

Religious Understanding of Nature and Influence of Geographical Environment on Shaping Religious Beliefs and Practices within Christianity and Islam

Md. Abu Sayem

Religious Studies Program, Chinese University of Hong Kong;
and Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka
email: sayemwrcdu@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper connects nature with religious understanding in regard to Christianity and Islam. Many studies show that religious beliefs and practices were shaped and reshaped, to many points, being influenced by a specific geographical environment. So, the paper aims to focus how nature serves continuously in generating human thought, feeling and experience especially with respect to religions. By correlating some verses of the Bible and the Quran alongside some interpretations by religious scholars, the paper attempts to explore why religious understanding of nature seems significant for preventing the natural environment from further degradation caused by uncontrolled human activities in nature. In so doing, it will be an effort to enrich the current discussions relating to religions and natural environment.

[Tulisan ini menghubungkan alam dengan pemahaman agama yang terkait dengan agama Kristen dan Islam. Banyak penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keyakinan dan praktik agama dibentuk dan dibentuk kembali, ke banyak titik, dipengaruhi oleh lingkungan geografis tertentu. Jadi, kajian ini bertujuan untuk memfokuskan bagaimana alam berfungsi secara terus-menerus dalam menghasilkan pemikiran, perasaan, dan pengalaman manusia khususnya sehubungan dengan agama. Dengan menghubungkan

beberapa ayat dari Alkitab dan Al-Qur'an bersama beberapa interpretasi oleh para ulama, kajian ini mencoba untuk mengeksplorasi mengapa pemahaman agama tentang alam tampaknya signifikan untuk mencegah lingkungan alam dari degradasi lebih lanjut yang disebabkan oleh aktivitas manusia yang tidak terkendali di alam. Dengan demikian, hal tersebut akan menjadi upaya untuk memperkaya diskusi pada saat ini yang terkait dengan agama dan lingkungan alam.]

Keywords: Creation of God; Environmental Sustainability; Human Responsibility; Manifestation of God' wisdom; Natural Phenomena; the Universe

Introduction

The term “nature” has multiple meanings, which vary according to the context. For the present discussion, we will treat nature as the natural world or natural environment around us which is beyond human artificiality. Human beings themselves are part of nature.^{1 2} For growth and survival of human beings and all other non-human animals, a balanced relationship between natural world and humans is undoubtedly essential. Indeed, nature has served in shaping human thought, religious beliefs and practices. With these crucial functions of nature in hand, the present paper tries to explore how nature has occupied people's minds over the centuries. Referring to the biblical and Quranic verses the current paper tries to show how nature reveals God's wisdom and serves as God's sign. Religious understanding of nature provides a participatory concept, according to which humans are part of nature. In contrast to mechanistic and materialistic world-view of nature developed by modern scientists and secular philosophers, religions deal with spiritual world-view of nature. The paper focuses how humans can search the Creator behind the visible natural phenomena and how humans are deeply attached with nature. Thus, the paper aims to show that nature has a universally and historically sacred value to humans, and therefore, nature should be treated in a more respectful and responsible way. With such a noble objective the current

¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology* (California: Bruce/Beverly Hills, 1972), 83-91.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1968/1976), 21.

study is accomplished to prove that nature serves as revelation of God, and geographical environment has a strong influence on religious beliefs and practices.

Methods

By adopting a qualitative research method, the current study tries to analyze the relevant data found so far in regard to religious understanding of nature by focusing a deep and inseparable connection between humans and nature. As the study is going to deal with Christian and Islamic perspective, the investigator is very selective to articulate some biblical and Quranic verses with regard to see nature in the light of religions; so, the study follows a hermeneutic method in correlating certain natural phenomena with some specific verses of the said texts. This study is not an independent study of earlier works; it is based on some previous researches in regard to significance of nature for living forms on earth, function of nature in religious beliefs and practices, and impact of geographical influence on formation of religions. All these resource materials are critically analyzed and evaluated in order to explore new knowledge and understanding with regard to religious perceptions of nature.

