

The Need for a Sacred Science: An Intellectual Defence of the Tradition

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Looking through humanity's experience of history one finds, in a variety of ways, a tendency to go beyond time.¹ This was true in premodern man and is equally prevalent in the postmodern view of human spirituality, even though postmodernism as an entity has failed to recognize the need and logic of such an idea.² In response, contemporary religious thinkers, philosophers, and spiritualists have argued for the revival of "tradition," religious values, and spirituality. Some of the main proponents of this "traditionist school" (p. 53) are Huston Smith, Frithjof Schuon, Gai Eaton, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, and, of course, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Nasr has written on several topics within the field of Islamics as well as other related disciplines. However, the major portion of his writings have been permeated with such themes as *scientia sacra*, perennial philosophy, and the revival of spiritual traditions. These are indicative of his concern for and commitment to the cause of the revival of tradition. In the words of Jane Smith, he is the "defender of the sacred."³

His works on Islam, especially on Sufism, the philosophy of religion, Shi'ite thought, and various topics in world religions are too innumerable to be accounted for here.³ But Nasr's relevance extends far beyond the areas of Islamic studies and comparative religion, for he writes for the specialist and for the wider public and appeals to those who are interested not only in religion and spirituality as such but also in their interrelation to philosophy, science, social science, policy making, art, and youth issues. Above all, Nasr provides material for those who simply seek to understand life's deeper mysteries. It has been rightly pointed out that Nasr has been

one of the leading figures in . . . the "neo-traditionist" movement in modern Islam and has contributed enormously to the enrichment of ideas earlier propounded by Rene Guenon. [Further] his defense of the "whole and integral tradition of Islam" separates him from other contemporary Shi'ite Muslim thinkers and brings him closer to the mainstream of Islamic thought.⁴

The two most important questions that come to mind as soon as one encounters the book under review are "What is a 'sacred science'?" and "How can the sacred and science be combined into one?" As Nasr himself contends in his introduction, it is rather "strange that one should speak of the need for a sacred science in a world where not everyone understands what is meant" by such a science (p. 1). In the modern world, where more and more people are becoming convinced that nothing is sacred, the very idea that there is a "sacred science" is brilliantly bold. It is a slap in the face of the kind of postmodernity for which everything is relative and nothing is absolute.

Science, as understood throughout this book, is not to be confused with the modern usage of the word "science," which rests on its having to do with what is "phenomenal" or the physical world. Sacred science, on the other hand, corresponds to the Latin *scientia sacra* and here refers to the "application of metaphysical principles to the macrocosm as well as the microcosm, the natural as well as the human worlds" (p. 2) in particular. In other words, it is the science that incorporates the physical as well as the metaphysical, the natural as well as the psychological (or rather parapsychological) phenomena. It is an attempt on Nasr's part to revive the traditional and for the most part forgotten "modes of knowledge" that present themselves as an "alternate" science so to speak, or, should I say a range of "sacred sciences in the context of . . . many spiritual and intellectual traditions" (p. 2ff).

. . . triumphs of modern science went to man's head in something of the way rum does, causing him to grow loose in his logic. He came to think that what science discovers somehow casts doubt on things it does not discover; that the success it realizes in its own domain throws into question the reality of domains its devices cannot touch.⁵

Therefore, it is the science of postmedieval Europe that is to be contested here: secular, mundane, and singular levelled as it is.⁶ As Nasr writes: "Rationalistic thought in the West has [reduced] both the objective and subjective poles of knowledge to a single level" (p. 15), whereas the traditional thought (and here there is no dichotomy between eastern and western) is based on a "hierarchic vision of reality." In other words, reality is multifaceted in the sense that levels of reality range from the subjective to the objective: "Not only are there many levels of reality or existence stretching from the material plane to the Absolute . . . but there are also many levels of subjective reality or consciousness, many envelopes of the self," so to speak.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, which deals with the "context" for understanding and the "cultivation of Sacred Science," involves discussions on God, self, and time. Part Two deals with the unity and the diversity of the divine and the human, respectively. Part Three pre-

sents the views on the traditional and modern sciences and includes a chapter on nature's spiritual significance. Part Four is, in essence, a final argument in favor of the tradition and the sacred science as it deals with such modern concepts as the environmental crisis, progress, and Hans Kung's theological modernism. And, finally, a postscript sums up the whole thesis.

What is remarkable here is the breadth of themes that Nasr draws from—a host of religious as well as intellectual traditions—for the arguments given in favor of his thesis. In the process, he makes valuable comparisons between various religious traditions and cites examples from each. In this way, he tends to portray a continuous and unbroken thread across the traditions of the world. It seems as if these traditions, or at least the particular perspectives being presented here, are all bound together in complete harmony.

