

## **Religious Ecologism, A comparative Review of Abrahamian, East Asian and Ancient Iranian Religious traditions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Environmental problems are among the most critical issues in the modern age. Alarms for the destruction of the earth have sparked widespread responses from political and social systems; extensive environmental activities have revealed that environmental protection is not achievable through purely economic, technical, political, or social solutions, but ethical and metaphysical approaches must supplement the movement. In effect, the attempt to protect the environment needs a “metaphysical reconstruction”, as technical, economical, and political methods are not sufficient for provisioning a constructive environmental approach. The comparative study of religions provides the framework for this research in examining the relationship between humans and her/his natural environment from a religious viewpoint. Through the comparative analysis of conceptual, ethical, behavioural, and paradigmatic principles and statements of religions, the formative role of religions on the relationship between humans and the environment is argued and analysed. According to the results, in seismic religions, human has the right to manipulate nature, since he is

the superior creature. In East Asian religions and religious beliefs of Ancient Iran, human beings are among other creatures and not allowed to interfere in their ecosystem. In East Asian religions, the right of nature is superior to the right of humans.

*Keywords:* Ecologism, religious environmentalism, spiritual ecology, seismic religions, Zoroastrianism

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## INTRODUCTION

Environmental problems are one of the most critical issues in the modern age. For almost a century, scientists have been arguing about the detriments of human actions on the environment (Balint et al., 2011). Alarms for the destruction of the earth have sparked responses by political and social systems (Karami, 2016). In this regard, environmental movements encourage society and the social system to pay attention to the environment by either protecting the environment, pressuring governments for accounting environmental issues in policy-making, and, eventually, eliminating palpable human-induced environmental crises from the disaster stage (Dryzek et al., 2014; Lipschutz & McKendry, 2011).

Extensive environmental activities have revealed that environmental protection is not achievable through purely economic, technical, political, or social solutions, but ethical and metaphysical approaches are required to advance the cause (Brown, 2013). The common strategies of verbal and moral recommendations or environmentally-friendly behaviour patterns are not enough to deal with the issue and consciousness about environmental problems does not automatically lead to protective solutions. Protective behaviour towards the environment should be safeguarded by a comprehensive system of attitudes, behaviours, and ethics which leads to environmentalism<sup>1</sup> in which people may

<sup>1</sup> Environmentalism is a political and ethical movement that seeks to improve and protect the quality of the natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities; through the adoption of forms of political, economic,

have environmental concerns may realise nature's rights or respect nature in some aspect; however, at a macro level, the real linkage constructed between the human and natural world has proved destructive, devastating, and collapsing.

To redeem the disadvantage, some environmental debates have highlighted the importance of political thought which is concerned in political ecology<sup>2</sup> debate. Political ecology is the study of the relationships between political, economic and social factors with environmental issues and changes.

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and social organisation that are thought to be necessary for, or at least conducive to, the benign treatment of the environment by humans; and through a reassessment of humanity's relationship with nature. In numerous ways, environmentalism claims that living things, other than humans, and the natural environment, as a whole, are deserving of consideration in reasoning about the morality of political, economic, and social policies (Elliott, 2019). Environmentalism (or environmental rights) is also a broad philosophy, ideology, and social movement regarding concerns for environmental protection and improvement of the health of the environment, particularly as the measure for this health seeks to incorporate the impact of changes to the environment on humans, animals, plants, and non-living matter.

<sup>2</sup> The term "political ecology" is a generous one that embraces a range of definitions. A review of the term from its early use (first used to describe this kind of work by Wolf (1972) to its most recent manifestations shows important differences in emphasis. Some definitions stress political economy, while others point to more formal political institutions; some stress environmental change, while others emphasise narratives or stories about that change. Even so, there seems to be a set of common elements. The many definitions together suggest that political ecology represents an explicit alternative to "apolitical" ecology, that it works from a common set of assumptions, and that it employs a reasonably consistent mode of explanation (DeCenzo, 2012).

