

# RELIGION AND THE ORDER OF NATURE

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

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THE ORDER OF NATURE

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*The 1994 Cadbury Lectures  
at the University of Birmingham*

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي  
الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا  
وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ  
وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ  
سورة البقرة - ٣٠

*Behold, Thy Lord said to the angels: "Verily I am about to establish on earth a vicegerent." They said, "Wilt Thou place therein one who will spread corruption thereon and shed blood, whilst it is we who celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy Name? God answered, "Verily I know what ye know not."*

The Noble Quran—*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, v. 30.

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RELIGION &  
THE ORDER OF NATURE

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# Introduction

The 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. The world of nature is being desecrated and destroyed in an unprecedented manner globally by both those who have secularized the world about them and developed a science and technology capable of destroying nature on an unimaginable scale and by those who still live within a religious universe, even if the mode of destruction of the order of nature by the two groups is both quantitatively and qualitatively different. The plight of the forests of the Northwest region of the United States, the Amazon, and the Himalayas, the pollution of air and water worldwide, especially in the former Soviet Union, and the constant extinction of more and more species are stark witnesses to this tragic fact. The environmental crisis now encompasses the entire Earth. Strangely enough, although the destruction of the sacred quality of nature by modern man dominated by a secularist perspective is directly responsible for this catastrophe, the vast majority of the human species, whether participating directly or indirectly in the havoc wreaked upon the natural environment, still lives within a worldview dominated by religion. The role of religion in the solution of the existing crisis between man and nature is therefore crucial. Furthermore, any discussion of religion and the order of nature, which is interested in healing the wounds of the Earth and ameliorating the existing crisis now threatening man's terrestrial existence, cannot but take place on a global scale.

A need exists to develop a path across religious frontiers without destroying the significance of religion itself and to carry out a comparative study of the "Earths" of various religions as has been carried out for their "Heavens," if these terms are understood in their traditional metaphysical and cosmological sense. But even if such a method is developed successfully and the religious understanding of the order of nature in each tradition is taken seriously as a religious matter

and not just historically or anthropologically, the problem still exists of numerous schools within each religion from which one can draw. Therefore, the question of the principle of selection becomes important.

In the following chapters we have first sought to develop the means of crossing from one religious universe into another without destroying the religious perspective itself and reducing it to either mere historicism or a phenomenological study devoid of the sense of the sacred and divorced from the reality of faith. Our next task has been to delve into various religious traditions to select those schools of thought, or at least some of them, that have displayed special interest in the order of nature, our guiding principle of selection being precisely the centrality of religious perspectives that are concerned with the natural order and that bear upon the existing environmental crisis. Needless to say, each major tradition such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam presents a rich variety of schools often in contention with each other concerning the world of nature and religion's relation to the natural order. Countless studies could be devoted to any single religion as far as this issue is concerned. Our selection is meant to bring out some of the deepest salient features of the views concerning nature in the religious traditions we have discussed without in any way claiming to be exhaustive or asserting that the views chosen are exclusive in their presentation of the religious understanding of the order of nature in the religious world in question. But what has been chosen is nevertheless significant within each tradition and also contains some of the profoundest views concerning the order of nature, views standing in contrast to the prevalent perspectives on nature and held by a world that has chosen to neglect the significance of the religious understanding of the cosmos.

And precisely because there exists such a world—namely the modern world, which had its exclusive home in the West until the last century but has now spread to other continents and which bears the primary responsibility for the global destruction of the environment—we have sought to delve into a historical study of both philosophy and science in the West that, beginning with views similar to the philosophies and sciences of other traditional civilizations, developed in what can only be called an anomalous manner from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward. It moved away from the almost universally held view of the sacredness of nature to one that sees man as alienated from nature and nature itself as no longer the progenitor of life (the very root of nature being from the Latin *nascitura*, meaning to give birth), but rather as a lifeless mass, a machine to be dominated and manipulated by a purely earthly man. 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.

We have also turned to the study of the concept of man himself in the Renaissance and its aftermath. This period witnessed the rise of a secular humanism and the absolutization of earthly man with immeasurable consequences for both the world of nature and traditional civilizations conquered by this new type of man for whom there was no longer any religious restraint upon the domination of nature and its forces, whether for the purpose of subduing nature itself in order to gain wealth or of conquering other civilizations or both.

In any case, in the West during the seventeenth century, 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. Moreover, until quite recently many theologians considered it the great glory of Christianity that it alone among the world's religions had permitted a purely secular science to develop in a civilization in which it was the dominant religion. It is only the environmental crisis of recent decades exemplified by global warming, the destruction of the ozone zone, and the death of so many animals and plants, a crisis now threatening the very fabric of life, that has finally caused many Christian theologians to have second thoughts concerning the rapport between religion and the order of nature. Even champions of secularism now speak of how significant the role of religion can be in averting a major global environmental catastrophe resulting in the loss of many human lives.

Consequently, many Christian theologians and also Jewish thinkers in the West have sought in recent years to develop a theology of the natural environment or what some now call *eco-theology*. After several centuries of neglect of this subject by both Catholics and Protestants, there is now serious interest in this field across the religious spectrum. And yet, as our study shows, despite a few exceptions, the concern of most religious thinkers in the West is with the development of environmental ethics and not the reassertion of the religious view of the order of nature as a legitimate knowledge that corresponds to an aspect, and in fact the most important aspect, of cosmic reality. To use the categories of Islamic thought, there is currently interest in *al-'amal* or action without *al-'ilm* or knowledge, whereas traditional Islamic sources have always taught that *al-'ilm* and *al-'amal* must accompany each other. *Al-'ilm* without *al-'amal* is, according to the famous Arabic proverb, like a tree without fruit. And *al-'amal* without *al-'ilm* is chaotic action without principle and ultimately positive efficacy, and it is usually more destructive than no action at all.