There are numerous conceptual as well as descriptive comparisons across traditions, such as the veil (*ḥijāb* and *mayā*) (p. 8); *nafs* and *rūh* with *anima* and *spiritus* (p. 15). A quote from the treatise on traditional metaphysics propounded by Coomaraswamy—"for to know is ultimately to know the Self"—is compared with the hadith that "He who knoweth himself knoweth his Lord" (p. 16).

There are other parallels between *al insān al kāmīl*, *purūṣa* and the divine *logos* (p.16); self and *ātman*; *al qiyāmah al kubrā*, *mahāpralaya*, and *apocatastasis* (p. 31); grace and *barakah* (p. 35); and so on. Three ways of approaching the divine in a "schematic fashion" are defined as the ways of "work, love, and knowledge," which here correspond conveniently to Hinduism's three *mārgas*, namely, *karma mārga*, *bhakti mārga*, and *jnāna mārga*. In Islam they are correspondingly *makhāfah*, *maḥabbah*, and *ma'rifah* (pp. 38; 58-59). These approaches reflect a certain hierarchy that is inherent in the way human beings utilize/follow them. Followers of these approaches are further classified into a hierarchy of "human types" that, according to the "religious perspective, [correspond] to . . . [the above-mentioned] modes of approach to the Ultimate Reality," namely, the *muslim* (the one who submits), the *mu'min* (the one who has acquired faith), and the *muḥsin* (the "possessor of spiritual virtue)." In the ancient Greek tradition, they are similarly referred to as the *hylikoi*, *psychoi*, and *pneumatikoi* (pp. 58-59). Other parallels, which may seem rather far-fetched, include *Sunyata* and Yahweh, and Vedic sacrifices and Muslim daily prayers, where these are considered as equivalents to each other (p. 60).

In understanding many difficult terms and concepts, it would be of great help if the reader is familiar with such earlier writings of Nasr as *Knowledge and the Sacred*,⁷ *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines*,⁸ and *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*.⁹ Moreover, it is important to know that Nasr writes within the mode of what is known as the perennialists or, as he himself refers to them, as those who are part of the "traditionist school"¹⁰ (pp. 53-54) and draws upon their writings as his primary source for the vindication of the tradition.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, Nasr wrote this book as an umbrella that covers the entirety of traditions rather than seeking to emphasize just the Islamic tradition.¹² However, he has influenced many contemporary scholars, among them Osman Bakar and Ziauddin Sardar,¹³ who argue for the recognition of Islamic science as a viable basis for Muslim social and educational constructs in the modern age.

Nasr calls for a thorough review of the traditional worldview as the central and perhaps the only viable solution to modern humanity's problems (p. 15). As the loss of the sacred in this technological age has created a vacuum in human lives, some scholars have compared secularization with dehumanization.¹⁴ And since the sacred is "intrinsic to our experience of genuine self-transcendence," it is impossible to achieve it without the "ceaseless renewing of our existential questions concerning life's meaning, faith, evil, love, and hope."¹⁵ Berger has called these existential questions "signals of transcendence"¹⁶ that depend on our knowledge of God, or as the Sufi would say, on our *maqām* (spiritual station). For Nasr, the only way to achieve such knowledge is via the "twin sources of metaphysical knowledge and certitude, namely revelation and intellection" (p. 7).

Nasr's emphasis is on the human condition that, from a traditional perspective, is in ever-decadence due to its being disjointed and removed from the center.¹⁷ Therefore, human beings in their current state live a life "removed from the Origin on a circumference distanced from the Center" (p. 25), and are imprisoned in the cage of time—"suspended," as it were, between it and eternity. As a result, humanity is neither "a purely temporal creature nor a being of the Eternal Realm" (p. 25). The whole purpose in attempting to understand "the nature of man is to become aware of his existential situation" or, in other words, to go beyond time.

The concept of going beyond time is an important feature of the worldview of traditional spirituality as part and parcel of the sacred sciences that this spirituality claims to apply. It is, however, explored in other disciplines as well.¹⁸ Modern humanity, as perceived through the eyes of such western ideologies as Marxism and existentialism, is the "man who is, insofar as he *makes himself, within history*."¹⁹ This discovery of "historical man" in the West symbolizes a steep appreciation of "history" as against the "archetypal" meaningful existence of the "primal man."²⁰ It is, in other words, putting humanity in the cage of history, whereas traditionally speaking, humanity was free of this cage. Humanity has moved from what Eliade calls the "metaphysical 'valorization' of human existence" to the enslavement in time.²¹