According to this approach, the realisation of environmental protection is subject to the construction of a modest, humble, non-dominant, and non-destructive relationship between “human” with “nature”. In this regard, a novel form of relationship between humans and nature should be considered, which is addressed through ecologism, and distinct from environmentalism<sup>3</sup>. Ecologism, or green political theory, is generally considered to be an ideological position that advocates a transformation in human-nature relations, challenges anthropocentric values, emphasizes respect for natural limits, and calls for significant social and economic change. However, the term has a range of divergent definitions and can encompass a spectrum of ideas.

This approach centralises the issue of environmental protection as the main subject of politics. Accordingly, the establishment of a balanced relationship between humans and the environment is reachable exclusively through an appropriate political system (Dobson, 2007). But it represents just some facets of reality. Indicating in some research, religious environmental movements are critically important in motivating people to react to climate change and environmental issues (Kearns, 2014).

The religious beliefs rooted in the unconscious mind of societies are key parameters in the construction of

ecological behaviour. From one perspective, shedding semantic light over society, environmental themes of religions bring us to the idea that, aside from green political thought, religious beliefs also influence environmental behaviours. In this regard, attempts to protect the environment and restore the balance and sustainability to the planet possibly may need a “metaphysical reconstruction” as technical, economical, and political solutions are not sufficient for constructing a positive environmental approach (Karami, 2011).

Focused on religion, the development of an original approach for responsible environmentalism and a new set of ecological strategies should be put on the agenda and even deep changes in economic, political, and technological methods are not sufficient to control environmental degradation and pollution. Attitudes about the relationship between humans and nature are socially and culturally constructed and the status of the human on the planet and in the world, along with other beings and with nature, is influenced by religious beliefs, among other factors. Here, we come to the fundamental role of ethical and spiritual infrastructures in the implementation of comprehensive and universal policies for sustainable development-oriented toward environmental preservation.

In this study, through a comparative examination of religions, the relationship between humans and her/his natural environment is examined from the viewpoint of religion. The main question of the study is *how religion affects environmental attitudes*

<sup>3</sup> While environmentalism focuses more on the environmental and nature-related aspects of green ideology and politics, ecologism combines the ideology of social ecology and environmentalism (DeCenzo, 2012).

*and environmental behaviours and how could we differentiate the environmental approaches of different religions.*

## **METHOD**

This study adopted an ecological-anthropological approach and sought to understand how religion affects environmentalism. The research was conducted by hermeneutical phenomenological method, using a text-based technique, and comparative study.

Hermeneutic phenomenology which was introduced by Heidegger (1962) is a kind of interpretation, focused on the historical meaning of experience and its dense effects on humans and emphasizes the meaning which is extracted from the interpretive interaction among the historical texts and its reader. The interpretation Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Gadamer considers is an evolving process of reading, thinking, understanding and interpreting “which is not totally objective, separate or value-free from the user. The focus of this study is “religious texts on environmental issues” and “the readers’ interpretations about these texts” as they understand it and then flow these narratives and believes into their lives. In this study, “religious texts on environmental issues” and “the readers’ interpretations about these texts” as they understand it are basic elements of the study which leads to employing hermeneutic phenomenological method.

In this comparative study, the environmental orientations of religions had been extracted and analysed, based

on the written religious texts of three discussed groups: 1) Semitic religions (Islam, Christianity, and Jews), 2) East Asian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), and 3) religions and religious beliefs of ancient Iran (Zoroastrians). The holy books of discussed religions (Quran, Old Testament, Genesis, Avesta), as well as the analytical religious textbooks, were the main written texts for analysis.

The holy scripts of argued religions had been studied and discussed in two levels: first, practices which could be addressed as environmental behaviours, and second, religious attitudes that encourage environmentalism and determine the relationship between humans and nature as an indicator of religiosity. To present a clear analytical argument, some theoretical concepts and a brief typology of mentioned religions follow this section.

Along with these, the analytical interpretations of the environmental approach of these religions, which have been written by some theologians and religious experts, were considered. Given this, the verses of mentioned holy books had been reviewed to address the environmental approaches of these religions.