Result and Discussion

Importance of Nature and Natural Environment

Aristotle holds that “in all nature there is something of the marvelous”.³ It goes without saying that nature and the natural environment are the containers of all lives. All things are dependent on nature and are encompassed by their natural circumstances. Crosby writes:

“It is nature that sustains human body, provides livelihood, supplies oxygen to lungs and tissues, allows species to evolve, facilitates the emergence of human language, culture and history, that accounts for the existence as an individual being. Natural body that with large brain permits the individual reason, to

³ Robert Huxley, *The Great Naturalist* (London: Thomas & Hudson, 2007), 23.

read, and to reflect. All works made by humans are themselves the product of nature. Everyday life i.e., brushing the teeth, eating lunch, reading book, playing, writing, raising linguistic or philosophical questions, teaching, participating in conference, sleeping at night, is a manifestation of nature's multifarious character and inexhaustible creativity. All such aspects of everyday lived experience must necessarily be included in any conception of nature that strives for comprehensiveness and adequacy."⁴

Nature is a refuge, shelter and container for peace, silence and rest.⁵ Each component of nature is the source of all lives, plants and animals. For example, we can just think of trees which produce oxygen humans take and receive carbon dioxide humans leave behind; trees also produce food, clothes and furniture; so, can we imagine our own life without the existence of trees? Water, air, and sunlight themselves are inanimate objects but without these no life is possible. Again, one natural object is used to sustain other objects. Thus, there is interaction and interdependence between natural object called ecology. In fact, human being is a product of natural world. People are completely dependent on the natural environment not only for their physical survival but also for their development, creativity, culture, civilization and worldviews, just to mention some of these. As an example, just think of the rivers' necessity in human life and civilization: we frequently use river's water for agriculture, transportation, fishing, etc. Thus, rivers work for human beings and other animals as a source of food. In the past, most cities were built at the banks of rivers due to multipurpose uses of rivers. Like rivers other components of the natural world, for instance air, sun light, trees, seas, lakes, etc. unconditionally provide humans and animals equally all required provisions for living. Human lifestyles around the world vary due to local geography and

⁴ Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 55.

⁵ De Camp Linda, *The Role of Nature in Unamuno's Quest to maintain Faith* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 65.

ecology. From the natural world humans also take various tools and weapons to overcome obstacles. Human society and culture are primarily shaped in consideration of their physical surroundings. All primitive religions originate from the natural world; for primitive peoples, important natural substances and features often appear as individual gods or goddesses. So, it is evident that the physical environment contributes to shape human society, culture, religion and civilization.

Nature also has its destructive aspects such as earthquakes, forest, fires, floods, tornadoes and hurricanes in which plants, animals and human beings pay huge price.⁶ It may be true that through destructive forces nature maintains its balance. Moreover, in view of the indispensable role nature plays in sustaining life, its benefits outweigh its negative effects. Thus, it is invalid to say that nature has no inherent value and its value to human is only contextual. When humans are viewed as an integral part of nature, they can realize that the value of nature exceeds the value of humanity.⁷ But this is a philosophical question the present paper does not intend to discuss further. Nevertheless, now-a-days it is believed that nature has at least ten types of inherent value such as life, species, ecosystem, biosphere, diversity, creativity, splendor, practical, moral and religious.⁸

How Nature matters in religious beliefs and practices

In *The Role of Nature in Unamuno's Quest to maintain Faith*, De Camp Linda discusses Unamuno's view of nature from religious perspective. In the view of Unamuno, the silence of nature indicates the presence of God. To search for God, man should come to the world of nature and then to think deeply about the creation of God. It is in nature where the divine silence lies, and this works properly as a basis for the meditation for deeply thinking and feeling God. Within the peacefulness of nature man can hear the divine voice of God. It is nature through which God teaches, speaks and provides provisions to humans and animals as per their necessity. Thus, Unamuno's pragmatic

