
THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE AS A TRANSNATIONAL BRIDGE ACROSS THE WORLD'S CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

*El carácter sagrado de la naturaleza como puente
transnacional entre las culturas y religiones del mundo*

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Ladies and gentlemen, steemed guests,

There is a theme that resonates deeply with the mission of the Hana and Francisco J. Ayala Center for Science, Technology and Religion: "The Sacredness of Nature as a Transnational Bridge Across the World's Cultures and Religions."

In delving into this subject, we draw inspiration from the remarkable life and legacy of Francisco Ayala, a luminary whose contributions span the realms of Biology and Genetics, Logic, and the Philosophy of Science. Francisco, a true Renaissance Man of Evolutionary Biology, navigated the intricate interplay between science and religion with grace and conviction. His work, particularly in Population and Evolutionary Genetics, not only advanced our understanding of life's intricate dance but also championed the coexistence of evolutionary theory with the spiritual domain.

Despite facing the turbulent waters of controversy surrounding the teaching of evolution, Francisco stood firm in his belief in the critical importance of recognizing the distinct yet complementary spheres of science and religion. His dedication to this cause was unparalleled, a testament to his profound commitment to fostering dialogue and understanding.

In the twilight of his brilliant career, Francisco, alongside his beloved wife Hana, bestowed upon us the Comillas Center for Research on Science, Technology, and Religion—a beacon of interdisciplinary exploration and a symbol of their shared passions. Their generosity and vision have enriched our academic pursuits and underscored the enduring significance of bridging diverse realms of thought.

I wish to embark with you on a reflection through the concept of the “Sacredness of Nature,” a topic that lies at the heart of contemporary environmental debate and holds critical relevance in the Anthropocene—the epoch marking humanity’s indelible impact on the very fabric of planet Earth, our common home.

The reverence for nature, a thread woven into the fabric of most faith traditions and echoed in the voices of poets, modern environmental movements, and even scientists, stands as a testament to our collective yearning for connection with the world around us.

It is this shared reverence that I propose can act as a transcultural bridge, uniting us across boundaries in a common cause: the protection of our precious planet, a cause fervently supported by Francisco and Hana.

1. **THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE, SYMBOLISM, AND INTERCONNECTEDNESS**

As we journey together through the exploration of the world, we find ourselves united by a profound appreciation of nature—a force that transcends geographical boundaries, cultural differences, and the diverse ways in which we understand our existence. Nature, in its boundless beauty and complexity, speaks a universal language that resonates with each of us, drawing us closer not only to one another but to the very essence of life itself.

In the heart of many traditions, we encounter the powerful concept of interconnectedness—a recognition that we are not detached observers of the natural world, but integral components of a vast web of life. This web is a source of meaning, a canvas on which the story of existence is etched. From the Buddhist principle of inter-being to the Christian sacramentality of creation, these perspectives offer us a lens through which we can view our deep embeddedness within nature and our profound connection to both human and non-human entities.

This interconnectedness serves as a bridge—a form of *religio* or re-connection—that emphasizes our shared vision and collective responsibility towards the Earth. It also beckons us to embrace a symbiotic relationship with the natural world, one that honors the sacredness imbued in the amazing biodiversity around us.

In this realm, we also encounter the *symbolic*—the powerful meanings attributed to elements of nature across different cultures and religions. The tree of life, the purifying power of water, or the guidance of spirit animals are but a few examples of how natural elements become imbued with profound significance.

These natural symbols become the icon of world religions, from the Islamic moon to the Christian cross as the tree of life and the Hindu Goddess river Ganges and to the Jewish star of David. Natural symbols serve as touchstones of our shared humanity and our intrinsic bond with the environment. The term “symbol” itself, evolving from a formal summary of religious belief to represent connections between the sacred, moral, and intellectual realms, invites us to reflect on the essence of unity. In a world where the fabric of nature is being torn apart, where ecosystems are degraded and fragmented, the symbolic calls us to action—to unite, to heal, to restore.

Ecology, the science of relationships, with its holistic vision and revelatory character, underscores the interconnectedness of life. It teaches us about the flow of energy and the intricate trophic chains that sustain ecosystems. Restoration ecology, in particular, emerges as a testament to our ability to mend, to reweave the tapestry of life, to put together what has been torn asunder. In this particular sense, ecology emerges as a symbolic science.

In this critical moment, as we stand at the crossroads of environmental crisis and hope, ecological thinking transcends the boundaries between the secular and the sacred. It becomes a symbol of a moral order that beckons us to preservation, to stewardship, to a reverence for life in all its forms.

2. THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE, AWE, AND SHARED REVERENCE

Across the vast expanse of cultures and religions that enrich our world, there lies a common thread—a profound reverence for nature. This awe-inspiring dimension of our existence is often enveloped in mystery, regarded as sacred, or even seen as a direct manifestation of the divine. It is a universal sentiment

that transcends the boundaries of belief systems, inviting us into a shared space of wonder and respect.

