

In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought

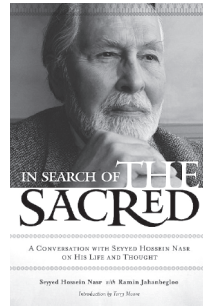
By Seyyed Hossein Nasr interviewed by Ramin Jahanbegloo

Introduction by Terry Moore

(Praeger, Santa Barbara, California, USA, 2010)

Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani

Seyyed Hossein Nasr requires no introduction to the readers of this journal. He is one of the foremost living intellectuals, a renowned scholar who has produced (and continues to produce) an impressive corpus of work in fields as diverse as Islamic studies, philosophy, science, history, art, architecture, and the environment, and is arguably the leading representative in the West of the perennial philosophy. He has made enormous contributions to Islamic thought, to his own Iranian culture and heritage, and beyond these areas, to a universal humanistic thought rooted in Tradition—and for all of which he has been recognized by being the first non-European (and first Muslim) to deliver the famed Gifford lectures on theology at Edinburgh, the privilege of presenting the Cadbury lectures on the environment, and being only the 28th philosopher inducted by peer-recognition into the prestigious Library of Living Philosophers (along with such predecessors as Einstein, Russell, and Sartre). In fact, the volume on Nasr, published by the Library of Living Philosophers under the title “*The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*” (2001), contains both an intellectual autobiography of Nasr as well as a series of critical essays and responses, and so covers much of the same territory as the book under review. However, there are several reasons why a reader would also want to read *In Search of the Sacred: A Conversation with Seyyed Hossein Nasr on His Life and Thought*.



First, as a series of conversations (recorded in Washington, DC in 2000-2001) between Nasr and a close family member (also an Iranian philosopher), the book employs an interview format in which Nasr's views are presented in a different context to his more formal writings. Anyone who has had the privilege of hearing Nasr in private conversation or speaking *ex tempore* at conferences or lecture halls will have experienced something of the taste of his stimulating and engaging style, and the breadth of his protean intellect, which are abundantly in evidence in this book.

Second, the interview format also lends itself well to allowing probing questions to be posed, with follow-up where required. While there are some paths not taken and areas not covered (notably, the infamous events of 9/11 and their aftermath—which presumably post-dated the interviews, hence their omission; and also Nasr's views on Khomeinism and on the present political regime in Iran—presumably this omission was deliberate, and made for the reasons expressed by Nasr in his reply to Lucian Stone in the volume on him in the Library of Living Philosophers in 2001, the same time as the interviews conducted by Jahanbegloo), nevertheless the interviewer explores such areas as, for example, Nasr's personal religious practices (in the context of whether he is a spiritual academic rather than a spiritual practitioner) and his intellectual influences, which provide insights into his thought that add to our understanding not only of him as a person but, more important, of his intellectual vision.

Third, the book will be accessible to anyone encountering Nasr's work for the first time, and provides a good introductory overview of his life, thought, and influence, while allowing a glimpse of his captivating intellectual charisma, as well as offering a survey of the range and profundity of his intellectual preoccupations. The themes of the book are clearly defined, with useful headings and explanatory notes (though there are a few areas where the book could have benefited from better editing).

The book begins with a dual introduction; the first is by Jahanbegloo, who describes the book as “a sort of intellectual memoir” focusing on Nasr's “quest for the sacred and his search for truth”; and the second is by Nasr's friend, Terry Moore, whose introduction titled “Who is Seyyed Hossein Nasr?” is in some ways fashioned along the lines of Nasr's

own introduction to his edition of *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*—Schuon was, like Nasr is, an intellectual giant, and a major influence on Nasr's inner life and thought.

The book is divided into nine different sections, of which Parts One through Four are largely biographical, while Parts Five through Nine comprise an intellectual survey of Nasr's views in a wide range of areas, including, among others, religion, spirituality, tradition, modernism, the environment, globalism, Western images of Islam, art, Sufism, interreligious dialogue, and secularism.