⁶ Donald A. Crosby, *A Religion of Nature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 78, 91, 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

thought of nature clearly shows that humans are called to preserve and protect nature and its beautiful environment.⁹

The Glory of God in Nature

According to the common belief of theistic religions, nature is created by God and His glory lies in it. So, if anyone wishes to see the glory of God s/he should observe it in God's creation. Without being reflected with the beautiful creation style of the universe, nobody can taste the glory of the Almighty Creator. The Quran states:

“It is Allah Who erected the heavens without pillars that you can see; then He established Himself above the Throne and made subject the sun and the moon, each running its course for a specified term. He arranges each matter; He details the signs that you may, of the meeting with your Lord, be certain.”¹⁰
“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? Then return your vision twice again. Your vision will return to you humbled while it is fatigued.”¹¹

According to the Bible, the sky itself shows the glory of God:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where

⁹ De Camp Linda, *The Role of Nature in Unamuno's Quest to maintain Faith* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1997), 5, 65-79.

¹⁰ The Quran, 13:2. Translation has been taken from *The Quran, English Meanings Revised and Edited by Saheeh International* (Riyad: Al-Muntada Al-Islami Trust, 2011).

¹¹ The Quran, 67:3-4.

their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”¹²

After having reflection by the wonderful creation of God, Pope Alexander expresses his feelings about the glory of God in this way:

“Vast Chain of being! Which from God began,
Natures aethereal, human, angel, man
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
No glass can reach; --- On superior powers
Were we to press, inferior might on ours;
Or in the full creation leave a void,
Where, one step broken, the great scale’s destroyed;
From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.”¹³

So, it is crystal clear from the above verses of both scriptures that in the creation of God there is no deficiency. Each part of the substance of nature well equipped and shaped by a great intelligent designer Whom Christianity and Islam call God or Allah respectively. Thus, the glory of God lies in the creation.

Nature as the Sign and Symbol of God’s Wisdom

The components of nature are treated in the Quran as the sign of God:

“And it is He Who spread the earth and placed therein firmly set mountains and rivers; and from all of the fruits He made therein two mates; He causes the night to cover the day. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who give thought. And within the land are

¹² Psalm, 19:1-4. Consulted with Holy Bible: New International Version (London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002).

¹³ Pope Alexander, *An Essay on Man, Epistle 1*, 237-46 (London: Methuen, 1950), 44-45; Kate Soper, *What is Nature? : Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 21.

neighboring plots and gardens of grapevines and crops and palm trees, growing several from a root or otherwise, watered with one water; but We make some of them exceed others in quality of fruit. Indeed, in that are signs for a people who reason.”¹⁴

The Bible mentions that both of animal and human life inherently reflect the creative power of God:

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the land of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breadth of all mankind.”¹⁵

“The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers, the heavens languish with the earth. The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws, violated the statutes and broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore, a curse consumes the earth; its people must bear their guilt. Therefore, earth’s inhabitants are burned up. And very few are left.”¹⁶

Thus, through various verses of the Quran and the Bible it becomes explicit that nature is, in principle, a sign of God, and it also carries the signature of God through the various diversity in unity which is not possible for humans to perceive or grasp clearly. Modern science has just given us some indications about the diverse variety of the creation. Really, these are the secret mystery in the creation that God creates each of them in a distinctive way, for instance, finger prints or faces of human beings. Here the remarks of Ernesto Cardenal seem relevant: “God’s signature is on the whole of nature. All creatures are love letters

¹⁴ The Quran, 13: 3-4.

¹⁵ Job, 12:7-10.