Recent research has shown that scientists, even those without religious affiliations, frequently encounter moments of awe and profound aesthetic appreciation within their explorations. This sense of wonder is not confined to the realm of spiritual or religious experience; it reflects the intrinsic beauty and complexity of the natural world that captivates us all.

Both scientists and theologians are driven by a deep-seated curiosity, a desire to unravel the mysteries of the universe. American sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund has observed that this shared virtue of curiosity, alongside a commitment to truth, lays the groundwork for meaningful dialogues between science and religion. Humility, too, plays a key role, allowing us to recognize the limits of our understanding and remain open to new perspectives and insights. The late British physicist Tom McLeish once reminded us that science—or “natural philosophy,” as it was originally known in its nascent days—embodies “the love of wisdom of natural things.” He posited that science, in its purest form, is a deeply spiritual pursuit.

Nature, therefore, stands at the crossroads of science and religion, serving as a fertile ground for dialogue and collaboration. It is here, in our shared reverence for nature, that we find a powerful basis for unity and cooperation. The contemporary environmental movement provides again a clear example of this intersection. Rooted in scientific evidence, environmentalism has evolved into a movement that bears many hallmarks of religious devotion, characterized by shared beliefs, rituals, moral codes, and a sense of community. Though it may not conform to traditional definitions of religion, environmentalism embodies a quasi-religious commitment to the sanctity of nature.

Traditional ecological knowledge represents another vital meeting point between science and spirituality. Indigenous communities, with their deep-seated reverence for the land and its sacred sites, offer invaluable insights that enrich our scientific understanding and ethical considerations. Their land-honoring ceremonies and rituals often underscore a holistic approach to conservation, one that respects the land, its spirits, and the complex web of life it sustains.

In our own times, we witness an increasing number of secular practices that seek to reconnect with nature—be it through meditation in serene landscapes, pilgrimages through breathtaking scenery, or rituals that draw upon the elemental forces of nature. These practices, along with the creation of

sacred landscapes such as the revitalized Camino de Santiago here in Spain, reveal a deep-seated human desire to forge a spiritual connection with the natural world. Sacred Natural Sites (SNS), where aesthetics, ethics, and spirituality converge, stand as beacons of this interconnectedness. They remind us that our appreciation for nature, in all its beauty and complexity, is a powerful force that can unite us across diverse cultural and religious landscapes.

Let us embrace this awe and shared reverence for nature. Let it be the foundation upon which we build a future marked by collaboration, understanding, and a deep, enduring commitment to the Earth we all call home.

3. THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE, ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS, AND LEGAL PROTECTION

As we delve deeper into the essence of our connection with the natural world, we encounter a concept that, while ancient, is ever more relevant in today's environmental discourse: the sacredness of nature. This notion, transcending the boundaries of religion, finds resonance even in secular terms, serving as a bridge between the realms of religion, ethics, and law. In the evolving landscape of environmental thought, terms deeply rooted in religious tradition—such as *dignity*, *intrinsic worth*, and *rights*—are being reimagined. Environmental ethicists are expanding our moral horizons, applying these concepts in novel ways to forge a deeper understanding of our relationship with the Earth, and to advocate for the moral and legal recognition of animals, plants, and ecosystems.

The assertion that nature, in its myriad forms—from keystone species to entire ecosystems—possesses a form of dignity, challenges the anthropocentric view that has long dominated our ethical considerations. This dignity, often paralleled with the sacred essence of life, is seen in many religious traditions as stemming from a divine connection. It is a call for reverence and protection, recognizing the value of the natural world as a source, as something far beyond a mere re-source for human consumption.

Building on the foundation of dignity, the concept of intrinsic worth advocates for the preservation of nature for its own sake, independent of its utility to us. This principle resonates with the belief in a sacred dimension that pervades all of existence, imbuing every creature and ecosystem with an inherent value that demands our respect and ethical engagement.

In an unprecedented legal evolution, scholars and philosophers argue for extending rights to natural entities—rivers, forests, species—mirroring those traditionally reserved for humans. This legal recognition, from granting personhood to rivers to protecting sacred lands, embodies a profound acknowledgment of nature's status, enshrining our duty to protect it within both legal and ethical frameworks. Consider the groundbreaking cases from around the globe: Australia's protection of indigenous sacred lands, Benin's legal recognition of community sacred groves, the Sacred Places Protection project in the US, New Zealand's acknowledgment of *wāhi tapu*, or the Ganges River's designation as a living entity in India. Each of these examples underscores the potential of legal frameworks to honor and safeguard the sacredness of nature.

