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Research Article

Theoretical and Practical Engagements in Islamic Environmentalism: A Comparative Appraisal of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun Majeed Khalid

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Abstract. The contemporary environmental degradation in the form of climate change, global warming, pollution are not merely due to an ecological imbalance but to a large extent due to the "spiritual malaise" and secular view of nature. Although, the current environmental discourse is dominated by scientific and secular worldview, often undermining the role of religion and ethics in environmental renewal. However, within Islamic tradition, scholars have contributed immensely towards the ecological thought. The significant attempt has been made by Syed Hussain Nasr through his philosophical cum spiritual approach and Fazlun M. Khalid through his practical methodology, offering a rich grounding for ecological restoration. Therefore, through the

comparative analysis of their ecological thought, a holistic environmental framework can be obtained. As, both of them conceptualize the man-nature relationship within the Islamic worldview. So, employing a comparative textual analysis of their primary and related secondary sources, a conceptual and practical framework towards the ecological restoration is possible. The study therefore contributes towards the eco-theological discourse by integrating the philosophical diagnosis with practical remedy of the man-nature relationship. Thus, urging for a paradigm shift from "dominance to trusteeship" and "consumption to reverence".

Keywords: Eco-theology, Climate change, Spiritual Malaise, Environmental thought, comparative study, man-nature relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The signs of environmental crisis are nearly visible in every part of the globe, ranging from biodiversity loss, pollution to climate change. However, scholars from second half of 20th century have shifted their focus to such crisis from mere "technocratic" to "value based", of which religions remain as a primary source **(Sayem, 2023).** The religion offers a fresh and diverse perspective in response to the ecological crisis in the form of "*Ecotheology*", the theological discourse on ecological relationship between human beings, their environment and God **(Purnia wan, 2020).** Similarly, Within the Islamic tradition two Eco-theologians—Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M. Khalid have significantly contributed to this discourse. While former argues the "Spiritual malaise" of the crisis (**Nasr, 1996**), later diagnoses the "materialist mindset" as the cause of ecological crisis (**Khalid,2019).** Therefore, a comparative analysis of their eco-theological insights, present a rich Islamic Ecological thought grounded in theory and practice.

In the contemporary discourse on Eco-theology, comparative studies exist among other religious discourses, and environmental theologians have used religious and spiritual approaches for rectification of "anthropocentric worldview". However, these studies largely emphasize the comparative analysis of inter-religious debates. Such as a comparative Eco-theological response to ecological crisis from Islamic and Hindu perspectives on "Fazlun M. Khalid and Ranchor Prime" (**Sadiqa and Rafi,.2022),** Also a Christian and Islamic comparison of ecological teachings of "John B Cobb and Syed Hussain Nasr". Both the studies have attempted to bring religious and moral foundations in the discourse of environmental challenges, however both within their respective faiths (**Sayem,2023)**. Similarly, Nasr's ecological thoughts have been compared with other Christian scholars like Lyn white Jr and Sallie Mc Fague to contribute in the comparative eco-theological discourse. (**Sayem, 2019).**

The above-mentioned existing literature necessities the intra-Muslim investigation of two prominent Muslim Eco-theologians. So, employing a comparative analytical approach, a scholarly comparison of the eco-theological

thoughts of two great eco-theologians of contemporary Islamic world __Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M Khalid have been undertaken. It is pertinent to mention that various scholars in the contemporary era have contributed to the discipline of Islamic environmentalism such as Ibrahim Ozdemir, Mawil Izzi Dien, Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M Khalid. However, the comparative analysis of the ecological thought of selected two leading figures in the discipline is an underexplored area which needs scholarly attention, for they are the pioneers of Islamic eco-theological intellectual tradition and have contributed immensely on the foundations of Islamic eco-theological lore. The study, therefore analyzes Syed Hussain Nasr's "*Religion and the order of nature*, *Man and Nature: the spiritual crisis in modern man*" and Fazlun M Khalid's *'signs on Earth: modernity and climate crisis"*. These works extensively discuss the Eco-theological thought from the Islamic point of view and have proposed their methodologies for environmental renewal. In addition, these works are considered as influential contributions to this field from a religious point of view, as they have positioned Eco-religious teachings within the present discourse of Islamic environment in a unique and comprehensive way. The present study finds both similarities and differences in their approach and methods of application. Thus establishes a comparative analysis of their Eco-theological views, suggestions and approaches for environmental sustainability. It attempts to show their understandings about human perception of nature and how human attitudes towards environment can impact the present environmental challenges. The objectives of study are threefold, which include:

1) To examine the core environmental teachings of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun Khalid, highlighting their metaphysical and pragmatic approaches.
2) To systematically compare their paradigms, identifying their points of convergence and divergence.
3) To assess the relative strengths and limitations in the metaphysical and pragmatic approaches of Islamic environmentalism for intellectual cum social program and future prospects in the field.