¹⁶ Isaiah, 24: 4-6.

from God to us.”¹⁷ In the view of the great early Christian theologian Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), the beautiful things of the world always reveal God as their creator.¹⁸

Nature itself praises God

Each and everything of the whole universe, we see or do not see, always praises God by its very nature. The Quran clearly mentions:

“Everything in the heavens and on Earth glorifies Allah.”¹⁹

“The seven heavens and the Earth and all they contain glorify Him, and there is not a thing but extols His glory; but you do not understand how they glorify Him.”²⁰

“Do you not see that all things that are in the heaven and on Earth bow down in worship to Allah—the Sun, the Moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals, and a great number of human beings? But a great number are (also) such as are fit for punishment. And those whom Allah shall disgrace none can raise to honor, for Allah carries out all that He wills.”²¹

Similarly, the Bible states:

“All the earth worship you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name.”²²

“And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to

¹⁷ Richard L. Fern, *Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 202.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Daubleday, 2002), 17.

¹⁹ The Quran, 62:1.

²⁰ The Quran, 17:44.

²¹ The Quran, 22:18.

²² Psalm, 66:4.

the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”²³

“Praise the Lord from the heaven, praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for He commanded, and they were created. He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that will never pass away.”²⁴

So, it is quite clear from the said verses that God is praised by all His creation, be it inanimate object or animate. Each part of physical body of living and nonliving thing praises God by obeying the laws of creator; otherwise body cannot work, in fact. So, praising God is inherent quality of every component of our natural universe as God has subjected them to obey the physical laws or the laws of nature created by God. For instance, through providing light and heat the sun obeys God’s command and thus, praises God; and similarly, the moon continues to praise God to be reflected by the sun’s light and through orbiting around the earth. Thus, all the planets and stars glorify God through their relentless motions. So, it seems apparently true that the glory of God is manifested in the continuous obligation of all things to obey the laws of nature that God created. God’s glory may be manifested in other ways about which humans do not know, that’s why it is stated by God, “...but you do not understand how they glorify Him”.²⁵ The Quran further mentions: “Every creature knows its own mode of prayer and psalm. And Allah is aware of what they do.”²⁶

Nature as the beauty of God

Nature itself expresses the beauty of its creator. God manifests His beauty in the beautiful creation of the natural world. If we start to

²³ Revelation, 5:13.

²⁴ Psalm, 148:1-6.

²⁵ The Quran, 17:44.

²⁶ The Quran, 24:41.

describe the beauty of God's creation, can we cannot finish it. So, it indicates that the beauty of God is endless and beyond human imagination. But, we can assume the beauty of God through the beauty of His diverse creation. The Prophet Muhammad clearly said, "Allah is beautiful, and He loves beauty."²⁷ Allah loves beauty. It implies that God has created His creation beautifully. So, to see the beauty of nature is to see the beauty of God.

According to Ibn al-'Arabi, the whole creation of Allah is equipped in accordance with the highest heavenly beauty that is not possible to completely grasp by the experience of human beings. For him, it is the beauty of creation through which Allah has named Himself as "Beautiful". In fact, the beauty of God is beyond comparison with any created ones. Though somethings in the creation look apparently ugly or dangerous, but that also carries its own distinctive features and functions, being different from others. Thus, in entire the creation, nothing exists but beauty. It is Allah who has created the whole cosmos in the image of His infinite beauty.²⁸ Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) states:

"If the goodness, beauty and wonder of creatures are so delightful to the human mind, the fountain head of God's own goodness will draw excited human minds entirely to itself. Something of the torrent of God's beauty can thus be known in the rivulets of the beauty of the creation. This has long been recognized as one of the most basic religious motivations for scientific research—the passionate belief that to gain an enhanced appreciation of the beauty of the world is to glimpse something of the glory of God."²⁹

²⁷ Abū al-Ḥusayn 'Asākir al-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim al-Qushayrī an-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, trans. by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2009), Hadith No. 911.

²⁸ Spahic Omar, "The Beauty of Allah's Creation, *Islamicity*," access December 2, 2016, <https://www.islamicity.org/8028/the-beauty-of-allahs-creation/>

²⁹ Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Daubleday, 2002), 16.

Nature as the image of God

Nature is seen also as the image of God in the sense that nature acts as mirror of God. We know that a mirror reflects the shape of a nearby thing. So, like a mirror the whole of nature reflects God though it cannot exactly grasp God. So, studying the wonders of the natural world means glimpsing aspects of God's existence.

