

Seyyed Hossein Nasr with Ramin Jahanbegloo, *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought*, introduction by Terry Moore
Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010. 373 pages. hbk.
Notes and index

In Search of the Sacred, as the subtitle indicates, lets readers in on a wide-ranging conversation between Seyyed Hossein Nasr, one of the world's most prolific Muslim intellectuals, and his cousin, Ramin Jahanbegloo, about Nasr's life and thought. Terry Moore provides a fine, admirably concise introduction, which, like many introductions to Nasr's thought, occasionally borders on the hagiographic.

Those who are relatively unfamiliar with Nasr's life, let alone his thought, will learn a lot from this highly readable book and, hopefully, be inspired to read some, or more, of his prodigious oeuvre. It would be of particular interest to students of Islam, comparative religion, religious studies, philosophy of religion, political philosophy and theory, and traditional studies. Those who are familiar with Nasr's work, meanwhile, may not learn much that is new here, although they may gain a different perspective or new insights on certain aspects of Nasr's thought. At times, it feels as though you are sitting in the same room as Nasr and Jahanbegloo, which is certainly a treat.

Having said that, if the book has one failing, it is that a reader who is more familiar with Nasr's work may occasionally be frustrated by its

failure to address certain specific aspects of Nasr's thought in more detail, aspects that are sometimes equally difficult to tease out of his own writings. For example, his discussion of harmony among religious traditions on the esoteric level and discord among such traditions on the exoteric level (290) is conspicuous for its lack of any substantial discussion of the political implications of this. This is all the more so given his remarks about the necessity of religion to determine the principles by which society should be governed—principles which must be expressed publicly, if I understand him correctly (314).

The first half of the book concentrates mostly on Nasr's life experiences, while the second half focuses primarily on his thought. The book is divided into nine parts. Among other things:

- readers will learn about his childhood in Iran
- his departure for America in the fall of 1945 at the tender age of twelve
- his years at MIT and Harvard, “the most important intellectual crisis” of his life (38)
- his ensuing quest for ultimate truth
- his discovery of the traditionalist writers René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon, who have profoundly influenced his thinking
- his return to Iran in the summer of 1958 and the challenges he faced there as an academic trying to revive traditional learning—and, especially, the study of Muslim and Persian philosophy, arts, and architecture in an academic environment heavily influenced by modern Western, especially French, secular ideas
- the nature of his controversial relationship with the Shah and the circumstances surrounding his exile to the United States just before the Iranian Revolution
- his critique of modernism through the lens of tradition
- his ideas about art and architecture, and specifically Islamic art
- the important role he sees for Sufism in interreligious dialogue, albeit on the “supra-formal,” esoteric level (290)
- and the European, indeed, Christian origin of the distinction between secular and sacred law and the social and political implications of this

What most distinguishes Nasr from so many other Muslim intellectuals writing in English today is that, rather than apologizing for Islam and attempting to demonstrate that Islam and modern, or post-modern, West-

ern, secular liberalism are somehow perfectly compatible—which is surely neither accurate nor particularly interesting—Nasr has made it his mission to interrogate and critique Western secularism and modernism, which he distinguishes from modernity, both in terms of what he calls “traditional Islam” and what he considers tradition as such. Here, the influence of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon is particularly evident in his thought. While Terry Moore also discusses Nasr’s efforts to facilitate and promote meaningful dialogue among different religious traditions in the book’s introduction, Nasr discusses this aspect of his thought all too obliquely in this book, which focuses primarily on the traditional aspect of his thought and his critique of modernism, for which he is most famous.

As a young Iranian transplanted to the United States when he was only twelve years old, Nasr was immersed in American culture from an early age. Wanting to know the nature of things, as he describes it in this book, he went on to study physics at MIT and the philosophy of science at Harvard University. He had a promising career ahead of him as a great physicist. But a fateful encounter with Bertrand Russell in the 1950s would completely change his perspective. As Nasr explains, Russell told him in no uncertain terms that modern physics has nothing to do with the discovery of the nature of things; rather, it has to do with mathematical structures. This precipitated what Nasr calls “the most important intellectual crisis” of his life (38). “Why am I wasting my time studying physics?” he asked himself. “What is the nature of the world?” he wondered. “What is reality? What is the Truth? Is there Truth in the absolute sense? Who am I and what am I doing here?” These questions, he says, “tormented” his “soul” (41).

Ironically, then, Bertrand Russell, an avowed atheist and author of *Why I Am Not A Christian*, set Nasr on a path that would ultimately see him return to Iran and reaffirm with great enthusiasm the truth of the Muslim tradition of his birth. In so doing, however, he by no means denied the truth of other religious traditions. Instead, he became a disciple of the perennial philosophy. Broadly speaking, this philosophy holds that all authentic traditions, which can only have as their ultimate source that Divine Principle which alone is real, share the same, fundamental, esoteric vision of that which alone is ultimately true. Nasr has made it his mission to explain and draw out the implications of this.

Nasr’s life has clearly been an incredible journey. His ideas have profoundly touched the lives of so many students. We shall be forever in his cousin’s debt for giving us this book, in which, over the course of in fact

several conversations, not just one, we can know just that much more about a truly unique contemporary, but adamantly not modern, Muslim thinker.

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