

What Is the Sacred and How Can We Know It in a Secular World?

By Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate. *Rabbī yasir wa lā ya'sir*: That is a prayer in Arabic from the Qur'an meaning "O God, make things easy and not difficult," and it seems appropriate for this occasion. It is difficult to talk after Mr. Lakhani has expressed so many salient points and so has made redundant much of what I was going to say. So what I have to speak about today is really in a sense an explanation of the basic principles, but perhaps somewhat expanded and elaborated.

Let us begin with an experience we just had. We were all here a few minutes ago when we heard a portion of a Bach cello suite. This would be categorized in today's musicology in the West as secular music, but there is more sacredness in this music than in practically any piece of 19th century European so-called sacred music. I once wrote that the *Coffee Cantata* of Bach, a cantata composed in the name of coffee that had come to Europe at the time of the 18th century, is a piece of music with much more of a sacred presence than all of the masses put to music in the 20th century. This is but an indication of the de-sacralization that has taken place during recent centuries in the West.

The loss of the imprint of the Sacred in human life in the Occident did not in fact take place such a long time ago. It occurred especially in a virulent way during the last two centuries, although it began toward the end of the Middle Ages and the downfall of the medieval worldview

leading to the Renaissance. Music was one of the last disciplines in which the Sacred took refuge after the other arts were secularized. We can see this when we compare the David or the paintings of the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo with the masses of Palestrina. Although the word “secular” comes from Latin and has a traditional root (“*secula/ seculum*”) that has to do with the passage of time, secularism in the modern European understanding of it, whether one considers English, French or other Western languages, is a fairly new word in these tongues and has no equivalent in most non-Western languages. Take any of the primal peoples living here in Western Canada, the Inuit, the Eskimos, anyone like that, and ask them, “How do you say secularism in your language?” They will say that they do not have any equivalent term. Nor does one find its equivalent in Sanskrit, Japanese, or any of the Islamic languages. My own mother tongue is Persian and I have written hundreds of essays and books in it in many of which I have tried to use this term but I have found it very difficult to find a Persian equivalence in the context of what I was writing. Usually one comes up with such borrowed words as *seculār* or *laïc* that are taken from French transposed into Persian. Many Arabs now use the term *‘ilmāniyyah* which has no historical root and is a contrived word created during the last few decades by Arab writers, and in Turkish they use “*laïcisation*” which some even think is a Turkish word. There is in fact no Islamic language with even a word for “secularism” which means that the concept itself is alien to traditional Islamic thought. We must understand, therefore, that the very idea of conceiving of a domain of reality apart from the Sacred and the Presence of God and calling it the “secular” world itself is an anomaly in human history.

Over thousands of years human beings have done many evil things. They have killed each other, invaded each other, robbed each other, but even evil itself was seen in the traditional world in light of the Sacred. Evil itself was not understood in terms of secularism because evil was itself understood religiously. Take for example Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, with its vivid accounts of all kinds of evils and its depictions of people in Hell or the Inferno. Yet, all this is treated from a Christian point of view. It is, therefore, very important not to confuse the idea of worldliness with secularism. The Qur’an speaks often about *al-ākhirah* (the Hereafter) being better than this world (*al-dunyā*). The dichotomy

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