Through the comparative analysis of conceptual, ethical, behavioural, and paradigmatic principles and statements of each religion, the role of religions on the relationship between humans and her/his natural environment was argued and analysed. A comparative study was conducted to understand:

- How do religions' approaches affect the relationship between humans and nature?
  - How is the relationship between humans and the environment constructed?
- and,
- How does human perception about her/his place in the world (in a religious approach) affect her/his exposure to nature and the environment?

### **Religion, Environment, and Ecology<sup>4</sup>**

Religions affect social life by influencing two spheres: "behaviours" and "attitudes". Religion is the cultural inspiration of most modern societies and human behaviours in the realm of social life are constructed based on religious beliefs. Religious beliefs, which are introduced, advised, and recommended in the form of religious statements, religious practices, religious obligations, ethics or moral propositions, obviously or implicitly, motivate and determine behaviors.

Religious attitudes affect people's observations and determine their behaviours. This can include appreciation and compassion and, in the words of William James, a sense that "great and

<sup>4</sup> Ecology is the branch of biology which studies the interactions among organisms and their environment. Objects of study include interactions of organisms with each other and with abiotic components of their environment. Ecology is not synonymous with environmentalism, natural history, or environmental science. It overlaps with the closely related sciences of evolutionary biology, genetics, and ethology. An important focus for ecologists is to improve the understanding of how biodiversity affects ecological function.

wondrous things are in the air" (James, 1987). Addressing the humans' status in the world is one of the fundamental attributes of religions which recommends the human how to behave in the face of nature. Religion lights the way in which human relates himself to nature in two levels: i) practices and ii) attitudes. Having intervened religion in the relationship between human and nature, it is worth mentioning that this ecological link is influenced by religious practices (behaviours and practices recommended to bring equilibrium to the relationship with nature) as well as religious attitudes (which represents how the position of the human in nature is represented by religion).

Religions, on the one hand, introduce special codes of conduct regards with the environment, and, on the other hand, prescribe how humans behave in the world and how they conduct their manner with nature. Religion is an important interfering factor to understand the relationship between human and nature, for several reasons:

1. Religion is a prominent issue of human society and is one of the main components of cultures. Religion is not summed up in religious rites; as the history of many centuries of religion's presence in human civilisation evidence, not only religious rituals but also religious attitudes shape the identical dimension of human social life. There is no society without religion, and even in primitive societies, religion is an essential cultural element that influences attitudes and behaviours.

2. Prophecies and religious beliefs exist in the unconscious memory of societies and give them social and cultural content. Therefore, even in a social system with less attention to religious rituals, religion is a key factor in shaping behaviours and attitudes.
  3. Religious beliefs, whether in form of religious or moral propositions, or in the form of their ecological approach, establish the relationship between human and environment, determine how to view nature, how to communicate with it, how to use it, and, in general, where human is located as part of the nature.
  4. Political and economic institutions are not sufficient to establish a balanced relationship between humans and nature. The institution of religion has a powerful influence in constructing behaviours towards the environment.
  5. Environmental ethics, which is one of the major environmental protection strategies, guides us to focus on religion as a protective solution.
- identical, and cultural status in societies, is one of the important identical societal layers which somehow determine the socio-cultural identity of the Iranian society.
1. Semitic or Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are an important feature of the cultural and social context of Iran; the cultural-religious identity of a society is constructed through the meaning system of these religions. Being located in the Middle East -the origin of Abrahamic religions- makes these religions key to shaping the cultural identity of the society. The long history of Abrahamic religions in the region, and the cultural dominance of Abrahamic religions globally and in Iran, make the identity given by these religions a crucial component in any study of religion.
  2. Religions of ancient Iran form the historical identity of Iranians. The ancient Iranian religions, in addition to being part of Iranian society, are part of the historical identity of the Iranian community due to civilizational attachments of identity. Religions of ancient Iran are still represented in some parts of society and reflect an important part of the semantic religious identity of Iranians.
  3. East Asian religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, are considered “religions in the shade”

### **Typology of Religions**

To understand the ecological approach of religions and to understand how the relationship between humans and nature is constructed, a comparative study has been done in three groups of religions. Each of these religions, based on their historical,

in the semantic system societal identity of Iranians and play a key role in Iran as an alternative religion. We name it “religion in the shade” because it has shadowed religious-Islamic attitudes in Iranian society and has affected people’s perception of religiosity both historically and contemporarily. The internalisation of religion and religious spirituality instead of giving up the official religious rites, plus the interpretation of religion based on internal perceptions, instead of measuring religiosity based on religious rituals as the main component of Eastern religions, have made these religions the “religion in the shadow” in Iranian society.