Strangely enough, in recent years the non-Western religions, including in this case Islam—in which such knowledge has continued to be present this day at the center of the religious scene—rather than being relegated to an “occultist” margin, have been mostly following the example of the West in dealing primarily with ethics rather than with the reassertion of a sacred science of nature. Only in the Islamic world at least debate about an Islamic science of nature independent of modern science has been carried out seriously in the past two or three decades. In any case, the reason for this neglect of the dimension of knowledge by non-Western religions in their response to the environmental crisis is that these religions, cut off for the most part from the forces driving modern science and technology and the deeper issues involved in the crisis at hand, are only now becoming aware of what this tragedy really involves. Only now is it beginning to dawn upon them that the present predicament is primarily the consequence of the loss of a sapiential knowledge of nature and an inner spiritual crisis and not simply the result of bad engineering.

Our aim in this study is to negate the totalitarian claims of modern science and to open up a space for the assertion of the religious view of the order of nature

that various traditions developed over the centuries in their cosmologies and sacred sciences. Only if life is *really* sacred can one talk of the sacredness of life in anything more than a journalistic sense. In a world in which the very category of "sacredness" as applied to nature is meaningless, to speak of the sacredness of life is little more than sentimental thinking or hypocrisy. The religious view of the order of nature must be reasserted on the metaphysical, philosophical, cosmological, and scientific levels as legitimate knowledge without necessarily denying modern scientific knowledge, as long as it is remembered that this latter science is the result of very particular questions posed to nature. The great tragedy that came about in this domain, as has been also observed by others, was that modern science began by posing particular questions to nature and ending up by claiming that these are the only questions worth posing and in fact possible to pose. Hence, the religious understanding of nature, including the physical body, which is a central issue in so much of the contemporary debate about man and nature and which remains central to the teachings of so many religions outside those dominant in the West, must be fully asserted in the context of each tradition, and on the basis of such knowledge the religious ethics of the environment propagated in such a way that it would possess meaning on a global scale. We have ourselves sought to provide a few glimpses into the traditional teachings concerning the human body to demonstrate how essential such teachings are for the understanding of the religious order of nature without again claiming in any way to do anything more than provide a few salient examples.

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 modern secularized West who are searching desperately for a spiritual relation with nature and who, not discovering it in what is available to them in mainstream religious organizations, turn to everything from serious Oriental teachings, to cosmologies of religions long dead, such as the Egyptian, to various cults and to the whole spectrum of phenomena now termed "New-Age" religions.

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

creative energies. There must be the rebirth of the religious knowledge of nature, the traditional cosmologies and sacred sciences still preserved in many of the non-Western areas of the world, while the heritage of the Western tradition in this domain must itself be resuscitated in a serious manner.

Moreover, a nexus must be created in this realm among the traditions, as has been carried out by the traditional proponents of the perennial philosophy for understanding of the Divine Principle and its numerous manifestations in various religious universes. One might say that in the same way that there is a *philosophia perennis*, there is also a *cosmologia perennis*, which in fact constitutes one of its elements and which shines through the multifarious traditional sciences of the cosmos.

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, not in the currently discussed sense of this term as prelude to a new phase of order and an element in the process of creativity, but as chaos that can destroy all human life on Earth. 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.

The composition of this book is the result of the invitation extended to us to deliver the Edward Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham in the fall of 1994. When given this great honor and opportunity, it became almost immediately evident that in light of the present intellectual and spiritual malaise and the severity of the environmental crisis that so many people discuss while shunning the deeper issues involved, it was imperative for us to turn to the question of religion in its relation to the order of the nature but treated on a global scale. In a sense, this work follows our book *Man and Nature*, which comprised the text of our 1966 Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago and which was one of the first works to predict the environmental crisis, and our 1981 Gifford Lectures, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, which itself was followed by *The Need for a Sacred Science*. It is our hope that the present work will be a further humble step in turning the attention of those truly concerned with the human condition, as well as the order of nature, to the deeper issues involved. This book thus extends further the concerns of the works cited above, which sought to bring into focus the religious and spiritual dimensions of the environmental crisis and the significance of the gulf between knowledge and the sacred in precipitating the chaos and upheavals of a spiritual and intellectual order of which the pollution and destruction of the natural order is a most visible consequence.

We wish to thank the authorities of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Birmingham and especially Professor Frances Young for the invitation to



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*Wa mā tawfīqī illā bi'LLāh*  
S. H. N.

Bethesda, Maryland  
September 1994

## Religion and Religions

می درخشد بر من و تو هم چو هور      دین حق را نیست حدی در ظهور  
 گه تجلی میکند بر کوه نور      گه پدید آید به اشکال بتان

*The One cannot in the many but appear,  
 In creation as in these sacred forms,  
 Which, diverse in their outwardness,  
 Manifest a single inner Light, eternal.  
 I gazed upon Thy countenance in singleness,  
 How bewildered I am to behold Thy many Faces now.*

Throughout the ages human beings have lived upon an earth that was for them *the* Earth, even if it constituted but a part of the globe, and under a heaven that was for them Heaven as such symbolized by the vast azure vault of the sky stretching from east to west. They lived on the Earth as at once a reflection of Heaven, progenitor of life and the female consort of celestial realities, the ground from which life originates and the theater from which it finally departs on its ultimate journey to the heavenly climes. There were on the earth other “Earths” wed to other “Heavens” of which human beings remained impervious until recent times and of which many, as yet not totally affected by the secularizing tides of modernism, remain unaware in a fundamental manner to this day.

It is only in these chaotic and turbulent times—when men and women, under whichever Heaven they happen to live, join those who have rejected the very notion of Heaven in its metaphysical, cosmological, and theological sense in destroying the Earth—that it is becoming incumbent to turn one’s attention fully to the other Heavens and Earths that have determined the matrices of human existence over the millennia. As man succeeds in destroying so much of the order of nature and even threatens cosmic chaos of unprecedented proportions hardly imaginable just a century ago, it becomes necessary to turn to the other “Heavens” and “Earths” that have defined over the ages the *modus vivendi* of the

many "humanities" which to an ever-greater extent are now unifying their efforts in the destruction of the natural order.

