

The Environment

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The force of nature has the power to stir great things in people, such as a deep curiosity, fear, a sense of wonder, and an impulse to know and understand something beyond the self. This existential and experiential perception of otherness has always been present in one form or another along the human journey. The relationships and experiences of nature have taken different forms as long as humans have been on the planet with cultures, religions, languages, and sciences. This lesson looks into that connection. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Caring for the Earth

2. Dharmic Ethics

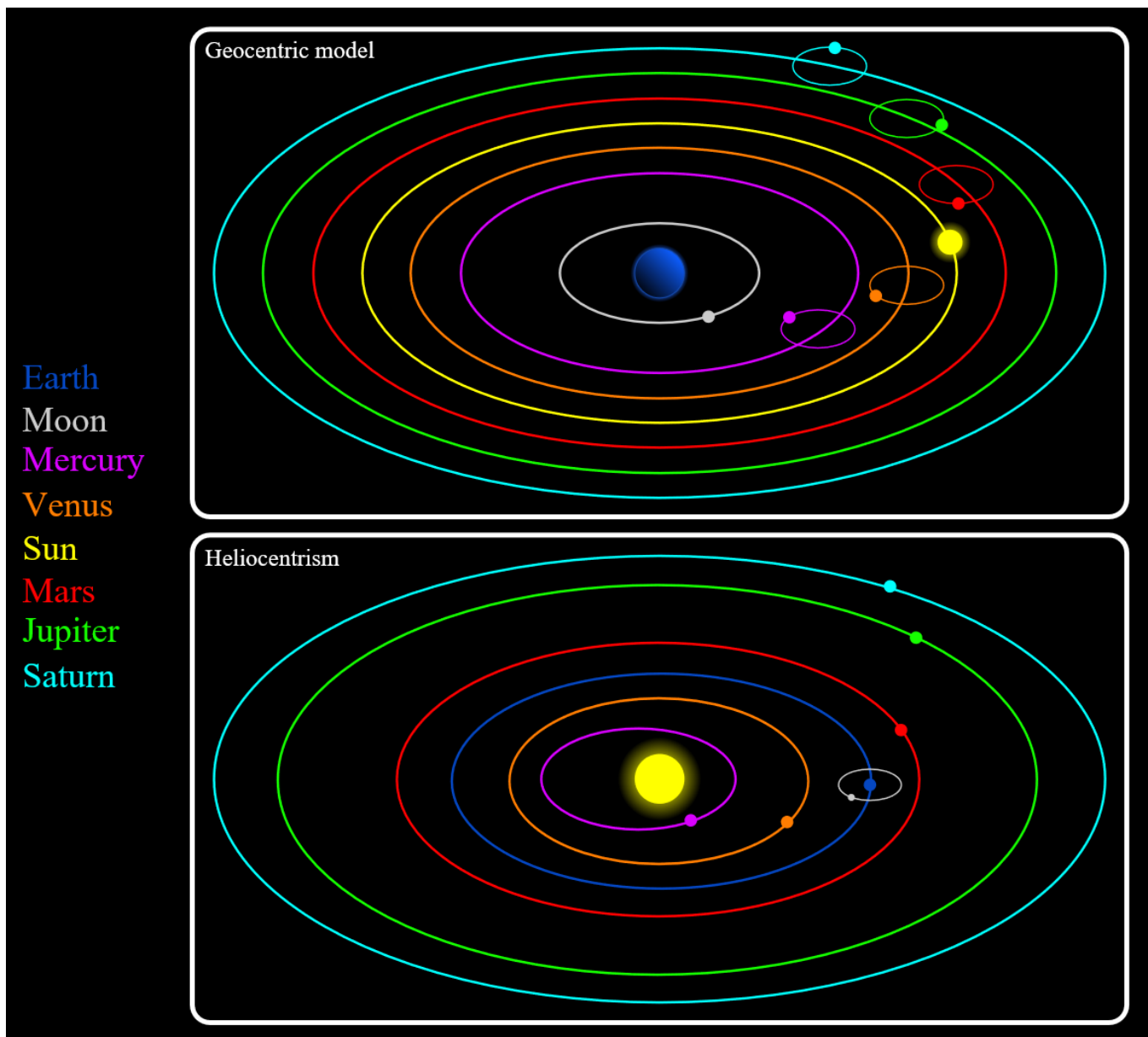
1. Caring for the Earth

In some of the major religions of the world, attitudes toward nature and the environment have many things in common. There are parallels concerning humankind as an agent, steward, or caretaker of nature and the natural world.