Historically, the presence of believers from East Asian religions in the cultural, semantic, and social context of the Iranian community during the Mongol era led to the formation of a cultural-semantic identity in the Iranian community<sup>5</sup>. East Asian religions, although not recognised as an official religion in Iranian society, have left their influence on the semantic context of the community.

These religions, and the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere caused by them, have also influenced the content of some religious sects<sup>6</sup> and have brought the semantic system

<sup>5</sup> Some researchers believe that because of similarities between East Asian religions and Iranian sects, like Sufism, the Mongols accepted Islam as their formal religion (Ziaei, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Sufism

of these religious sects closer to the semantic system of East Asian religions (Ziaei, 2016). At the same time, in the contemporary life of Iranian society, the orientation towards East Asian religions can be observed in the form of new religious movements (the new mysticism, for example).

### Conceptual Considerations

The ecological approach of the religions introduced in the previous section are analysed based on two axes:

1. Environmental behaviour codes that are recommended by religions and observe environmental behaviours;
2. The definition of the status of the human in the universe based on these religions.

Therefore, religious ecologism is constructed based on two components and two main questions:

- What are the recommended environmental behaviours in these religions?
- What is the status of the human in the universe based on these religions?

Environmentalism in religions, and the status of the human in the world (determines how people are related to the environment), represents spiritual ecology<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Spiritual ecology is an emerging field in religion, conservation, and academia, recognizing that there is a spiritual facet to all issues related to conservation, environmentalism, and earth stewardship. Proponents of Spiritual Ecology assert a need for contemporary conservation work to include spiritual elements and for contemporary religion and spirituality to include awareness of and engagement in ecological issues (Sercey, 2007).

### **“The Place of Human in the World” Based on Concerned Religions**

Humans’ relationship with the world is determined by the role individuals assume for themselves based on their religious or ideological attitudes. Humans behave based on the criterion of their status in the world. Part of this worldview is shaped by the religious approach to human status in creation. Religions describe the position of the human in the world and teach humans what their role among other beings is and what place they occupy in relation to nature and other beings. This notion of human-nature relations is called ecology. Ecology deals with how humans relate to nature determine how this relationship plays a role in protecting nature, and at what level it is destined to destroy it.

**Semitic Religions.** In Sami religions, there are two main axes that represent the status of the human in nature:

1. belief in the superiority of human over all creatures;
2. belief in conquering dominance of human beings over nature.

In Semitic religions, the human being is superior to all creatures. This approach places human beings in a position beyond all creatures and all creatures are under human control. In the holy book of Islam, it is mentioned that: “The Lord created human, created heaven and earth and ordered the cosmic system to follow and prostrate him” (Quran 1: 34). With respect to Abrahamic religions, “All beings have been

commanded to obey human and prostrate him” (Quran 1: 30-33).

In Semitic religions, human is generated from nature (natural components), but nature intrinsically is naughty, evil, submissive, and low-value. Based on this approach, human has been promoted to the position of superior of all creatures due to the Spirit of God in him. During her/his life, he has always consisted of these two natural and spiritual parts; her/his natural part is her/his submissive and low-value part in the human biological system. This approach considers nature to be despicable and worthless.

In Christianity, also, human is superior to nature and all creatures. Among the creatures, it is only humans who are created like God, while the rest are inferior to him. In Christianity, mankind is also promoted to the status of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, it is said that human is a creature created by God and like Him. The divine form of human is not transversal, but her/his intrinsic features. Verse 1, which is very important in understanding the Christian view of the nature of mankind and the status of the human in nature, reads, “human is created in the image of God and in the likeness of him”; even after sinning, the image of God in her/his identity remains.