Although the crisis of the relationship between man and the world of nature on the scale observable today first began in the West where modernism was born, it is now global and demands an inquiry beyond the borders of the Western tradition<sup>1</sup> and the history of the attack against that tradition in modern times. Any inquiry into the question of the relation between religion and the order of nature, one that wishes to address the crucial issues emanating from the present-day environmental crisis, needs to cross the frontiers of various spiritual universes and journey from the Heaven and Earth of a single human collectivity to the many Heavens and Earths of the several "humanities" constituting present-day global humanity as such.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the relation of religion to the order of nature on a global scale, rather than from the perspective of a single tradition, a task to which we address ourselves in this book, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the order of nature or the "Earth" in the context of various religions. And by virtue of the inalienable link between Earth and Heaven, it is essential to turn to sapiential and metaphysical teachings of the religions in question as contained in their traditional cosmologies. It is also necessary to comprehend the sense in which the many "Heavens" have crowned the cosmos of various humanities. One must understand the truth that various religions over the ages have encompassed both the Heaven and the Earth of the humanity for which these religions have been destined and have therefore determined the meaning of nature and the order pervading it for their followers. Any serious study of this question must therefore turn, before discussing the order of nature itself, to the crucial problem of how to study religion and religions in a world in which the reality of other religions must be taken seriously as never before.

Moreover, this condition holds true especially for studies carried out in those parts of the world that have become fully exposed to the rationalism, humanism, and relativism characteristic of modernism and postmodernism, such as the modern West on both sides of the Atlantic. Any study that does not consider seriously the truth claims of religions other than one's own or rejects all religious truth, including that of one's ancestral religion, on the basis of doubt and skepticism cannot claim to say much that is relevant, in the context of present-day environmental crisis, about the living relation between religion and the order of nature. Nor could a study that disregards the truth of religions on a global scale come to any conclusions that would have appreciable significance for the majority of human beings on the globe who still live within the matrix of a religious universe and yet are participating, usually in opposition to the teachings of their own traditions, in the destruction of nature and the disruption of the order that still continues to dominate over the world of nature in such a blinding fashion.<sup>3</sup>

Let us then turn before anything else to the question of how to study religions "religiously" and yet in a scholarly fashion, a task of utmost significance especially in Western academic circles where the study of religion during the past century has often been itself a highly unreligious, if not antireligious, activity. Needless

to say, this vast question is a subject that needs to be treated separately in not one but many separate works, and in fact numerous voices in recent years have turned to it from different perspectives and with varying concerns.<sup>4</sup> Here, although we would wish to address ourselves to the major issues involved in this central question, it is necessary to confine our discussion in the light of our present subject to the order of nature and leave aside the vast ramifications and extensions of this question to other domains of religion.<sup>5</sup> We must seek to understand the Heaven of each spiritual universe along with its Earth in the light of our understanding of that Heaven.<sup>6</sup> How else can we grasp religiously the religious significance of the order of nature in a religious universe other than our own?

## CROSSING RELIGIOUS FRONTIERS

The question of crossing religious frontiers without loss of orientation and with full awareness of the reality of the sacred, which cannot be reduced to any other category, is perhaps the most daunting of all religious and theological tasks today and the only really new challenge of significance in the world of religious discourse of contemporary man.<sup>7</sup> The modern mind, affected by the relativizing influence of secularism and rationalism, has only too often been presented with the plurality of religions as proof of their relativity. Until recently, few in the West had sought to develop a metaphysics and theology of comparative religion that would avoid the trap of either retreating into a provincialism that would accept only one's own religion as being true and believe all other religions to be simply historic and social systems devoid of any absolute truth and therefore ultimately false or irrelevant from the point of view of that Truth, which is none other than the Absolute Itself, or considering all religions to be false.

The various possibilities followed in the West during the past century in the study of religion in a multireligious universe began with either the reduction of all religious realities to phenomena to be studied "scientifically" and historically in the perspective of *Religionwissenschaft* without regard for either the question of theological truth or faith, or phenomenologically with little interest in the historical setting as well as disregard for the question of faith or metaphysical truth. Outside the secularized universities where these approaches were cultivated and continue to be so to a large extent even today, the seminaries did not cease to treat other religions as simply those of "heathens" or "pagans" to be studied so as to be refuted or to better prepare missionaries for combatting them. In the West only during the past generation have a number of Christian scholars and theologians, and also a number of Jewish scholars, sought to develop a means of studying other religions theologically and spiritually as committed Christians or Jews. Meanwhile, there have also been those who have accepted a sentimental unity of religions at the expense of overlooking their formal differences and belittling what they usually refer to in a derogatory manner as "theological dogmas."

Amidst this rather bewildering scene, one also finds the view of the propagators of the perennial philosophy, the *philosophia* or *sophia perennis*, expositors of

tradition such as R. Guénon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, F. Schuon, T. Burckhardt, M. Lings, and M. Pallis, who have provided the metaphysical knowledge necessary for understanding the multiplicity of religions while doing full justice to the claim of absoluteness within each authentic religion and the irreducible sacred forms and doctrines they contain within themselves.<sup>8</sup> And yet their views have not been taken seriously in academic circles until quite recently<sup>9</sup> since their metaphysical teachings negate the very basis upon which modern rationalism and historicism rest and challenge the very legitimacy of the modern and what is now called by some the postmodern world. Still, it is only the universal doctrines of the perennial philosophy as interpreted traditionally that are able to provide the key for the penetration into diverse religious worlds or different "Earths" and "Heavens" without destroying the sense of the sacred or the absoluteness of each authentic religion, which in its essence is religion as such.