Gilkey proclaims nature as an "image of God".³⁰ He argues that if human beings are created in the image of God nature is also created in the image of God. Like our own existence, nature, therefore, also has a value, "an inherent integrity, order, and worth". He mentions Martin Buber's approach to nature as "an image of its creator" where Buber addresses nature as a third person like human beings using the specific term "other" to mention nature.³¹ Gilkey further argues God is believed to be the creator, the commander, the lawgiver, instructor, the sustainer, the provider, the protector, and the like; then there should be no objection to accept nature (power, life, order, law, and unity) as the image of God. He claims that God in the scriptures is grandeur, power, order, and beauty of nature, and God is conceived by means of these signs, i.e., the components and characteristics of nature itself. So, through such philosophical analysis on the analogies of nature human beings can easily grasp the existence of God. Referring to the Bible (e.g., Psalm 104; Job 28, 38-39), Gilkey continues to argue that "the order and the beauty of nature—the regularity of its changes, its coherent system despite its variety—also are sign of God's wisdom and of God's power".³² That's why humans conceive God as power, order, wisdom, mercy and so on. Thus, in his view, nature is a genuine image of God. He argues furthermore that if nature is considered as an image of God, it is fair to say that nature has inherent value. Such understanding of nature, as Gilkey contends, allows humans to show due respect to it.

In the chapter titled "Nature as the Image of God" of the same book Gilkey interprets this theory a bit more. In support of his argument, he constantly argues if nature is, in principle, believed to be

³⁰ Langdon Gilkey, *Nature, Reality and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150-151.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

³² *Ibid.*, 150-151.

an image of divine power, nature will be regarded like humans. Then it will be easy for humans to believe that nature has integrity and a genuine value in and of itself, much as humans see themselves. If so, people would not see nature just as an object for their exploitation and a means for their own use; rather they would regard it as a sacred object. Thus, Gilkey thinks nature is an image of God matching with the power, life, order and unity which God Himself has imposed on it.³³

Nature as the family of God

Nature is considered as the family of God. The Prophet Muhammad said: “All creatures are (like) a family of God and He loves most those who are kindest to His family”.³⁴ If natural world is understood with this feeling, there will be no chance to abuse and misuse every component of nature by human beings.

Nature as Mirror of God

John Calvin interprets that nature works as the divine mirror of God in the sense that through nature God’s supreme power is known and understood. Without a mirror, we cannot see even our own faces; so, without nature we cannot understand the ultimate authority of the creator. Through nature we see the power and authority of God, so in this way nature acts like mirror.

Nature as the source of life

God believing people are to believe that God is the only giver and taker of life, though externally it appears that nature is the source of life. We know all the components of life such as air, water, foods, etc., come from nature. Is it possible for any living things to live for a moment without these ingredients of nature? Not at all. According to the Bible and the Quran God has created life from the components of nature and nature itself is created by God.

³³ Ibid.,175.

³⁴ Narrated by Hazrat Anas ibn Malik, *Mishkat al-Masabih* 3: 1392, quoted from *Sahih al-Bukhari*; Sheima Salam Sumer, Lessons From The Hadith ‘All Creatures Are (Like) A Family of God...’, *New Age Islam: Mapping an Agenda for the Twenty-first Century*, accessed September 7, 2018, [http://www.newageislam.com/islam-andpluralism/lessons-from-the-hadith-‘all-creatures-are-\[like\]-a-family-of-god...’/d/109194](http://www.newageislam.com/islam-andpluralism/lessons-from-the-hadith-‘all-creatures-are-[like]-a-family-of-god...’/d/109194)

Nature is sacred power of God

In and through nature God's power is manifested. Nature works continuously as the power of God. Religious scriptures, for instance the Bible and the Quran, suggest thinking how the natural forces work for the mechanism of the whole universe. Scientists have proved that each atom produces power and it works continuously. Every substance has motion and this motion endlessly moves. Everything in the universe moves; so, nothing exists without movement. Why is everything in movement or in motion? According to the view of scientists, movement happens because of attraction to one another and within itself; but religious texts clearly describe this motion as the sacred power of God which God has inserted in each thing.