In Judaism, God congratulates himself for the creation of the new existence, and in Genesis (1: 27) it is stated that God has created humans like himself. In some respects, humans are superior to animals and animals are superior to plants and plants are

superior to idle things. Therefore, the human is the superior of all the lower creatures and beings, has the priority over them, is created in the form of God (Genesis 1: 26-27), and he is commanded to fill the earth, dominate it, and rule all creatures (Ibid).

Semitic religions recognise nature under human domination. While interpreting verses 32-34 of Ibrahim Sura, referring to the fact that the word “domination” is repeated four times, it is clearly stated that all beings are under human domination. In Islam, human’s relationship with nature is a captive/dominative relationship (Amoli, 2008).

#### **Ancient Iran Religions (Zoroastrianism).**

To understand the status of the human in nature in the Zoroastrian tradition, it should be noticed that the attitude of Zarathustra to the universe is based on the adherence to the Asha laws<sup>8</sup>. According to Asha Law, “Great Lord of Life and Wisdom” has created the world based on a normative principle that governs all beings and creatures. This norm and organised rule is named Asha by Zarathustra. The steadfastness of Asha on the world reflects the will of the Great Lord. So far, this law is similar to the Abrahamic religions, who believe that the world is deployed based on divine order and tradition. However, the difference between Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic religions

begins when Zoroastrianism declares that human must coexist with this cosmological norm.

The law of Asha is the coordinating force of the universe and humans must be coordinated with it. According to the law of Asha, a human must coordinate nature, not dominate it. Given that these Iranian religions have emerged in a historical period when natural resources were abundant, religious texts of ancient Iranian religions have not given any mention of the constraints on natural resources and consumption; rather, they have recommended controlled consumption.

In religions and beliefs of ancient Iran, nature is scared but the approach to plants and animals is neither self-possessive nor worshipful; therefore, human beings can consider their safety and well-being without looking after other lesser creatures. The infinite praise of the elements of nature in the religions and beliefs of ancient Iran leads to a balanced life of a human with nature. Despite respect for other organisms, believers can eliminate them if they harm human beings. For this reason, in the Zoroastrian religion, the killing of insects that are detrimental to human comfort is not forbidden and is even promoted.

The exploitation of land and nature is also a reprehensible act. In exploiting nature, humans have balanced privileges with other creatures. In ancient Iranian belief, an environmental perspective is based on the inherent value of nature, not the interests of humanity. Although this intrinsic value

<sup>8</sup> Asha (/ˈɑːʃə/; aša) is the Avestan language term for a concept of cardinal importance to Zoroastrian theology and doctrine. In the moral sphere, aša/arta represents what has been called “the decisive confessional concept of Zoroastrianism” (Duchesne-Guillemin, 1963; Lommel, 2013).

is not emphasised, respect for nature in the religions and beliefs of ancient Iran is not due to the risk of human consumption.

**East Asian Religions.** In Upanishads, there is a narrative that likens human beings to trees. In Upanishads, like other religious texts of East Asian religions, many symbols of nature are introduced, However, what matters about them is not the abundance of narratives, but that these religions recognise human as a partner of nature, and, in some cases, consider human as equivalent to it. In Eastern religions, nature is beyond human, and human beings have no right to interfere in it.

East Asian religions are manifold and vary from “admission” to the “absolute worship of nature”. Here, nature and other beings are promoted to the stage of worship and human status is lower than other beings. According to this view, to protect nature and life on the planet, this is human, who must be humble towards nature and should give up the domination of living beings.

Due to the humble position of human versus nature, human exploitation of nature is very cautious, reliant on extreme avoidance of natural resources, and limited to minimal consumption. In East Asian religions, nature is built on an integrated balance. A human is only a small part of this equilibrium, and without it, the balance of nature is not interrupted. It is human exploitation of nature that disturbs this balance. It's not nature that prostrates in front of a human, but the other way around. The extent of this humility and submission

in front of nature can be seen when humans are absolutely surrendered to animals (such as in India, where all animals are sanctified). This is absolute surrender to the extent that even if human beings are harmed by other organisms, they have no right to harm them, even if on the defensive.