For premodern humanity, the abolition of time was not something imposed upon it, but was rather a natural way of looking at life that was meaningful and real only insofar as it was "archetypal and paradigmatic." In this worldview, humanity is content with "imitation" of the "exemplary model" that exists parallel to its own illusory existence. In other words human beings cease to be in order to be, and the ritual and symbolic gestures of the "archetype" assume the only reality that is possible.²² This

archetypal individual's primal spiritual and intellectual heritage is constituted by what is known as the "primordial tradition" (p. 57) through the medium of *philosophia perennis* that, in its turn, is concerned primarily with tradition in general as well as traditions (religious or philosophical) (p. 57). The *philosophia perennis* upholds the primordial tradition that is inherent in and underlies each tradition as its essence and that is the juncture of unity for all religious traditions (p. 57). *Philosophia perennis*—and to this should be added *universalis*—is

a knowledge which has always been and will always be and which is of universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing with universal principles. This knowledge which is available to the intellect is, moreover, contained at the heart of all religions or traditions (p. 54).

In conclusion, it should be noted that there are a few typographical errors here and there (p. 4, n. 2; 30, 34-35, 187, etc.) but for the most part it is a very impressive volume. In its content, it is a challenge not only to those who do not regard anything as sacred but also to those who do, and to those who not only believe in metaphysical realities but also seek a glimpse of some of them, even though in the final analysis, "it's always that path that chooses the man, and not the man who choose the path."²³

Endnotes

1. In the words of Mircea Eliade, primitive societies have always made every effort to "revolt against concrete, historical time, [essentially due to] their nostalgia for a periodical return to the mythical time of the beginning of things, to the 'Great Time.'" See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), ix. See also below.

2. Huston Smith, in his *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroads, 1989), argues for the primacy of the metaphysical aspect in the human situation as against the postmodern emphasis on deconstruction. See also Ibrahim Abu-Rabi's review article of this book in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (September 1990): 235-56.

3. Jane I. Smith, "Seyyed Hossein Nasr: Defender of the Sacred and Islamic Traditionism," in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

4. Sulayman S. Nyang and Mumtaz Ahmad, "The Muslim Intellectual Emigre in the United States," *Islamic Culture*, 59 (3 July 1985): 289, note 13.

5. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 34.

6. Perennialists like Nasr have mainly focused on the two "quintessentially modern movements . . . [which] are connected to the rise and total pervasiveness of scientific method and its attendant technology. The first is positivism, . . . [which] is rooted in the paradigm of seventeenth- through early twentieth-century science, [and] has its wider expression in scientism." The second is hermeneutics, which is "rooted in a rejection of the metaphysics implicit in positivism, [and which] receives expression in historicism. From a perennialist perspective, however, both are reductionist," since both present a

"broken image" of the modern individual or rather a "one dimensional man," to use Herbert Marcuse's term. Sheldon R. Isenberg and Gene R. Thursby, "Esoteric Anthropology: 'Devolutionary' and 'Evolutionary' Orientations in Perennial Philosophy," *Religious Traditions*, 7-9 (1984-1986): 180.

7. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981.

8. London: Thames and Hundson, 1978.

9. London: Longman, 1975.

10. As mentioned above these are, in addition to Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Gai Eaton, such thinkers as Rene Guenon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Marco Pallis.

11. For example, he himself points out that his source for quotations from traditional sources concerning time and eternity are taken from Coomaraswamy (p. 39; n. 1).

12. He reflects upon almost every major tradition, including Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Taoism.

13. See Osman's recent *Tawhid and Science: Essays on the History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Penang, Malaysia: Secretariat for Islamic Philosophy and Science, 1990), Sardar's *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come* (London: Mansell, 1985), and numerous other books published by Mansell (London) and others.

14. James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 411.

15. Ibid. See also Daniel Bell, "The Return of the Sacred," in *The Winding Passage* (Cambridge, MA: ABT Press, 1980).

16. Peter Berger, "Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, no. 2 (June 1974).

17. Nasr speaks elsewhere of a "pollution of spiritual revolt," which implies that the human revolt against the Absolute is the main cause of the spiritual decadence of the modern age. See his *Sufi Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), 162.

18. The idea that there is a "reality" possible or that there is a kind of existence/awareness beyond the limitation of time is found in all "primitive" cultures. Freud has spoken of the subconscious as devoid of the sense of time. In the subconscious, there are what Freud calls "conative impulses" that are there forever. They are indestructible and "can only be recognized as belonging to the past . . . when they have been made conscious . . ." He contends further that "there is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time, there is no recognition of the passage of time, and . . . no alteration in its mental processes is produced . . ." This leads us to think that time can be meaningless to certain human states, which are mental and can be called "spiritual." Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 74. Cf. Wahiduddin Khan, *Madhab aur Jadid Challenge* (New Delhi: Maktabat al Risalah, 1987), 95ff.

19. Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), ix. Emphasis added.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 34. Qur'an 30:30.

23. Nasr in Jeff Zalesky's "The Long Journey," *Parabola* 10, no. 1 (1985): 41.

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