Many religions have **creation stories** that impart humankind with a unique potential and capacity for seeing the union between creator and created. Many responsibilities might go along with that knowledge and wisdom.

The otherness and the unity of opposites have therefore been prominent in the study halls and the forest trails of religious life on the planet. At different times in history, the homework of knowing exactly how to respond to nature, how to live in the environment responsibly, and how to make sense of it as an Other and simultaneously as an intrinsic part of us, has been a real task.

With the birth of modern science, these questions have been stirred up even more. The Earth was turned on its head in the mid-16th century. It was thrust out of its comfort zone as the center of the universe. The sun was recognized as the focal point for the planetary solar system. While many ancient traditions may have understood this, it wasn't known by modern science until then.



Christianity and the other religions that followed the lead of the revolution in science had to reassess the role of humankind and the Earth adrift now in an even more unfathomable universe. In many cases, religion therefore became more of an anchor than science.

In the Hebrew and Christian Bibles in the book of Genesis, there is a recounting of God's creation of the universe, Earth, all the creatures, and Man. In Genesis 1:28, it says, "And God blessed them. And God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth and subdue it. And have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the Earth."

There has historically been tension over the issue of what and how to conduct ourselves in relation to this planet Earth, how to be and behave.



DID YOU KNOW

"Behave" actually comes from an old English word "behabben," meaning "to contain."

This Bible passage has been interpreted in different ways. The notion of dominion is sometimes taken to be a very anthropocentric, or human-centered, attitude. Some environmentalists, therefore, see an incompatibility between their efforts and the words of the Bible. However, many Christian organizations are very much involved in environmentalism, conservation, and education on the subject.

In the **Qur'an**, there's a deep respect and understanding of the environment and the Earth as a sacred life. It is a reflection of truth. If attentive and responsive to its needs, it's understood in Islam that humans can gain great recompense or reward.

"There is none amongst the believers who plants a tree, or sows a seed, and then a bird, or a person, or an animal eats thereof, but it is regarded as having given a charitable gift [for]"

Al-Bukhari, III:513 (Hadith)



TERMS TO KNOW

Creation Stories

Narratives, taken to be true by a particular culture, that explain various ideas on how the world came into being.

Qur'an

The sacred or holy text for Muslims.

2. Dharmic Ethics

According to Buddhism, the suffering that seems inevitable along this journey does have a remedy. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, found this way of enlightened being in the world after traveling the roads of two extremes: asceticism and self-indulgence.

This path is known as the **Middle Way**. The teaching of Buddhism, like other traditions, cautions that too much human-centered activity can have negative impacts on the cosmic order of which the Earth is a vital part. Buddhism speaks to the importance of allowing the Earth's voice in the course of creation, humans, society, and environment.

Hinduism's ancient art of medicine and healing, called Ayurveda, also emphasizes this principle of balance. The tradition refers to the property or the primal motive force and intelligence behind the universe. These principles in both Buddhism and Hinduism are related **dharmic ethics**.

Gandhi (full name Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi) offered great inspiration in this direction, having seen the power of colonization and industrialization and their effects on the natural world.

There have been many prophets who voiced the truth about this delicate relationship between humankind and the environment. These include people such as Muhammad in Islam, Gandhi, many mystics from the Middle Ages, and maybe even some modern-day environmentalists.



TERMS TO KNOW

Middle Way

The path recommended by Buddha to achieve peace and liberation, or Nirvana.

Dharmic Ethics

A set of ethical/moral teachings based upon cause and effect found in Hindu and Buddhist teachings.

Gandhi

A 20th-century Hindu political and religious leader who pioneered the ideas of satyagraha, or "soul force," and ahimsa, or "total nonviolence," in his struggle to liberate people in India from British colonial rule.



SUMMARY

The religious duty of **caring for the Earth** stretches back farther than you can know. The idea of being responsible for the planet is present in many religions. **Dharmic ethics** are from Hindu and Buddhist teachings, and related to humanity's relationship with the environment.

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