Nature as grounds for religious practices

Devotees and worshipers use the components of nature when they invoke God. For instance, they build temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, etc. from the soil of the earth and woods of the forests; they preserve religious texts or the divine messages of God on paper made from trees; they wear the clothes made of cottons which come from trees and animals; they take their foods from the earth, they take breath from the air, they quench their thirsty with water, they deeply meditate in the silent places of nature, they bury their dead in the ground. Devotees get strength from natural resources to glorify God and to perform other religious rituals. Without having air, water, food, cloths, and a kind of shelter on the earth no people can exist to perform any sort of religious practice. So, it becomes crystal clear that without the ingredients of natural world people cannot pray and perform religious rituals. In fact, all practice is embodied in the components of nature and the human body itself is a part of nature. Thus, natural world and its resources work as the grounds for religions. Therefore, for the religious people, natural world is not only secularly valued but it is also valued on religious grounds. They must preserve and protect nature and the natural environment from both perspectives considering nature as a core supporter and source for livelihood and life on the earth, and the ground for religious practices. Thus, on the earth the physical acts are seen as the substratum for the metaphysical purposes, where natural world serves as the ground for spiritual feeling of humans.

Geographical Environment as the Ground of Religions and Spirituality

From the preceding discussion, it is very clear that religious beliefs and practices are shaped in so many ways where geographical environment has remarkable influence. There is no religion that is not significantly influenced by its surrounding environment, culture, and geographical location and thus by natural phenomena. In ancient times, primitive people were heavily influenced by the power and fear of natural phenomena like the sky, the sun, the moon, the wind, the earth, the river, the mountain, the trees, etc. and then, they projected divinity on to these elements of the natural world, and later, they started to worship these things. Thus, according to many scholars like Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), James George Frazer (1854-1941), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and so on, religious beliefs and practices came into existence, though divine religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam had different origin of development. Even many civilized religions that appeared in the Indus valley, along the river of Nile, in Babylonia, in Greece, in Mexico, in Japan, in China, etc. were also deeply associated with natural phenomena and the followers of these religions used to worship those natural components in their own ways. For instance, ancient Egyptian people used to worship the Nile river as a powerful deity, and Japanese people used to consider Mt. Fuji as the dwelling place of gods or deities.

R. H. Whitbeck views that early people were so much impressed by natural phenomena that mostly affect their life, for instance, the rain, the sun, the wind, or something else. But various natural phenomena were seen with different power or force according to the geographical location. For instance, in Greece and Rome many mythological stories were developed based on the power and fear of the sea, but these were unfamiliar to the tribal people of interior Asia or of central Africa where other natural phenomena informed their mythological stories. As the life of the ancient Egyptians was completely dependent on the Nile, so to them veneration of the Nile river became a part of their religious belief; but such kind of river was not in Palestine, Norway, or in Persia and therefore such religious ritual or religious beliefs were not seen there. Ancient Indian people were so dependent on the rain water for

their agriculture, therefore, they viewed the rain water as a divine blessing for which they used to pray to an individual deity who was believed as responsible for rains; but in Amazon valley rains were so frequent that the indigenous peoples of this region were annoyed, or even threatened, by them and therefore they used to treat the rains as a fearsome deity.³⁵

Even cosmology was shaped based on local geographical influence. According to Norse mythology humans were created from trees because trees were so common for them as a source of their livelihoods. Such conceptions were also commonly seen in the forest lands of northern Europe. Indigenous peoples of Peru considered the light and heat of the sun as essential source of life; therefore, they showed their utmost veneration to the sun as the sun deity. Dwelling places of deities vary according to geographical locations. Sky is generally considered as the dwelling place of God (for instance, in Abrahamic religions). In primitive and ancient religions, the chief deity (for example Dyaus, Zeus, Divus, Theos, Deus, Juno, Diana, and so on) is placed in the sky and dwells in the highest part of the sky.