METHODOLOGY

The paper employes Qualitative research design utilizing comparative, analytical and descriptive analysis, in order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives. The primary source of this study are the works of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M. Khalid, and the secondary data sources include the previous studies on their thoughts, to get the most holistic understanding of their Islamic ecological thought. The study employes textual and thematic analysis to understand the meaning contained in the concepts and thoughts of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M. Khalid related to ecological concerns. Moreover, the comparative analysis of their insights has been employed to highlight their convergence and divergence in their

eco-theological thought, with their potential strengths and limitations for future prospects in this new field.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biographical account of Scholars:

The environmental vision of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M. Khalid was shaped and framed by their background and intellectual engagements. Both the contemporaries were born and raised at different settings and which shaped their religious discourse on environment, "Eco-theology", in a different way.

Syed Hussain Nasr was born in Tehran in 1933 CE, where he received his early education. He pursued his higher studies in west, Massachusetts Institute of technology (B.S), and Harvard University (M. A and Ph.D.). He also served as a professor of Islamic Studies at Tehran University and at George Washington University, USA(**Nasr,1968)**. His inclination towards Eco- theological discourse emerged after his discussion with Bertrand Russel during his undergraduate studies at MIT (**Quadir, 2013)**. Subsequently, he delivered different series of lectures on the subject, which emerged in the form of different books on the subject of environmental crisis. Such as, 1994 Edward Cadbury lectures at the university of Birmingham resulted into a form of book "*Religion and the order of nature*", Rockefeller lecture series at university of Chicago in 1966 into a book, "*Man and Nature: the spiritual crisis in modern man",* and the 1981 Gifford lectures on the subject resulted into a book, "The *need for a sacred science*" (**Nasr, 1968)**. Nasr was among the pioneer Muslim intellectuals who wrote extensively about the philosophical and religious dimensions of the environmental crisis. **(Quadir, 2013**). His works on the subject trace the roots of the crisis in the "rationalism and modern subjective science" made him recommend spiritual renewal that encourage the replacement of modern subjective science with sacred science, which upheld the metaphysical principles inherent in all religious traditions (**Quadir, 2013)**.

Fazlun Majid Khalid was born in Colombo Sri Lanka in 1932 CE and later moved to United Kingdom where he spent most of his life. He traced his lineage to Hadramout Yemen (**Wikipedia Contributors,2026**) . Before joining the Royal Air Force (RAF) Britian in 1953, he had travelled overland through south Asia, Middle east and Europe. He was also engaged in factory work and trade union activities in United Kingdom, it was there, where Khalid became deeply interested in the relationship between faith and societal activities and felt that religion is not just a set of rituals but a way of living in the world and has a say about how we should live with our natural environment **(M.P Sharma,2021)**. This realization prompted him to pursue master's degree at Birmingham university, focusing on environmental ethic. During this course, He mentions , "I was thrilled by the discovery that there is hardly a page in the Quran that did not mention the cosmos, the earth or other sentinent beings", after that he figure out to articulate this environmental ethos of the text

into practice **(M.P Sharma,2021)**So, he turns his body of knowledge into a teaching tool called "*Quran, Creation and Conservation"* and founded the lively non-governmental organization *"Islamic foundation for ecology and environmental sciences"* in 1994 **(IFEES,2026).**Since, foundation of IFEES, Fazlun had travelled around the world initiating environmental education projects in Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia etc. He also served as director of training at the *Alliance of religion and conservation* and as a consultant for *world wildlife fund.*[1] Khalid is recognized as one of the leading Eco theologians in the world alongside the Dalai lama and Pope. On the subject of Islamic environmental thought, he has authored numerous books and research articles, shares his thoughts on the origins of our environmental crisis and climate crisis. His most important work on the subject is, "*Signs on earth: Islam, modernity and climate crisis"(* **Khalid, 2002)**.

From Theoretical Foundations to Practical Engagement: A Comparative Study of Nasr and Khalid's Environmental thought.