### **Environmentalism in Religions (According to Religious Behaviours)**

Religious ethics and religious propositions demand followers to perform religiously accepted behaviours. Religions advise their followers to maintain a particular lifestyle in the form of moral propositions or codes of conduct. Social affairs and the lives of followers are managed by religions as well as the way people behave in social life. In this way, religions have a set of ethical propositions and codes of conduct that advise followers to protect the environment. These codes of conduct and moral propositions can be considered as criteria for environmentalism in religions.

**Religious Environmental Behaviours in Semitic / Abrahamic Religions.** In Semitic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), many recommendations have been made regarding environmental protection, respect for natural rights, respect for animal rights, respect for plant rights, respect for nature and protecting it, and avoidance of behaviours which damage or destroy.

The approach of Abrahamic religions to protect the environment is basically ethical and is presented within the framework of ethical recommendations and value

propositions. In Abrahamic religions, recommendations to limit natural resource exploitation and encouraging environmental protection is within the scope of ethical recommendations, not compulsions.

These ethical recommendations are limited to specific areas of the environment and do not include all dimensions of the environment. In this approach, ethical recommendations for protecting the environment include areas that are useful to humans. Tolerance and kindness with animals include animals that are beneficial to humans and protecting the environment is limited to planting and preserving trees, which are beneficial to humans.

Although these issues confirm that Semitic religions emphasise environmental protection, the approach to environmental protection is sometimes so reductive that the environment is considered equivalent to ‘cleanliness’, ‘purity’, and ‘health’ (Amoli, 2013).

In short, in Semitic religions, moral propositions in the field of the environment eventually lead to human benefits and interests. Respect of nature and the environment is valuable and recommended because it is essential for human life, survival, and comfort. Therefore, the rights of nature must be respected and protected so that human life persists.

In Semitic religions, it is ‘the right of nature’ that is respected, not ‘the right to nature’. The human being as the most powerful creature gives some of nature’s rights in return for nature to provide him to meet her/his needs; however, human has no

obligation to provide “the right to nature”. Actually, ‘right to nature’ is resultant from ‘the right to the human’ (Ibid).

**Religious Environmental Behaviours in Ancient Iranian Religions.** Religious propositions on the environment in ancient religions emphasise obligatory environmental protection. In Zoroastrianism, the observance of the rights of nature goes beyond the moral advisory propositions and is obligatory; the sacredness of the four elements of water, wind, soil, and fire is inhibited, and preservation of the environment is obligatory for Zoroastrians.

Nature was worthwhile and respectful to the ancient Persians and enjoyed special respect. Iranians considered the four elements of water, fire, wind, and soil, and had hymns to praise each: *Aban Yasht*<sup>9</sup> is praise of water, *Hwarshed Yasht*<sup>10</sup> is praise of the sun, *Tishtar Yasht*<sup>11</sup> is praise of rainfall and fertility, and *Zam Yasht*<sup>12</sup> is praise of

<sup>9</sup> Aban Apas (āpas) is the Avestan language term for “the waters”, which, in its innumerable aggregate states, is represented by the Apas, the hypostases of the waters (Encyclopaedia Iranica).

<sup>10</sup> Hvarə.khshaeta (Hvarə.xšaēta, Huarə.xšaēta) is the Avestan language name of the Zoroastrian divinity of the “Radiant Sun” (Wikipedia).

<sup>11</sup> Tishtrya (Tištrya) or Roozahang is the Avestan language name of a Zoroastrian benevolent divinity associated with life-bringing rainfall and fertility. Tishtrya is Tir in Middle- and Modern Persian. As has been judged from the archaic context in which Tishtrya appears in the texts of the Avesta, the divinity/concept is almost certainly of Indo-Iranian origin (Encyclopaedia Iranica).

<sup>12</sup> Zam (Zām) is the Avestan language term for the Zoroastrian concept of “earth”, in both the sense of land and soil, and in the sense of the world. The earth is prototyped as a primordial element in Zoroastrian

what is related to “earth”, in both the sense of land and soil and in the sense of the world. Based on this latter *yasht*, the earth is prototyped as a primordial element in the Zoroastrian tradition.