Part One deals with Nasr's childhood, his early memories of Iran, and his early influences, in particular the seminal influence of his father (who instilled in his son a love of knowledge and good character) and mother (though there were early differences of ideas between them concerning tradition and modernism—a debate that was to continue to occupy him later in life). From the earliest days, it was evident that Nasr possessed special talents. For example, he recalls one episode of outdoing a revered elder and family friend in a contest of verses (*musha'irab*) at a very young age (Nasr had memorized thousands of verses of traditional Persian poetry by the age of eight).

Part Two deals with the period 1945 to 1958, after Nasr was sent by his father to be educated in America, and his years at Peddie, MIT and Harvard. Much of this is material that Nasr has covered in greater detail in his intellectual autobiography—though there are a few new details here, particularly as regards his influences, and, for example, his views on Heidegger (“he never understood what *Sein* is in itself in the Sadrian sense of the term”).

Part Three, which covers the period after Nasr returned to Iran, from 1958 to 1979, contains much new material that has not—to this reviewer's knowledge—appeared elsewhere in English, and is of great interest. Nasr discusses his pursuit of a traditional education from teachers such as Sayyid Muhammad Kazim Assar, Allamah Tabataba'i, and Sayyid Abu'l-Hasan Qazwini, as well as his enormously influential activities in various educational and cultural projects in Iran which he pursued while maintaining a prodigious teaching schedule, training students of whom many, such as William Chittick and Sachiko Murata, are renowned in their own right (the book lists an impressive array of several generations of students whom Nasr has trained), research

and publication programs (bringing to light important traditional texts in Islamic and Persian philosophy, largely unknown and neglected in the West—in particular, the works of Mulla Sadra, whose works Nasr introduced to Henry Corbin, Toshihiko Izutsu, and Fazlur Rahman), and at the same time developing influential contacts with Western intellectuals (most notably Corbin, with whom Nasr collaborated extensively). He speaks passionately about the “remarkable gatherings” with his traditional teachers and with Corbin—whom he introduced to his traditional teachers (Nasr describes their meetings as “very important in the intellectual history of 20th century Iran and more generally in the meeting between Islam and the West on the highest intellectual level”)—and of their influence on him (referring to his beloved teacher, Allamah Tabataba’i, Nasr describes one memorable encounter in the following terms: “It was as if the walls were speaking with him”).

Nasr devotes some time to discussing Corbin, their difference over the latter’s criticisms of Titus Burckhardt, Corbin’s evolving views about Tradition and Islam, his personal religious inclinations and gifts (“He was a kind of hermeneut of the angelic world...He always looked for the inner sense of things.”), and their various collaborations (Nasr refers to his editing of certain works by Suhrawardi at Corbin’s behest—a monumental project that occupied ten years of Nasr’s life—as “one of the major achievements of my life”).

Nasr also discusses at some length his views on education (integral, not compartmentalized—knowledge for wisdom’s sake and for the perfection of the being) and of the numerous ambitious reforms he instituted in Iranian education, including his work in the Faculty of Letters, as Vice Chancellor of Tehran University, in the cause of integrating science and Persian philosophy while President at Aryamehr University, and his major contributions as the founder of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy (which was modeled after the distinguished French Academy, the *Institut International de philosophie*, of whom Nasr was the first Iranian member). He discusses candidly the personal price he had to pay for his indefatigable work in his education reforms and the difficult decisions he faced in doing so (the quelling of student revolts, balanced with his championing of student causes—which caused him to “soil his hands” and thereby to gain many enemies, in one notable case resulting in an attempt on Nasr’s own life, and in another case, where Nasr

intervened to obtain the freedom of one of his students after entreaties to him from the student's family, resulting in an act of terrorism by the freed student that cost several lives).

Nasr also acted as a bridge between the imperial court and the clergy, and it is a tragic irony that his championing of traditional Islam may paradoxically have contributed to the empowerment of the clergy in ways that indirectly led to the circumstances of his own exile from his beloved country. While he discusses his own exile, Nasr has chosen—one would imagine for reasons of political sensitivity and to protect certain persons living in Iran under the present regime—not to address publicly and directly the political and theological upheavals in Iran.

Part Four covers the post-exile period, after Nasr left Iran following the Iranian Revolution in 1979. While he has never returned to his native land, it is evident that Nasr maintains a strong nostalgia for the country of his birth, expressed in his passionate interest of its culture, of the beauty of the land, and of the "spiritual presence of Iran" that he carries within his soul. He discusses his own sense of identity (as both an Iranian and a Muslim) and relates this to certain traits in the Persian ability to synthesize the sensual and the spiritual, the particular and the universal—traits of intellectual plasticity that are evident uniquely within Nasr himself.

