

From Secular Science to Sacred Science: *The Need for a Transformation*

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Abstract

The article begins with a clarification of the two terms “sacred science” and “secular science.” It then tries to discuss the wide qualitative gap that exists between the two forms of science. On the understanding that it is possible to restore contemporary secular science to its original sacred position, this article further discusses the issue of how this restoration could be realized. However, given the wide scope of the task of restoration in question, the article seeks to focus its discussion on the needed reconstruction of the foundational assumptions of modern science. In this focused discussion we will be making references to a special case study undertaken in 2008 by the so-called Hokkaido Symposium, a small group of thinkers representing the major world religious and spiritual traditions. The main agenda of the Hokkaido Symposium was to reexamine the foundational assumptions of modern science in the light of new knowledge in science itself, particularly in physics and biology, as well as in the light of contemporary knowledge in comparative history and philosophy of science. The reexamination in question, though yet incomplete, has produced a significant finding. A great portion of the assumptions has to be discarded on the basis of both criteria. Another portion may be retained without any modification. The rest of the assumptions need revision or modification. The article concludes with an affirmation of the significance of the reconstruction of the foundational elements of science as a key aspect of the transformation needed if contemporary science is to be restored to its former sacred position.

Introduction

It would be very helpful in avoiding unnecessary confusion, at least for the purpose of this article, if we were to begin a discussion of its title with a clarification of the key words used in it. There are four key words in the topic, namely science, sacred, secular, and transformation. A clarification of these four terms would help us define sacred science and secular science as well as understand the current gulf separating these two forms of science. Knowing the nature and extent of this gulf of separation would in turn help us better appreciate the kind of intellectual challenge posed to all of us who are interested in realizing a transformation of contemporary science, which is generally considered as secular, into sacred science.

In clarifying the meanings of sacred science and secular science we are indebted to the writings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, which have thrown much light on the subject. Nasr is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneering intellectual figures in modern times passionately arguing for the restoration of the idea of the Sacred in all domains of knowledge and thought, particularly the sciences of nature.¹ Nasr explains very clearly the meaning of sacred science in all its grades and forms, the highest position being given to the supreme science of metaphysics as this term is traditionally understood. He defines metaphysics as “the science of the Real, of the origin and end of things, of the Absolute and, in its light, the relative.”² Equivalently, he defines metaphysics as the science, “which deals with the Divine Principle and Its manifestations in the light of that Principle.”³ The two definitions are equivalent, since the Ultimate and Absolute Reality and the Divine Principle both refer to God, Who is the Sacred as such and the source of all that is sacred, while the manifestations of the Divine Principle refer to the domain

¹ Nasr deals with the issue of the relation between knowledge and the sacred in several of his writings, but it is in his magnum opus *Knowledge and the Sacred* first published in 1981 (New York: Crossroad) and reprinted in 1989 (Albany: SUNY Press) that he brings out the full depth and breadth of that relation. For his discussion of the issue, see also his *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Mandala edition, 1976), p. 81. First published under the main title *The Encounter of Man and Nature* in 1968 (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd) and with the same subtitle, the book has undergone numerous editions and reprints as well as translations into numerous languages in all continents but with the original main title shortened to simply *Man and Nature*.

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 1.

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