Yet, we must tread carefully. The sanctity of nature, while a powerful motivator for conservation, is a double-edged sword. There are instances where the perception of sacredness may lead to unintended consequences, such as environmental degradation through mass religious tourism or diminished awareness of ecological risks. The sacredness of nature offers us a profound foundation upon which to build our environmental ethics. It calls us to recognize the intrinsic value of the Earth, the deep interconnectedness of all life, and the moral imperative to act as responsible stewards.

4. **THE SACREDNESS OF NATURE, INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE**

As we approach the culmination of our exploration into the sacredness of nature, I want to add a final reflection: the reverence we hold for the natural world is not just a pathway to environmental stewardship and legal action to protect nature, but also an opportunity for interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange. The care of our common home offers a platform for diverse religious backgrounds to converge in a shared celebration and a shared responsibility.

In recognizing the intrinsic value and dignity that nature commands across different cultures, we lay the groundwork for mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration. This shared ethos can illuminate common ethical principles—*stewardship*, *compassion*, *reverence for life*—that transcend political and ideological divides, fostering a sense of global community bound by a common cause.

In an era marked by polarization and conflict, the value of nature emerges as a unifying force, compelling us to look beyond our differences and join hands in the vital work of environmental conservation. Together, we can protect endangered species, conserve vital ecosystems, and combat the looming threat of climate change. By mobilizing interfaith and intercultural coalitions, we amplify our collective impact, leveraging the strength of our diversity to champion the cause of sustainability.

Furthermore, the spiritual dimension of environmental protection offers a profound motivation that transcends mere economic or utilitarian considerations. In a world where the vast majority identify with a religious tradition, spiritual imperatives can galvanize communities towards embracing sustainable practices and advocating for policies that protect our shared home. Allow me to highlight three pioneering initiatives that embody this spirit of unity and action:

The World Resources Institute's "Faith and Sustainability Initiative" exemplifies how the sacredness of nature can catalyze interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and collective environmental action. By tapping into the deeply held values of faith communities worldwide, this initiative demonstrates the pivotal role of religious and spiritual groups in driving sustainability efforts.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), with its unparalleled commitment to the preservation of the natural world, actively engages faith-based organizations in its conservation endeavors. The IUCN Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas stands as a testament to the synergy between conservation science, cultural heritage, and spiritual values, fostering a holistic approach to sustainable development.

Finally, *Pangea World*, an initiative sponsored by Hana Ayala, not only champions the integration of scientific research and biodiversity conservation but also acknowledges the critical role of cultural and spiritual perspectives in achieving sustainable development. This holistic view underscores the importance of embracing both scientific, economic, and spiritual insights in our quest to protect natural habitats and promote the well-being of communities around the globe.

In delving into how various faith traditions engage with nature, we unlock invaluable insights that can shape sustainable practices and inform environmental policy. This collective reverence for our planet transcends boundaries, offering a potent antidote to the divisiveness that characterizes much of our contemporary discourse.

5. CONCLUSION

As we stand at the crossroads of hyperglobalization, mass migration, technological disruption, and environmental degradation, our journey can shed some light: our shared reverence for the natural world is a powerful catalyst for change, transcending the boundaries of science, religion, ethics, and law.

We began by exploring the universal language of nature's sacredness, a concept that transcends geographical boundaries and cultural differences, uniting us in our awe and reverence for the natural world. This shared appreciation lays the foundation for meaningful dialogues between science and spirituality, fostering a deeper understanding of our place within the web of life.

We delved into the ethical dimensions of environmental protection, reimagining traditional concepts like dignity, intrinsic worth, and rights in the context of nature conservation. This reevaluation challenges us to expand our moral boundaries and embrace a more inclusive ethic that recognizes the inherent value of all beings and ecosystems.

Through the lens of interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange, we witnessed the unifying power of the sacredness of nature. This shared value serves as a bridge, bringing together individuals from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds in a collective effort to protect our planet. It inspires us to leverage our collective resources and influence, promoting meaningful action in the face of environmental challenges.

In closing, the sacredness of nature is not merely an abstract concept but a call to action. It beckons us to unite in our diversity, to weave together the threads of scientific inquiry, spiritual wisdom, ethical consideration, and legal protection into a cohesive strategy for environmental stewardship. By honoring the sacredness of the natural world, we affirm our commitment to preserving its beauty and vitality for future generations.

As we move forward, let us carry with us the lessons learned from the interconnectedness of all life, the intrinsic value of nature, and the power of shared reverence. Let these principles guide our actions as we strive to protect our precious planet for generations to come.

In closing, I extend my deepest gratitude to you all for being here today. May the collaborative spirit fostered by the Hana and Francisco J. Ayala Comillas Center for Research on Science, Technology, and Religion inspire us to continue this vital work, united in our diversity and strengthened by our common cause.