The traditional interpretation of the *philosophia perennis* sees a single Divine Reality as the origin of all the millennial religions that have governed human life over the ages and have created the traditional civilizations with their sacred laws, social institutions, arts, and sciences. This Divine Reality is beyond all conceptualization and all that can be said of It, and is referred to by such sacred formulae as the *Lā ilāha illa' Llāh* (There is no divinity but God) of Islam, *neti neti* (Not this, not that) of the Upanishads, the "Tao that can be named is not the Tao" of the Tao Te-Ching and also the "I am that I am" of the Bible if the meaning of this well-known dictum is understood on the highest level.

Other traditions, especially the primal ones, refer to It only through silence or indirect allusion, whereas certain esotericisms such as the Cabala refer to It by means of expositions of blinding clarity that only veil Its infinite darkness transcending the light of manifestation. Even Its Name remains veiled and unutterable in certain traditions such as Judaism, but Its Reality is the origin of all that is sacred and the source of the teachings of each authentic faith. Like a mighty spring gushing forth atop a mountain, It gives rise to cascades of water that descend with ever-greater dispersion from each side, each cascade symbolizing all the grades of reality and the levels of cosmic and, by transposition, metacosmic reality of a particular religious universe. Yet all the cascades issue from a single Spring and the substance of all is ultimately nothing but that water which flows from the Spring at the mountaintop, the Reality which is the alpha of all sacred worlds and also the omega to which all that is within their embrace returns.

This Ultimate Reality, the Name that cannot be named, is the Beyond-Being of which Being is the first auto-determination. Together they comprise the Divine Order and are the principle of cosmic manifestation, the instrument of this manifestation being the Logos, the Word, the *Fiat Lux*, which one might say is the isthmus between the Divine and the cosmic orders, there being both an unmanifested and a manifested Logos. The Divine Order may be thus said to be comprised of the Divinity Itself, at once unconditioned and conditioned, supra-ontological and ontological, *Gottheit* or Godhead and the personal God, Allah in His Essence as well as Names and Qualities, the *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* Brahman, "the nameless," which was the beginning of Heaven and Earth and the "named,"

which is the mother of the myriad creatures.<sup>10</sup> But also in a certain sense the Logos *in divinis* may be said to belong to the Divine Order, and this truth is of the greatest significance for the understanding of the religious assertion that the root of the natural order resides in the Divine Order.

From this Divine Order issue forth the many cascades alluded to above, each with different forms and trajectories and with no two cascades being formally the same, although all consisting of water. There are those that gush forth over similar types of formations and terrains corresponding to similar human collectivities, and thus constitute members of a religious family, while others display greater diversity and are produced by yet other types of terrains. There are never exact repetitions but there are always correspondences. Nor is it impossible for a tributary of one cascade to flow into another, but all cascades originate from the Spring on the mountaintop and none from each other. Their similarities are basically due to the oneness of their Origin and resemblances in the rock beds, which receive the water through that original act of gushing forth into each cascade that is theologically called "revelation." Only at the Spring Itself are all the cascades one and nowhere else should complete unity be sought among them. To repeat the well-known Islamic saying, "Unity is unique" (*al-tawḥīdu wāḥid*); one might add that only in that Supreme Unity, which is unique, must ultimate unity be sought. That is why Frithjof Schuon, the foremost contemporary expositor of the *philosophia perennis* especially as it concerns religion, has referred to this unity as "the transcendent unity of religions,"<sup>11</sup> thereby emphasizing that, although there is such a transcendent unity, religions do not necessarily assert the same truths on the level of their external forms and dogmas; on the contrary, they have a distinct character of their own, each religious universe being a unique creation of the Divine Artisan.

By virtue of this metaphysical view of reality, which sees the origin of all authentic religions in the Divine Principle—which manifests Itself through what the Abrahamic religions call revelations according to laws and an order belonging to the Divine Realm Itself—the traditional interpretation of the perennial philosophy<sup>12</sup> stands opposed to other current interpretations of religious diversity in basic ways. It opposes historicism by emphasizing the Divine Origin of each tradition and the spiritual genius of each religion, which is original in the deepest sense in that it issues directly from the Origin. It does not deny historical borrowings whether they be of Christian images in Sufi poetry or Sufi symbolism in St. John of the Cross or Taoist influences in Chan Buddhism, but it considers such borrowings as secondary in comparison with the living body of an authentic religion that must of necessity originate from Heaven. In emphasizing the reality of revelation and taking seriously a view of reality in which revelation is both possible and necessary, it certainly does not try to explain away major elements of a religion by simple recourse to historical borrowing as we see in the treatment of Islamic esoterism in the form of Sufism by so many Western orientalists from the middle of the nineteenth century to our own day.

Perennial philosophy, as traditionally understood, also opposes the phenomenological approach to the study of religion as usually practiced in academic circles

by emphasizing the significance of faith, the question of religious truth, major and minor manifestations of the Spirit, and the ineluctable relation between phenomena and noumena, the former being a gateway to the latter despite the disclaimers of Immanuel Kant and most of post-Kantian Western philosophy. There are of course those Western scholars of religion such as H. Corbin, A. M. Schimmel, E. Benz, and others whose interpretation of phenomenology is close to the traditional understanding of the relation between the phenomenon and the noumenon of which precisely the phenomenon is the phenomenon, but such scholars constitute the exception rather than the rule.<sup>13</sup> As for M. Eliade, the foremost expositor of the phenomenological method in recent decades in America, it must be remembered that early in his life he drank deeply from the teachings of Guénon and Coomaraswamy and, despite moving away from the traditional position in his later life, retained certain important elements of the traditional worldview in his erudite and all-encompassing studies of various religions, although he no longer associated himself with that perspective.