Parts Five through Nine of the book, which deal with Nasr's views on a wide range of topics, are best addressed in this review by citing some quotations from Nasr, which illustrate his insights and his eloquence.

On the vital importance of esoterism: "There are certain questions that only esoterism can answer, and if religion remains bound to only its exoteric dimension and becomes what we call *qeshbri* (*qishbri*) in Persian, clinging only to the shell and neglecting the kernal, or the *lubb*, then there are certain questions that it cannot answer for its followers, and it faces the danger of disbelief in religion, which happened to a large degree in the modern West." (174)

On Tradition's meta-historicism: "The gaze of tradition rests upon the sacred both in its immutable aspect and in its manifestations. Tradition does not only deal with the ossified or petrified, as has been claimed by its opponents, but with an ever-living reality." (182-183)

On the need for Tradition as a paradigmatic alternative to modernism: "I think that the only paradigm that can replace this modernistic paradigm is an application to our contemporary situation of the perennial philosophy, the creation of a paradigm that goes back to the eternal wisdom." (195-196)

On the need for a radical approach to the environmental crisis: "Many seek to have recourse to better engineering, to what I call cosmetics, to solve the environmental crisis; but what we need is a change of view as to what the meaning of nature is, what our responsibilities towards nature are... We cannot destroy nature without destroying ourselves." (196-197)

On the importance of reviving the sense of the sacred: "I feel that at the present moment in the history of the West, in order to resuscitate a sense of awareness of the spiritual world and of Ultimate Reality, the word *sacred* is seminal. The word *spiritual* has become too diffused." (203)

On his criticism of the Zeitgeist: "We have absolutized time, although this is philosophically absurd, and now we search how we should accommodate ourselves and even our religion to this way of thinking. I am totally opposed to this point of view, and I have stood like a firm tree against a storm during over fifty years of writing on this subject. I have stood for the principle that it is we who must make the times in accordance with our sacred traditions." (213)

On globalization: "I think that the role of Islam, as all the other religions and not only of Islam, should be to prevent the homogenization of humanity and destruction of local religions, cultures, and traditions in the name of global economic warfare. The present shibboleth of globalization is only a name—the poor getting poorer and the rich richer." (221)

On sacred art: "Sacred art cannot transform us until we participate in the spiritual universe that has created it." (251)

On modernism and demythologization: "To kill myth is to secularize the world, to kill the sacred. But that does not mean that every tradition has to express its truths only in purely mythological terms; and yet no tradition can be complete without myths." (254)

On the intellectual impoverishment of modern man: "Modern man can no longer see symbols; he only sees facts." (255)

On integrating art and education: "Traditional civilizations never separated the aesthetic, the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual." (267)

On distinguishing Sufism from Christian mysticism: "Sufism is based more than anything else on *gnosis* in its original sense, on illuminative wisdom and the realization of the oneness of God, a realization that is not possible without love." (276)

On interreligious dialogue (the comments were made before 9/11): "One of the reasons why it is so difficult to have in-depth religious dialogue today is that on the Christian side, where this dialogue began, the esoteric, inner dimension has been to a large extent absent...Islam also needs religious dialogue, which is at the heart of civilizational and cultural dialogue; but Islam is not theologically threatened by the presence of other religions in the same way that Christianity is. But over time engagement in religious dialogue becomes more and more a necessity for Islam as well...I believe that in the deepest religious sense, the presence of other religions and their truths, which confirm the teachings of one's own religion, is a kind of divine compensation for the loss of the homogeneity of the religious ambience which modernism and secularism have brought about." (290-291, 299)

While these few excerpts from the interviews serve to demonstrate the profundity of Nasr's insights, they fail to capture the range of his assessments. There are lengthy discussions in the book of, for example, Nasr's view of Persian culture, of occidental images of Islam, and of the history of modernism and secularism in the West (including its encroachments in the oriental world), which are too detailed to cite in this brief review. For those, and many other, insights, the reader is commended to read the book itself.