In Iranian ancient religions, natural resources have been respected and of immense importance. Xenophon quotes that Xerxes, while passing through Anatolia and observing a beautiful forest, ordered the construction of a club and the deployment of soldiers to protect it. This is the world’s first preserved area. These religions introduced punishments for pollution of water and land, and Zoroastrians insisted on keeping clean the water, soil, air, and fire. Herodotus and Xenophon had quoted that Iranians did not throw anything dirty in water, and took care to keep the soil, land, and water clean (Mehr, 2008).

Xenophon, an ancient Greek historian, quoted in her/his book about Cyrus 2600 years ago, “children brought their own bread and vegetables from their homes, as well as a container for drinking water. Whenever they were thirsty, they sipped from the river’s water. Iranian children were taught in their schools to drink river’s water with their water container” (Xenophon, 1914 (370BC)). He also said that even today, it was a great sin to spit on the land or to blow nose. Iranians consider it disrespectful to the land.

An important example of nature’s appreciation by believers of ancient religions

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tradition, and represented by a minor divinity Zam, who is the hypostasis of the “earth”. The word itself is cognate to the Baltic ‘Zemes’ and Slavic ‘Zem’, both meaning the planet earth as well as soil (Wikipedia).

and beliefs is the celebration of Nature or Nowruz, which is the day of planting trees and is celebrated as the beginning of the New Year. Trees and plants were respected in the religions of ancient Iran. Whenever a baby was born, a tree was planted for his/her sake and it was called after him or her. These were the holy trees.

In ancient Persia, many trees were of noteworthy value, and, even now, there are many surviving trees all over the country that have kept their holy aspects (Sarve-e-Abarkuh<sup>13</sup> & Sarv-e-Manjil<sup>14</sup>).

### **Religious Environmental Behaviours in East Asian Religions.**

In Eastern Asian religions, an offense to nature is condemned. In these religions, behaviour towards nature is conducted by the capacity of the environment, which itself determines its needs. Environmental viewpoint is defined as “attention to the intrinsic value of nature, regardless of its interest in human.”

Consumption in East Asian religions is also condemned, imposing restrictions on human consumption. In East Asian religions, humans are not allowed to hurt animals or use other living things for their well-being. In extreme cases, even if animals hurt humans, humans do not have the right to interfere in natural processes for retribution.

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<sup>13</sup> The Cypress of Abarkuh, also called Zoroastrian Sarv is estimated to be between 4000 to 5000 years old and is a holy tree located in Abarkuh in Yazd Province of Iran. It is said it was first planted by Zoroaster.

<sup>14</sup> The Cypress of Manjil is a holy trees located in Manjil; a city in the Central District of Rudbar County, Gilan Province, Iran.

## RESULTS

When comparing the three groups of religions, the Abrahamic religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, generally considered the nature inferior to humans and because of the priority of the human allowed him/her for any interference into nature. Although in these religions, the law of nature is commanded to be respected, but these are ethical recommendations and necessarily do not lead to objective environmental behavior. A human can conquer nature and use it for his own benefit and is more precious than other beings.

In contrast, the ecological approach of East Asian religions was different. In this approach, human was served by nature and in comparison with Abrahamic religions, the priority was given to nature and other non-human beings. Also in these religions, the relation between humans and nature was not balanced and nature was preferred to humans.

According to the results of this study, in the ancient religions of Iran, there was a balance between humans and nature. Human rights could not be ignored in favor of nature and nature's right was not ignored either. Human did not have the right to conquer nature and to exploit it without regard to the rights of nature and the human right to exploit nature must not be ignored.

## DISCUSSION

The main focus of this discussion was to examine the role of religion in the relationship between humans and the

environment/nature. Based on a comparative comparison of three groups of religions, the discussion attempted to understand whether religions affected their followers' environmental approach or not. We observed that religions affected environmental behaviours in two ways: 1- Ethical religious propositions recommend conservation of the environment; 2- They promote environmental protection by determining the status of the human in nature.

Based on a comparative study, three groups of religions were examined and, by referring to the written texts of these religions and based on the two axes above, the impacts of these religions on the environmental approach of their adherents were examined to conclude the following.