The traditionalists, of course, also oppose the thesis based on the sentimental embracing of all religions within a unity that some envisage as a least common denominator among religions and which they hope to achieve at the expense of casting aside sacred doctrines and forms of a particular religion that do not seem to accord on the formal plane with those of another religion. Much of present-day ecumenism in the West is in fact based upon such a view and is thereby opposed by the proponents of perennial philosophy as being damaging to the very forms of that reality with which there is the need to create accord. They insist that authentic ecumenism can only be esoteric and cannot be achieved on the formal plane if one absolutizes the formal and relative plane with disregard for the basic metaphysical truth that only the Absolute is absolute.<sup>14</sup> Schuon has said quite aptly apropos of this question that harmony among religions is possible only in the divine stratosphere and not in the human atmosphere.

Needless to say, proponents of traditional metaphysics and the perennial philosophy also oppose both the relativists—who consider all religions to be relative, products of particular human societies without a Divine Origin that bestows an absoluteness upon each religious universe—and those who would consider their own religion to be the only true one and all other religions to be false. At least the latter view has the virtue of incorporating a lesser truth, but nevertheless a truth that has efficacy for those still living within a homogeneous religious world; but with the loss of such homogeneity it too falls into the danger of being rejected and repudiated. There is many a soul who cannot retain faith in his or her own religion at the expense of considering the followers of all other religions as being damned and who is intelligent enough to detect in the sacred art, doctrines, and rites of other traditions the seal of the Divine.

The metaphysics that the perennial philosophy, as traditionally understood, expounds is based not only on the hierarchy of universal existence to which we have referred briefly, but also the distinction between the outward and the inward, external form and essence, form and meaning, or phenomenon and noumenon. Without the comprehension of these basic distinctions, one cannot

understand the dialectic of the traditional writers nor in fact the message of the perennial philosophy throughout the ages, a message echoed in works of seers and sages of the East and the West over the millennia; hence the perennial nature and also the universality of the *philosophia perennis*.

## THE OUTWARD AND THE INWARD IN THE COSMOS AND IN RELIGION

Traditional metaphysics sees the universe not as a multitude of facts or opaque objects each possessing a completely independent reality of its own, but as myriads of symbols reflecting higher realities. Before the Divine Reality nothing in fact can be said to exist; but on the plane of manifestation, the light of the intellect, sacred in its own essence and also sanctified by revelation, penetrates into what appears as fact to reach its inner significance and meaning so that opacity is transformed into transparency. Phenomena thus become transparent to realities that transcend them and that they reflect on their own existential level. Phenomena become gateways to noumenal realities. The universe, both religious and cosmic, is realized as being constituted of symbols reflecting the archetypes or supernal realities that belong to the Divine, and not simply the psychological order.<sup>15</sup> The language of symbolism is foundational to religions and is referred to in many sacred texts such as the Quran which explicitly states that all things glorify Him with praise,<sup>16</sup> meaning they symbolize the Divine Archetype in their very existential reality, and their very substance is ultimately nothing other than the coagulation of that Divine Substance the Sufis call the Breath of the Compassionate (*nafas al-Raḥmān*).

The doctrine of symbolism may also be concluded from other verses in which the Quran affirms that every single thing on earth has been sent down in finite measure, sent down as a loan rather than a gift, for nothing herebelow can last, and everything must in the end revert to its Supreme Source. In other words, the Archetype is always the Heir who inherits back the symbol in which It manifested Itself.<sup>17</sup>

The world is thus a veil that at once hides and reveals the realities beyond, being at once the shutter that hides the light of the inner or noumenal world and the opening to that world thanks to its symbolic nature and the inner reality (*al-bāṭin* in Arabic) of which every outward reality (*al-zāhir*) is the outward. In other words, there is nothing that is simply an external and brute fact or phenomenon because the very notion of externality implies inwardness. To use the language of Rūmī, every form (*ṣūrat*) possesses an inner meaning (*ma'nā*) and leads to that inner meaning provided the beholder possesses a vision that has itself been cured of the ailment of seeing only the outward dimension.<sup>18</sup>

This structure pertains not only to that macrocosmic revelation, which is the cosmos in all its levels, but is to be found also and above all in religion, which marks the direct eruption of the Logos into the human order. Religion has an



outward aspect concerning everyone destined to accept its teachings, but it also possesses an inner dimension accessible to the few who are able to penetrate from the realm of outwardness to the inward, who are constituted in such a way as to seek at all costs that pearl of great price which was forbidden by Christ from casting before swine. Herein lies the basic distinction between the exoteric and esoteric so much emphasized by the traditional proponents of the perennial philosophy and so much neglected in the modern West where even the official religious institutions marginalized the esoteric teachings of Christianity to such an extent in recent centuries that these teachings often ended up as some form of occultism, usually with dangerous consequences of both a religious and an intellectual nature.

The insistence upon the esoteric as the only means of penetrating beyond the veil of distinct formal worlds of various religions to the inner meaning or transcendent unity—binding them together, and wherein alone can religious harmony be found in the deepest sense—has in fact been one of the major impediments for a wider appreciation of the approach of the perennial philosophy to the study of religion in academic circles. The mainstream approaches to the study of religion in universities on both sides of the Atlantic have remained until quite recently opposed to the very category of esotericism, often confused with occultism, as have theological circles which have considered esotericism to be alien to the mainstream Christian perspectives. If during the past two decades the study of esotericism has gained some academic respect, especially in France and Germany,<sup>19</sup> it has been most of all thanks to the revival of tradition and the material exposition of esotericism by the expositors of traditional doctrines.<sup>20</sup>

Esotericism, traditionally understood, does not negate the significance of the exoteric. On the contrary, it insists upon its importance, for it is only through forms that one can transcend the formal plane, and one cannot surely throw away what one does not possess. In direct contrast to pseudo-esotericism, which is so prevalent in such diverse forms in the West today, esotericism as traditionally understood not only comprehends the necessity of the exoteric but also insists upon the sacrosanct quality of religious forms even on the exoteric level and the fact that they are ordained by Heaven and cannot be rejected by those who have not even reached the state of accepting such forms. Esotericism emphasizes the basic distinction between transcending forms from above and rejecting forms by falling below them, thereby forfeiting the very possibility of ever reaching the world of the Formless. Much of the traditional study of religions is in fact precisely devoted to sacred forms and the meaning they convey as symbols and myths without denying their historical reality and significance.

