (cf. Dossey, 1997; Emoto, 2004; Koechlin, 2005).

In Conclusion: Toward Earth Healing

Throughout this essay, I have maintained that environmental education and, in extension, environmental studies, if they are to be genuine partners in the global sustainability project, can and must reclaim religious-spiritual paradigms, and guard these against the dominant scientific worldview. Moreover, the field must accept the mandate to re-introduce religious-spiritual understandings of nature in modern/postmodern society—not merely as a matter of individual preference, but on a cultural level and global scale. Studying the perennial philosophy may be arduous, yet upon closer inspection it offers many an insight into a body of knowledge rarely discussed in environmental education or in an environmental studies program. The perennial philosophy and the study of tradition provide insights into the aspects of human-nature relationships which, I have argued, is partly if not critically dependent upon environmental education to resurrect and publicize in this

United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.

Studying the environmental crisis from a religious-spiritual perspective reveals that environmental ethics alone will not suffice in healing the crisis and setting humanity on the path of recovery toward sustainability. Environmental ethics, grounded and emerging in western moral philosophy, does not have the metaphysical perspective and insights required to apprehend the religious-spiritual knowledge of nature which, according to Nasr (1996), alone can heal the environmental predicament at its deepest levels. In his words, an environmental ethic, even if this be a religious ethics, "can not cohabit with a view of the order of nature that radically denies the very premises of religion and that claims for itself a monopoly of knowledge of the order of nature" (1996, p. 273).

At this time, Nasr's expositions are first and foremost a call for research and scholarship within environmental education/environmental studies on sacred cosmology and its relationship to planetary sustainability. Practical implications for curriculum development and teaching can be envisioned and explored concomitantly with the scholarly groundwork being laid:

- implications for training the intellect *and* the intuition,
- for studying scholarly, exoteric, *and* esoteric teachings,
- for deciphering the language and order of nature through scientific *and* spiritual methods, and
- for balancing indoor *and* outdoor experiences toward a meaningful, well-lived life guided by natural laws and in harmony with nature as revealed and understood as part of the Divine Reality.

Accepting that our current worldview, including science and technology, is profoundly limited in bringing about the most fundamental and necessary changes toward sustainability, we can make use of those tried practices which have sustained individuals, cultures, and the cosmos for millennia. The task, in essence, is to create a space and a platform to explore and authenticate types of knowledge and ways of knowing in need of resurrection, validation, and transformation for a post-postmodern resacralized, spiritualized, sustainable world.

Note

[1] Nasr uses "man," "he," and "his" throughout his writings; I do not correct this with [sic] in all following quotes.

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Notes on Contributor

Almut Beringer, PhD is Associate Professor/Director of Environmental Studies and Sustainability at the University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Outdoor Education and Environment at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. **Contact:** Faculty of Arts—Environmental Studies and Sustainability, University of Prince Edward Island, 550 University Ave., Charlottetown, PEI, C1A 4P3, Canada; aberinger@upei.ca

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