Syed Hussain Nasr, one of the leading figures of contemporary Islamic environmentalism brings forth an Islamic ecotheology which is grounded in *Islamic cosmology* and *perennial philosophy*. He describes "the *spiritual* and *metaphysical* foundations of contemporary ecological crisis and comments:

"The modern man has desacralized nature to the extent that it has been treated like a prostitute__ to be enjoyed and benefitted to the fullest without having any sense of responsibility towards her, rather than like a married woman from whom benefits are taken but with proper responsibility" (**Nasr,1968).**

According to Nasr, nature is the *theophany* (*tajalli*) of Divine names and qualities that are the roots(*asl*) and support (*Mustan1' ad*) of all the realities of the phenomenon of this world **(Nasr, 1996).** However, the modern man has reduced nature to mere materialistic and artificial environment, which is devoid of meaning and this rupture originates from the loss of sacred knowledge (*Scientia sacra*) (**Nasr, 1996)**. So, there occurs a lack of harmony between man and nature, which actually results from the lack of harmony between God and man **(Nasr, 1968)**. In order to achieve this harmony, there is a need to accept the norms and rhythms within nature, which Nasr calls "*Eternal returns*". So, it is the metaphysical doctrine of "*perennial philosophy*" of Syed Hussain Nasr which provides the key for penetration into the diverse religious traditions for governing human life without destroying the sense of sacred in the nature **(Nasr, 1996)**.

On the other hand, the environmental thought of Fazlun Khalid is rooted in *Quranic cosmology*, *Prophetic teachings* and *Islamic law*. **(Khalid,2002)**. In contrast, his approach towards environment is pragmatic and action oriented. According to his view, Islamic concepts such as "*Tawhid* (unity principle), *Fitrah* (creation principle), *Mizan* (balance principle) and *Khalifa* (responsibility principle)" form the core foundations of Islamic environmentalism **(Khalid, 2002)**.

- The principle of *tawhid* according to Fazlun Khalid is the primordial testimony to the fact that there is unity of all creation and man is intrinsically a part of this natural order **(Khalid, 1998).** As affirmed by Quran "*what is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allah; He encompasses everything* **(Al Quran,4:126)**. The whole creation being the work of one Creator, so everything works according to His set parameters, "Verily, *We have created everything according to Predestination"* **(Al Quran, 54:49)**. And the role of man, who has a will of his own , is capable of interfering in the natural order, is one of submission and there must be limits to his actions to establish the harmony in the nature.
- The principle of *fiṭrah* in the Eco- thought of Khalid signifies the natural pattern of Allah's creation, the different elements of which work together in coordination to keep it in order. The order mentioned in Quran *"So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know"* **(Al Quran, 30:30)**. Therefore, the term "*fiṭrah*", a feminine noun which occurs around fourteen times in the Quran, allows us to consider nature as mother, to convey us the sense of where we belong in the pattern of Allah's creation (**Khalid, 2019**). *"From it [i.e., the earth] We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time"* **(Al Quran, 20:55)**. However, the deep ecological crisis of today is the result of changes in the original state (*fitrah*) of creation due to human interventions, so this verse lays the foundation for the deep ecological insights of the Quran.
- The principle of *Mizan* (balance) describes the purpose and order in the creation, which run with utmost precision and harmony, as Quran says *"[And] who created seven heavens in layers. You do not see in the creation of the Most Merciful any inconsistency. So, return [your] vision [to the sky]; do you see any breaks?"* **(Al Quran, 67:3-4)** However, human intervention has disrupted this balance (*mizan*) of creation reflected in the form of climate change, melting of glaciers, corrosion of coral reefs in the oceans, denudation of top soil and the extinction of species etc. without having a thought of being threat to ourselves (**Khalid, 2019)**. Humans, the only conscious being, has responsibility to live in harmony with nature and maintain balance in it, Quran says "*And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance, that you not transgress within the balance*" **(Al -Quran, 55:7-8)**.
- Lastly, it is the *"Khilafah"* __ the responsibility principle, which sets the role for mankind as trustees of the whole creation. It is in the grand scheme of Allah that humans are more likely to destroy the Allah's creation, so have been made its caretakers and guardians. Many verses of holy Quran describe man's duty as "*khalifah fil Ard*", Quran says, *"And it is He who has made you successors upon the earth and has raised some of you above others in degrees [of rank] that He may try*

you through what He has given you. Indeed, your Lord is swift in penalty; but indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful" **(Al -Quran, 6:165)**. Therefore, this role of *Khilāfah* is that of a sacred duty handed down to human race, which is required to be executed on the basis of Adl (justice) (**Khalid,2019)** *"And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance, that you not transgress within the balance* **(Al- Quran, 55:8-9)***"*.