The traditional interpretation of perennial philosophy, therefore, envisages a universe in which the outward is the gateway to the inward in both the domain of religion and the cosmos, the former being in fact the key for the understanding of the latter. There are symbols innate to the nature of things and there are those sanctified and given efficacy by a particular religion. There are rites, doctrines, sacred art, and practices on the formal plane in each religion that must be fully respected for what they are on their own formal level without any attempt of

reducing them to some harmless historical borrowing or stigmatizing them by classifying them under pejorative categories such as animism, which for only too long was the favorite means used by an army of anthropologists and scholars of religion to draw a veil over the deeper significance of what they were studying. But the traditional study of religions sees beyond this vast and wondrous world of multiple sacred forms the one single Reality that is the origin of the cascades descending from the different sides of the mountain of existence. And it asserts that it is only authentic esotericism, or literally the inward dimension, that is able to grasp this inner Reality of diverse religious universes.

Lest some think that this is simply a modern construct alien to the traditions themselves, let us recall the poem of the Persian philosopher Nāṣir-i Khusraw who a thousand years ago said,

*Gaze upon the inner dimension of the world  
with the eye of inwardness,  
For with the outward eye,  
thou shalt not see the inward.*

به چشم نهان بین نهان جهان را      به چشم عیان بین نبینی نهان را

Applying the doctrine of form and meaning alluded to above to the realm of religion, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī was to sing over seven centuries ago,

*The difference among creatures issues from forms (ṣūrat),  
When one reaches the world of meaning (ma'nā) there is peace.  
O pith of existence, it is as a result of the  
difference in perspective  
That contention has come about between Muslims,  
Zoroastrians, and Jews.*

اختلاف خلق از نام اوفتاد      چون به معنی رفت آرام اوفتاد  
از نظر گاه است ای مغز وجود      اختلاف مؤمن و کبر و یهود

## INNER UNITY AND OUTER MULTIPLICITY

The traditional doctrine of the inner unity and formal multiplicity of religions, far from being a modern invention like the other academic methods for the study of religions, is perennial and embedded in the traditions themselves. Only now it is

formulated anew according to the dire needs of present-day humanity for religious understanding across the traditional frontiers that have separated one humanity from another over the centuries. Nor do the traditional expositors of the perennial philosophy have recourse to the language of only one tradition. Rather, they employ fully all the possibilities of the rich Western metaphysical tradition in addition to those of Islam, Hinduism, and other religions. Thus, they speak of essence and form, or substance and form, archetypes and theophanies, *Ātman* and *māyā*, manifestation (*zuhūr*) and veil (*ḥijāb*), etc. The principal realm is that of the essences, whereas the things of this world belong to the realm of forms. The Ultimate Reality is the Supreme Substance of which every other order of reality below is an accident. Archetypes contain the realities which through theophany are manifested in this world that per se is but a mirror reflecting forms of a celestial origin while being nothing in itself. Only *Ātman*, the Supreme Self, is Real and all else is a veil that is unreal in the ultimate sense but possesses a reality on its own level, as *māyā* is not simply illusion as usually understood but the creative power and *śakti*, or female consort, of *Ātman*. The Divine manifests Itself through Its Names and Qualities, and yet things that manifest the Names are also veils or *ḥijāb*, which hide the Face of the Beloved. For the Prophet has said, "Allah hath Seventy Thousand Veils of Light and Darkness: Were He to withdraw their curtain, then would the splendours of His Aspect surely consume everyone who apprehended Him with his sight."<sup>21</sup>

To see beyond the veil of multiplicity—especially in the domain of religion—that unity which is the origin of all sacred forms and at the same time be able to grasp the significance of the *meaning* of sacred forms within the religious universe to which they belong are the tasks that traditional perennial philosophy has set before itself. It is a task which can be realized solely through recourse to that metaphysics that provides knowledge of the hierarchic structure of existence, the levels of reality, the reflection of the higher realities upon the lower planes, and the inward in the outward. They are tasks realized only through recourse to that hermeneutics which is aware of the esoteric dimension, of the objective realities that the phenomena veil and unveil beyond all the psychological, historical, and linguistic entanglements that have imprisoned the very notion of hermeneutics in recent years. It is also a task whose goal is the discovery of the truth that shines forth within each authentic religious universe manifesting the Absolute within its own boundaries without which it would in fact not be an authentic religion at all.

This question of the sense of the Absolute in each religion is of central importance especially in the present work, which seeks to study the relation between religion and the order of nature across religious frontiers.<sup>22</sup> Were there not to be the sense of the Absolute in a religion, that religion would not be religion as usually understood nor would anyone follow it seriously. And yet the very multiplicity of religions implies relativity if one accords truth to the message of religions other than one's own. One can in fact ask legitimately that if each religion claims to be absolute, how can one have a multiplicity of absolutes, an assertion that is metaphysically absurd, multiplicity implying by definition rela-

tivity. The Absolute must of necessity be One and, in fact, *the* One as asserted by so many metaphysicians over the ages.<sup>23</sup>

The answer to this dilemma is to be found in the distinction between the Absolute in Itself and what F. Schuon has referred to in many of his writings as “the relatively absolute.” This term appears as being logically problematic. And yet it points to a most profound reality that allows one to understand why each religion is absolute and yet the Absolute in its ultimate sense is beyond any of the forms in which It manifests Itself in a particular religious universe. In each religious universe, the link connecting it to the Divine Order, whether it be called prophet, *avatāra*, incarnation, or some other divine entity, is absolute within the religious universe in which it is a center and yet it is not the Absolute as such. It might be said that each manifestation of the Divine Logos, to use the language of the Abrahamic religions, is for the world for which it is the center, *the* Logos as such.<sup>24</sup> It is the sun in that planetary system which comprises its religious universe. And yet each sun is in reality a star in a vast firmament in which there are also other stars, which, while being stars in the firmament, do not cease to be suns in their own planetary system.

