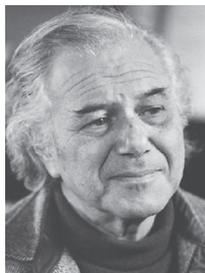


# 'Be Ye Lamps unto Yourselves': Interview with Jacob Needleman

*Interviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*

Professor Jacob Needleman (b. 1934) is no stranger to the readers of the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*, and he will therefore be familiar to the readers of *Sacred Web*; many will recall that he has provided one of the most influential anthologies, what many consider to be a landmark in the field of the Traditionalist or Perennialist studies, through the book that he edited, titled *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism* (1974).<sup>1</sup> Professor Needleman describes his first encounter with the integral metaphysics of the perennial philosophy which may resonate with contemporary seekers:



One of the most interesting intellectual developments of the 1960's was the publication in England of a periodical called *Studies in Comparative Religion*. When it first came across my desk, it had seemed to me merely another gray scholarly journal—an impression that was only strengthened by its stated purpose of presenting essays concerning "traditional studies." Like many Americans, I was put off by the very word "tradition." But I pressed on because I had heard that this journal contained some of the most serious thinking of the twentieth century.... On close reading, I felt an extraordinary intellectual force radiating through their intricate prose. These men were out for the kill. For them, the study of spiritual traditions was a sword with which to destroy the illusions of contemporary man.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> By way of an example, Patrick Laude (b. 1958) has indicated, "*The Sword of Gnosis*, edited by Jacob Needleman in 1974, was instrumental in introducing the perennialist perspective to the English speaking world."

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Needleman, "Foreword," to *The Sword of Gnosis: Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (London: Arkana, 1986), p. 9.

Jacob Needleman is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at San Francisco State University and is the author of numerous books covering a wide array of topics. At the core of all of his works, it could be said that he addresses the ultimate questions which relate to the inner dimension of all religions, what is known as esotericism.

Professor Needleman also had the opportunity to meet and know many of the representatives of the traditionalist school such as Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Marco Pallis (1895–1989), Martin Lings (1909–2005), Joseph Epes Brown (1920–2000), Whittall N. Perry (1920–2005), Huston Smith (b. 1919) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933).

An interesting feature of Professor Needleman's work is his sustained interest in modern psychology and its relationship to the Sacred. He has sought the proper place of modern science by confronting the reductionistic outlook of scientism and advocating in favor of the sacred science underlying the spiritual domain.<sup>3</sup> He has participated in numerous panel presentations and conferences relating to this theme<sup>4</sup> and has also published, edited and translated books on this topic.<sup>5</sup> He has also known personally many of the pioneers and influential individuals within humanistic and transpersonal psychology. While Professor Needleman has conducted many interviews, this one uniquely covers the theme of sacred psychology as it relates to the perennial philosophy.

The interview was conducted on November 4, 2011, at Professor Needleman's home in Oakland, California.

<sup>3</sup> "Psychology, properly so-called, must therefore always be a sacred science". (Jacob Needleman, "Magic and Sacred Psychology," in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* [New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976], p. 138).

<sup>4</sup> See "Psychology, Science, and Spiritual Paths: Contemporary Issues," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1978), pp. 93–111; Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber, "When Is Religion Transformative? A Conversation with Jacob Needleman," in *Spiritual Choices: The Problem of Recognizing Authentic Paths to Inner Transformation*, eds. Dick Anthony, Bruce Ecker and Ken Wilber (New York: Paragon House, 1987), pp. 327–348.

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Binswanger, *Being-in-the-World: Selected Papers of Ludwig Binswanger*, trans. Jacob Needleman (New York: Basic Books, 1963); Jacob Needleman and Dennis Lewis (eds.), *On the Way to Self Knowledge* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Jacob Needleman, "Psychotherapy and the Sacred," in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 107–134; Jacob Needleman, "Magic and Sacred Psychology," in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 138–139; Jacob Needleman, "A Brief Note on Jungianism," in *A Sense of the Cosmos: The Encounter of Modern Science and Ancient Truth* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1976), pp. 130–134; Jacob Needleman, "Psychiatry and the Sacred," in *Consciousness and Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 72–87; Jacob Needleman, "A New Psychology and a New Humanity," in *What is God?* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009), pp. 54–64.

To read the balance of this article, please subscribe to this volume.



# SACRED WEB

A JOURNAL OF TRADITION AND MODERNITY

[www.sacredweb.com](http://www.sacredweb.com)