These four principles thus form the basis for "*Ilm ul Khalq"* (knowledge of creation), apart from which Islamic jurisprudence contains regulations for preservation of natural resources like scarce water, range lands, wet lands, green belts in the form of Harim and Hima **(Khalid,2002)**. Besides, Khalid's environmental thought is also backed by his practical projects and institutional reforms which he runs through his NGO IFEES (Islamic foundation for ecology and environmental sciences). For example, his community engagement with the fisherman in Zanzibar, who had resorted to the dynamiting coral reefs to procure fish which used to have detrimental impacts for the fishing ground, his involvement with them not only stopped the illegal fishing techniques but also helped them to replace with sustainable ways **(M.P Sharma,2024).** Similarly, his other projects are designed based on education and training, natural resource management and project and network developments**(IFEES,2026).**.

Convergence and Divergence in the Environmental thoughts of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun M. Khalid:

S.H. Nasr and F.M. Khalid are the prominent figures of 20th century in the Islamic eco-theological discourse. Both are well aware about the contemporary environmental challenges our planet earth is facing. Therefore, both have proposed the solutions and have criticized the modern and secular worldview that have convinced human beings towards exploitation of natural resources for their own benefit that has resulted the era of Anthropocene.

Though both scholars differ in their approach towards environmental concerns, however there are various points of convergences in their ecological thought as well which makes them forerunners of the same field.

CONVERGENCES

- For both Nasr and Khalid, the roots of environmental crisis stem from the *Spiritual* alienation and *modernity*. In "*Religion and the order of nature*", Nasr argues that environmental crisis is an external reflection of modern man's spiritual crisis. Nasr, while comparing the traditional sciences with the modern scientific revolution, blames scientific revolution as a mark of profound rupture in the humanity's understanding of nature, the cosmos and its spiritual meaning(**Nasr, 1996)**. By traditional sciences he means "Islamic, Indian, Chinese, Greek, Egyptian " that were grounded in metaphysical and religious principles, with all sharing a

common meaning with the religion, by viewing nature as a living , purposeful and spiritually charged reality. These were the complete systems rooted in sacred cosmology **(Nasr, 1996)**. However, during the renaissance and scientific revolution, nature was seen as a machine devoid of life and intelligence and cosmos was reinterpreted as a system operating under fixed, impersonal laws. Similarly, according to Khalid, global modernity contributes to the ecological breakdown, by adoption of urban life styles, modern modes of living which reveal a complete lack of awareness regarding the order and care of natural world or environment around us,(**Khalid, 2019)**. He argues that modernity, consumerism and industrialization need to be rethought, alongside an appeal to reconnect humanity with creation in the divine order (**Khalid,2019)**.

- Both share the concepts of *Tawhid*, *Mizan* and *Ayah* as fundamental Environmental ethical principles.

For Nasr, *Tawhid* implies the unity of creation, as Islam provides a monotheistic solution to environmental crisis (**Nasr, 1996)**, similarly, for Khalid, *Tawhid* is the foundational principle of the Unity of the Creator from which everything else flows and affirms the interconnectedness of the natural order **(Timmerman and Munn, 2002)**.

The term *Mizan* (balance) in the metaphysical philosophy of Nasr signifies the "balance of the universe itself through that Divine Wisdom which preserves everything in its place and has created everything according to a just measure, so it becomes closely associated with the order prevalent in the nature" **(Nasr, 1996)**, and for Khalid, *mizan* qualifies " the order and purpose in nature and the dynamic balance which is observed in the sun, moon, stars and in the earth itself" **(Timmerman and Munn, 2002)**.

By *Ayah* (signs of Allah), Nasr means everything as part of natural world besides the revelation (sacred text). Thus, signifies natural world as the living sign of God, which needs same sanctity as given to a sacred book **(Sayem, 2023)**. For Khalid, ayah applies to the created world as much as it does to the verses in the Quran. As Almost every page in the Qur'an has a reference to the natural world: the sky, the moon, the stars, trees, fruit and vegetation. Several chapters in the Qur'an are named after animals and insects: The Cow, Cattle, The Bee, The Ant and The Spider **(Editorial, Last Prophet,2015)** *"But to God belongs all things in the heavens and on earth. And he it is that encompassed all things"* (**Al -Quran, 4:126)**.

DIVERGENCES

For environmental renewal both Nasr and Khalid undertook different approaches. They differ in their methodology and scope.

- **Methodology:** Nasr uses the philosophical and metaphysical lens dealing with environmental crisis. He argues that ecological crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis caused by desacralization of nature (**Nasr,1968)**. He offers solutions in the

form of sacred cosmology and traditional Islamic metaphysics, and recommends spiritual renewal through religious world view which encourage replacement of modern science with a sacred science.