Furthermore, by virtue of the presence of this “relatively absolute” reality in a particular religious universe, other elements in that universe partake of the character of absoluteness, from sacred laws, to rites, to the efficacy of sacralized symbols and myths, to the significance of cosmos and to the order of nature. The fact that these elements within a particular religious universe might differ from or even contradict elements belonging to another universe does not prove their falsity or destroy their absoluteness within the universe to which they belong. The art of being able to cross religious frontiers in a religious and not simply anthropological, linguistic, or historical manner consists precisely of being able to appreciate the meaning of sacred doctrines, rites, forms, and symbols in the new landscape over which one is traveling with the sense of absoluteness that they possess and yet remain aware of *the* Absolute beyond all formal universes.

This art, which is also a science of the highest order, necessitates gazing upon forms in the sense of *śūrat* according to Rūmī, and not to be confused with the form in its Platonic or archetypal sense, always in function of the essence or meaning (*ma'nā*) and seeing the world of *ma'nā* reflected through the variegated forms comprising different worlds of the sacred. What must be done is to see the *religio perennis* as embedded in the inward dimension of the revealed religious universes, each of which is distinct and most precious in all its sacred details, as long as it has been preserved intact and has not undergone decay or deviation, and yet through its distinctness leads to that Universal Reality which is beyond all forms.

## THE MANIFESTATIONS OF THE ABSOLUTE

The Absolute does not, however, manifest Itself in the same manner in different religious universes. The Ultimate Reality manifests Itself in multifarious sacred

worlds sometimes in mythical forms and at other times as “abstract” monotheism. Sometimes It manifests Its Names and Qualities in the sounds and forms of a sacred language and at other times as divinities symbolizing the various divine forces; hence the distinction between a polytheism aware of the Divine Unity transcending multiple sacred forms<sup>25</sup> and idolatry decried so strongly by Judaism and Islam. In an atmosphere as anti-idolatrous as that of Islam the fourteenth-century angelic poet Shaykh Maḥmūd Shabistārī could say,

مسلمان گر بدانستی که بت چیست      بدانستی که دین در بت پرستی است

*Were a Muslim to know what is an “idol,”  
He would know that religion is idol worship,<sup>26</sup>*

thus evoking the long Sufi tradition of identifying the *but* or idol not with a divinity considered as an independent reality of its own as was done by the pre-Islamic Arabs, but as the locus of the manifestation of Divine Presence (*ḥudūr*). As asserted by so many Sufis, followers of divinely revealed religions—whether speaking of the fire-temple, the Three Persons of the Trinity, or the many faces of Brahman—are singing the praise of the One even if it be in the guise of the many.

The difference in the manner of manifestation of the Absolute is also to be seen in the different positions that the “relatively absolute” holds within each sacred universe. In Christianity, Christ remains the central reality as do the Torah and the Quran in Judaism and Islam, respectively, without the Hebrew prophets and the Prophet of Islam ceasing to be of the utmost significance. In Zoroastrianism the archangelic and angelic worlds play a central role cosmologically, ritually, and soteriologically different from their role in the Abrahamic world, without angels ceasing to be of great significance in the religious economy of the sacred universes of the monotheistic religions.

The Buddha image plays a salvific role in Buddhism different from the role of the icon in Christianity, and both religions differ in this matter from the aniconic worlds of Judaism and Islam. The cardinal directions have a central role in Native American cosmology and ritual not to be found in Christianity. One could go on indefinitely citing other examples to demonstrate how “the relatively absolute” is “situated” differently within each sacred universe, not to speak of the vertical levels of the manifestation of the Absolute from the Supreme Essence or Ultimate Reality, which is the Principle Itself, to Pure Being, the Logos, the archangelic, and angelic hierarchies. This universal hierarchy can in fact be understood fully only from the purely metaphysical and esoteric points of view<sup>27</sup> while it is symbolized in the religious language meant for a whole collectivity usually by the “heavens” to which the Quran refers so often almost as a refrain<sup>28</sup> and which concerns the vertical hierarchy within a single religious universe. This vertical multiplicity of heavens must, moreover, be distinguished from Heaven referred to at the beginning of this chapter as symbolizing the transcendent pole of each of

the religious worlds existing “horizontally” and side by side with each other on neighboring “Earths.”

## THE ORDER OF NATURE IN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS WORLDS

In the light of this analysis one can understand better the difference in the status of the order of nature in both senses of the natural domain and the order dominating over it in different religions. All religions of course must of necessity also embrace the cosmic domain and incorporate its significance in their teachings and practices. But the religious meaning of the order of nature, its spiritual role in human life, and its soteriological function are far from the same in all religions. What is important is not only to try to understand the meaning of the order of nature in relation to the basic structure of each religion (as we shall seek to do in the next chapter) but also to comprehend the significance of the order of nature in the historic development of a particular religion such as Christianity, which is of special concern to our study precisely because of its special relationship with that worldview which came to negate all religious significance of the order of nature. Without paying attention to the latter factor, we shall never understand why Christianity, which believes in the incarnation of the Divine Word as flesh and in the spatio-temporal sequence, should in its later history surrender the world of nature to a totally nonreligious perspective without many of its leading thinkers ever being concerned with the violation of the original Christian theology that such a surrender of the cosmos implied.