In ancient Greek religion, warm and sunny mountains, especially Mount Olympus and Mount Ida, were believed to be the dwelling place of deities; in Japan, Mount Fuji was considered as the dwelling place of deities. In contrast, in cold Norway where mountains are always covered with snow and ice mountains were considered very dangerous places, so Norwegian people used to believe the mountains were the dwelling places of devils, demons and evil forces with whom gods or deities were believed to fight. In India, the Aryans were dependent on the monsoon rains for their agriculture, so the deity of rain, Indra, was highly respected and worshipped. Before entering India from central Asia, they had their own native deity sky deity, Dyaus; but in India this deity, Dyaus, became less important to them and instead they gave high priority to his son, Indra, because he was responsible for monsoon rains which they considered essential for their farming. This historical event of the Aryan migrations clearly implies that based on a

³⁵ R.H. Whitbeck, The Influence of Geographical Environment upon Religious Beliefs, *Geographical Review* 5, (4) (1918): 318.

changing geographical environment a supreme deity may be replaced by a subordinate deity.³⁶

Whitebeck mentions A. S. Murray's comments as a reference to the beliefs of early Indian people whereas Murray states: "In a land with the climate conditions of India and among agricultural people, it was but natural that the god whose fertilizing showers brought the corn and vine to maturity should be regarded as the greatest of all".³⁷ In the view of Edward Wasburn Hopkins, environmental conditions were so essential for the development of religious beliefs and practices as he claims that Hindu theology was originated from climatic environment.³⁸ C. F. Keary mentions that it is not only the case for Hindu people, but also the same case for Persian, Greek, Roman, Teutonic and Celtic people who are believed to have discovered their religious creeds from the different objects of natural phenomena. Furthermore, he states: "Wherever we turn in time or in space to the earliest and simplest religions of the world, we find them dealing with nearly the same object facts in nearly the same subjective fashion, the differences being due to local and temporal causes".³⁹

Ideas of the afterlife, such as heaven and hell, are also shaped in accordance with geographical locality, local culture and people's desires. From Whitebeck's view it is evident that for the people of very cold climates heavens are thought to be a place of warmth and hell to be a place of cold. As an example, he mentions:

"... in Norse mythology, heaven was a place of warmth and hell a place of cold and mist; but in the religions of Palestine and Arabia, hell is a place of heat—of eternal fire. To the Arab of the desert, paradise was dreamed of as an oasis, or a garden, always having flowing water, shade trees, and fruit."⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., 321-323.

³⁷ R.H. Whitbeck, *The Influence of Geographical Environment upon Religious Beliefs*, *Geographical Review*, 5(4), (1918): 323.

³⁸ Ibid., 323.

³⁹ Ibid., 323-324.

⁴⁰ R.H. Whitbeck, *The Influence of Geographical Environment upon Religious Beliefs*, *Geographical Review*, 5(4), (1918): 320.

Thus, it becomes clear that the environment in which people feel comfort they attribute the same conditions with the place of eternal reward in the next world. In contrast, they view the opposite conditions with the place of eternal punishment. Whitbeck continues to mention that if the religious scriptures like the Bible, the Quran, the Vedas, etc. would be there in the northern hemisphere; then the description of heaven and hell of those scriptures might be different.⁴¹ So, in Whitebeck's view, religious doctrines are seemingly influenced by surrounding environment and geographical locations. If his interpretation is accepted, it can be argued that manifestation of the absolute truth, different religions commonly share, varies from place to place on the basis of human understandings, which is also relatively shaped by encompassing unavoidable circumstances.