All religions recommend environmental behaviours. In all religions, the rights of other living beings and nature have been revered and they acknowledge that nature is worthy and should be respected. All religions have ethical recommendations for observing the rights of nature and the environment.

In some religions, environmental recommendations are compulsory, and nature and its betterment are prioritised. In establishing the balance between humans and nature, the rights of other living beings are prioritised to the rights and will of a human.

In some religions, environmental advice is ethical, but not obligatory. Recommended environmental behaviours are purely advisory and ethical and are centred on human interest. However, in others,

environmental advice is both ethical and compulsory, and both human and natural benefits and rights should be preserved.

Sometimes, the human’s relationship with nature is an interactive and non-dominant relationship. Human is a living person like other beings and does not have the right to dominate nature. The relationship between humans and nature is based on rapprochement, cooperation, and coexistence. This is demonstrated in Table 1.

Based on this comparative study, the human-nature relationship is significant at three levels:

1. In religions of ancient Iran, the relationship between humans and nature is a balanced relationship; it is profitable and non-destructive. Both humans and nature enjoy

balanced rights, and there is not a dominant relationship between them. See Figure 1 for the illustrated information.

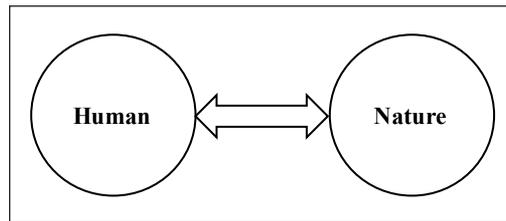


Figure 1. The relationship between religion and environment in ‘religions of ancient Iran’

2. In Semitic (Abrahamic) religions, human is superior to all creatures and nature is under the control of mankind. Human beings have the right to seize the abundant nature and exploit it for their own

Table 1  
Comparative table on a religious environmental approach

Ethical recommendations	Consumption/Resources	Relation with nature	Religion
The observance of the rights of nature is optional.	Consumption is unlimited. Resources are unlimited.	Human is the owner of Nature. Human is worshipable Human is the superior of all creators Nature is for humans Nature must be dominated.	Abrahamic Religions
The observance of the rights of nature is compulsory.	Consumption is unpleasant. Resources are limited.	Human is not the owner of Nature. Nature is worshipable. Human is one among creatures. Nature is for humans. Nature must be respected.	East Asian Religions
The observance of the rights of nature is compulsory.	Consumption is subject to resources. Resources are limited.	Human is not the owner of Nature. Nature and humans should interact. Human is one among creatures. Nature and humans co-exist. Nature must be respected.	Ancient Iranian Religions

interests. Human can invade the wilderness and dominate nature. This is reflected in Figure 2.

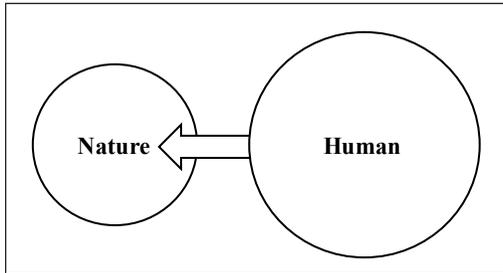


Figure 2. The relationship between religion and environment in ‘Semitic (Abrahamic) religions’

3. In East Asian religions, the relationship between humans and nature is a balanced relationship, but the balance in nature does not depend on the existence of mankind. With the removal of humans from nature, the balance does not coincide. Nature and other living things have priority over humans. Nature dominates humans, and humankind must be humble in front of it. Figure 3 demonstrates the relation between humans and nature in East Asian religions.

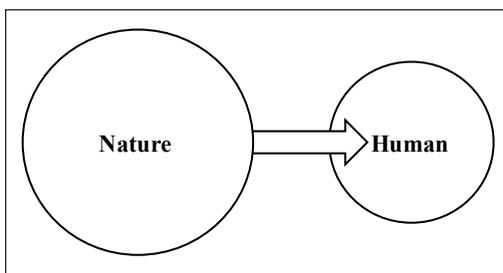


Figure 3. The relationship between religion and environment in ‘East Asian religions’

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