Let us turn briefly to these differences before embarking upon a comparative study of the relation between religion and the order of nature in different traditions, limiting ourselves, in pointing to these differences, to the living religions whose views on this matter are of existential significance in the current environmental crisis.<sup>29</sup> One of the ways of distinguishing between the views of various religions concerning the order of nature is to turn to their attitudes regarding the nature of time and becoming. The primal religions—which must include the Shamanic family of Siberian origin with its later ramifications in Japan and the Americas, sometimes referred to as “indigenous” religions and which still survive despite the massive displacement and destruction of indigenous people during the past few centuries since the European expansion over the globe—live essentially in space rather than time conceived as a moving arrow. For them the world of becoming and time manifest themselves as a cyclical phenomenon, and there is no linear movement to history in need of being redeemed in the Christian sense of the term. Nature expresses herself most of all through her rhythms and what has been called “the eternal return.”<sup>30</sup>

In such religions nature is not only a symbol of spiritual realities but *is* those realities not by a reduction of the spiritual essences to material forms but by an inner identity among those who share the primordial perspective between the symbol and the symbolized. Hence, in such worlds nature herself is the supreme cathedral. Her order *is* the Divine Order and her laws divine laws without there

being in any sense a naturalism or animism in the pejorative sense of these terms or as they appeared during Hellenistic decadence when Christianity first spread into the Mediterranean world.

Then there are religions such as the Iranian and Abrahamic in which both the process of becoming and the movement of the "arrow of time" gain a religious significance, and a distinction begins to be made between the Divine Order and the order of nature, which now reflects the Divine Order as there is also an ontological separation between the symbol and the symbolized transcended only in the esoteric dimension of these religions, whose proponents still see God everywhere. Among these religions, Islam, while participating in the Jewish and Christian understanding of the religious significance of the flow of time, marks in a sense a return to the primordial religion. This return to a primordial state, to the *dīn al-ḥiṭrah* to use the Quranic term, is seen in the Islamic concept of the cycles of prophecy reflecting the cyclical march of time<sup>31</sup> and the central role of nature in the Quranic revelation.<sup>32</sup>

Hinduism occupies a special position in this scheme of classification in that it is on the one hand a primordial religion reflecting most directly the early Indo-Iranian and Indo-European religious universe. And yet it has adopted itself to the later stages of cosmic history where historical time gains ever-greater significance. It therefore contains views above the order of nature resembling those of the primal religions and yet possesses an elaborate doctrine of cosmic cycles, the most elaborate of any of the religions, in which the gradual divorce between nature and her spiritual prototype—through the very process of becoming, leading finally to the dissolution of the present world at the end of this cosmic cycle—is fully explained.

What makes the study of the relation of religion to the order of nature more difficult is the presence of not one but several perspectives and doctrines concerning this issue in each of the major traditions. In Christianity the secularization of the cosmos in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries resulted in the theological significance of nature and the necessity to study it seriously from a theological point of view being pushed aside. In fact, the issue did not become central again until quite recently. But before the modern period, Christianity, like Judaism as it developed in the West and especially in the bosom of Islam in Spain, possessed several perspectives on the meaning of nature, all of which contained profound religious significance. One has only to mention the Victorines along with Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, and Raymond Lull, not to mention the purely mystical views of nature expressed in the poems of the Irish monks, the German visionary Hildegard of Bingen, as well as the canticles of St. Francis. A similar situation could be found in Judaism in the works of an Ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, and the Cabalists. They expressed differing perspectives concerning the order of nature within Judaism as those mentioned above had done within Christianity. But this situation was to disappear more or less after the Renaissance especially in the mainstream of Christianity and at least to some extent in European Judaism.

In Islam and Hinduism the presence of several perspectives located in a sapiential hierarchy has not ceased to exist to this day. When one asks what is the

Islamic or Hindu attitude toward the order of nature, does one only refer to the Quran and the Upanishads? Does one speak only of the jurists and legalists of the two traditions or of an Ibn Sab'In or Śāṅkara, who deny that anything can even possess reality other than the Ultimate Principle? And where does one locate the elaborate doctrines concerning nature in both traditions? It is precisely here that the question of being able to situate the role of the cosmos and its study in each tradition becomes central. As already stated, the understanding of the order of nature and its significance in the religious life is not the same across religious frontiers. Moreover, it is not even always the same within the various schools of a single religious universe.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that each tradition is like a tree with its roots sunk in the Divine Ground but its branches, which have grown over time, spreading to cover a particular cosmic space. Furthermore, some traditions have been confronted with and compromised by antitraditional forces, foremost among them Western Christianity, whereas others have not undergone the same historical experience of secularization and in a certain sense marginalization, thus affecting their view of the order of nature, at least not to the same extent. One cannot simply compare most nineteenth- or twentieth-century Christian theologians as far as views toward nature is concerned with a Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim religious thinker of the same period unless one searches to find the few non-Western religious thinkers influenced by such modern ideas as secularism, progress, and evolution. But the latter remain to this day marginal in their traditions, whereas the modernized Christian theologians who have altered their view concerning the order of nature as a result of accepting the secularization of the cosmos, far from being marginal, have even triumphed to a large extent even within the more traditional forms of religion in the West.

Also, the role of both modern philosophy and science in affecting the understanding of the meaning of the order of nature in the West has not been equaled in any non-Western society as a whole, even in the highly technological world of modern Japan or Marxist China. In the future the impact of such forms of secularist thought may spread much more than now and one might address the issue of the relation between religion and the order of nature on a global scale by studying various existing forces and ideas in a parallel fashion across civilizational frontiers. For the moment, however, one must understand the deep difference between the attitude of a Malay, Indian, or Burmese, whether they be Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist or, for that matter, an Ethiopian Christian, and let us say even a believing Belgian or American toward the religious significance of the order of nature. Even more important is the understanding of the theological and historical causes that have brought about that crisis between man and the natural order, which is on the one hand global and on the other brought about by the applications of science in the form of modern technology, which grew under special circumstances in only one part of the globe and has only begun to spread over the surface of the planet fairly recently.

It is in the light of this situation that we must be able to distinguish first of all the most profound and enduring teachings of each religion concerning the