Now it is quite clear that each environmental factor based on geographical location has acted to generate its own distinctive model of thought and philosophy of life, and thus, finally to shape religious beliefs and rituals accordingly. Religious beliefs and practices were not only influenced by the local geographical environment but reflected the dominant characteristics of the surrounding environment. Popular mythologies in the realm of ancient religions are not but the personification of natural forces and their phenomena.⁴² Here Keary's remarks seem relevant:

“...the creed of a people is always greatly dependent upon their position on this earth, upon the scenery amid which their life is passed and the natural phenomena to which they become habituated; that the religion of men who live in woods will not be the same as that of the dwellers in wide, open plains; nor the creed of those who live under an inclement sky, the sport of storms and floods, the same as the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 316-324.

religion of men who pass their lives in sunshine and calm air”⁴³.

Thus, religions alongside spiritual thoughts and feelings are associated with nature and geographical environment. In the course of time, religions and spirituality are being modified by the influence of nature and the environment.

Conclusion

Nature not only provides support for existence but also shapes and dominates human thoughts and actions, from which religious beliefs and practices are not exception. We, human beings, are part and parcel of natural world. Our lives completely depend on nature; so, let us rethink about the essential value of nature. This study will inspire readers to modify their present perceptions and actions to keep natural world safe and sustainable, otherwise not only human existence but the whole living planet will proceed for destruction. Both in the biblical and Quranic descriptions, nature is seen as the manifestation of God’s power, wisdom, and sign. Nature is regarded sacred by religious scholars like Cobb and Nasr. If the natural world is viewed as sacred, it may be easy for humans to treat with natural environment in a responsible and balanced way. So, religions have a positive role in reforming human attitudes in favor of the sustainable natural world and viable environment for living.

Acknowledgement: Author is thankful to PhD supervisor Professor Lai Pan-Chiu and co-supervisor Professor James D. Frankel of Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for their valued inputs in formation and improvement of the paper. Author is also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their kind comments and suggestions to furnish the paper in a more scholarly way. Last but not least, the author recognizes the cooperation of editor and his assisting team in regard to publication.

⁴³ R.H. Whitbeck, The Influence of Geographical Environment upon Religious Beliefs, *Geographical Review*, 5(4), (1918): 324.

Bibliography

- Cobb, John B. Jr. *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*. California: Bruce/Beverly Hills, 1972.
- Crosby, Donald A. *A Religion of Nature*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Fern, Richard L. *Nature, God and Humanity: Envisioning an Ethics of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Gilkey, Langdon. *Nature, Reality and the Sacred*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Imām Muslim, Abū al-Ḥusayn ‘Asākir al-Dīn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj ibn Muslim al-Qushayrī an-Naysābūrī. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. trans. by Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, Riyadh: Darussalam, 2009.
- Linda, De Camp. *The Role of Nature in Unamuno’s Quest to maintain Faith*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1997.
- McGrath, Alister. *The Reenchantment of Nature*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2002.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*. London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1968/1976.
- Omar, Spahic. *The Beauty of Allah’s Creation, Islamicity*. Accessed December 2, 2016. <https://www.islamicity.org/8028/the-beauty-of-allahs-creation/>.
- Saheeh International. *The Quran, English Meanings Revised and Edited*. Riyadh: Al-Muntada Al-Islami Trust, 2011.
- Soper, Kate. *What is Nature? : Culture, Politics and the Non-human*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Sumer, Sheima Salam. Lessons From The Hadith ‘All Creatures Are (Like) A Family of God...’, *NewAge Islam: Mapping an Agenda for the Twenty-first Century*. Accessed September 7, 2018. [http://www.newageislam.com/islam-and-pluralism/lessons-from-the-hadith-‘all-creatures-are-\[like\]-a-family-of-god...’/d/109194](http://www.newageislam.com/islam-and-pluralism/lessons-from-the-hadith-‘all-creatures-are-[like]-a-family-of-god...’/d/109194).
- The Holy Bible: New International Version. London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002.
- Whitbeck, R.H. The Influence of Geographical Environment upon Religious Beliefs. *Geographical Review* 5, (4) (1918): 316-324.