On the other hand, Khalid uses environmental activism as a methodology. He established the "Islamic foundation for ecology and environmental sciences" as an internationally recognized body to initiate environmental projects such as: development of educational and training programmes, developing and implementing sustainable projects in key locations, developing networks of Muslim environmental activists worldwide **(IFEES,2026)**. He continuously draws from the Quranic and Prophetic teachings to illustrate the environmental ethics. As Islam provides a holistic approach to existence and does not differentiate between the sacred and secular, neither does it place a distinction between the world of humankind and the world of nature(**Khalid, 2019)**.

- **Scope:** Dr. Syed Hussain Nasr is credited as the first Muslim intellectual to address the environmental crisis, he is also the first ever to write extensively about the philosophical and religious dimensions of the crisis. The core message in his environmental thought is a call for the revival of religiously purposeful lifestyles as alternatives to technocratic and economy driven modern lifestyles, which he believes are behind the ecological crisis. However, despite the depth of his message and great relevance , his works does not provide any extensive and specific strategy for different environmental challenges (**Quadir. 2013).** Also, his philosophical approach for environmental crisis draws a limited scope only with in the academia and among intellectuals.

On the other hand, the pragmatic and community driven approach of Fazlun Khalid draws wider scope. As through his organizational projects he has mobilized common people for responsible actions towards environment. In Indonesia, Tanzania, Middle East, Zanzibar etc. his organization collaborates with local people and projects to work on environmental conservation projects applying Islamic principles. Such as establishment of Hima or management zones, Harim or inviolable sanctuaries and *Ihaya al Mawat* or reviving of neglected lands to become productive **(PPI,UNAS,2010)**.

Relative Strengths and Limitations in the metaphysical and Pragmatic approaches of Environmentalism:

The Nassirian approach for dealing with environmental crisis is mostly based on metaphysical and sacred cosmology. This approach provides a critique of secular modernity and recommends process of "*resacralization of nature*" as a key for environmental renewal **(Nasr, 1993)**. Scholars like Foltz, Abu Sayem and Tariq Quadir, described this approach as the most systematic and comprehensive and a critique for modern environmental degradation. Nonetheless, Dr. Nasr's thought is deeply intellectual and philosophical, it remains less engaged with the practical

activism. As this high level of perennial philosophy is difficult to operationalize at the grassroot level and is also less accessible to policy makers and activists (**Foltz, Denny and Baharuddin, 2003)**.

In contrast, the *pragmatic approach* of environmentalism associated with F. Khalid also holds strengths like it employes the environmental ethics into practice through community engagement, ecological activism and conservation projects, so bridges the gap between theology and policy (IFEES,2026). However, this approach certainly cannot be without limitations as well. As pragmatism alone cannot transform the global capitalistic structure, that is the root cause of draining natural resources at the cost of environmental degradation.

Henceforth, it can be said that through an integration of "metaphysical and pragmatic "approaches, a solid foundation of environmental theology (*Eco-theology*) can be established.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the unexplored framework of religious and metaphysical dimensions of environmental crisis, manifesting in the form climate change, pollution, depletion of natural resources etc. In this backdrop, the metaphysical and pragmatic contribution towards environmental crisis of Syed Hussain Nasr and Fazlun Majeed Khalid have not been compared and analyzed in a systematic scholarly manner. Therefore, their comparative analysis reveals that ecological crisis is rooted in desacralization of nature and spiritual alienation. Both align at the core Islamic teachings of *tawhid*, *mizan* and *khilafah*, however they somehow differ in their methodology and scope. Nasr's approach being more philosophical in nature, whereas Khalid's approach being more practical and action oriented. The study suggests that Islamic ecotheology possesses both theoretical depth and practical ability. which together can lead to effective restoration from environmental crisis.

Despite a contribution, the scope of this study is limited by the fact that this work is primarily textual in nature. Though Khalid's practical initiatives have been acknowledged, however, the long-term empirical assessment of his environmental projects is underexplored area. Similarly, the Nasr's philosophical contributions have not been examined in relation to interdisciplinary environmental frameworks, that could have enriched the comparative framework. So, the future course of work from this study will be to assess the tangible outcome of Khalid's environmental projects through an empirical study and a comparison of Nasr's sacred science with other faiths can deepen the theoretical grounding for environmental ethics. Subsequently, through the Eco theological visions of Nasr and Khalid, the study demonstrates that "environmental crisis is not merely a scientific and industrial malfunction, but rather a moral and spiritual rupture". As a result, Nasr reminds us that nature is a sacred trust and divine reality, which needs care and respect and Khalid's approach translates responsible stewardship into a concrete action. The combined legacy of

these two approaches can create a paradigm shift __from domination to trusteeship and from consumerism to balance in order to establish a sustainable and ethically grounded environmental future.

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