

The Sacred in Education and in the Teachings of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

By Fatima Casewit

It is a great honor for me to be able to take part in this unique conference, and at the same time it has been a daunting challenge preparing for this talk, given the exceptional intellectual capacity of the participants. I would like to thank Mr. Ali Lakhani, not only for organizing this conference once again, but also for all that he has done to promote the outlook of the Sacred, beauty, and tradition in the modern world.

Metaphysical principles

Let us begin from a lofty view of the Sacred in education, by recalling the very precise definition of the Sacred elicited by Frithjof Schuon who formulates the Sacred as “being the presence of the center in the periphery”. The periphery is all of the world around us, and also within us. He also reminds us that the Sacred is of the transcendent order and possesses a character of absolute certainty. Therefore, the Sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into the relativity of this world and life and confers upon perishing things a sort of “texture of eternity” to use Schuon’s words again. As Dr. Nasr has explained on many occasions, the Sacred resides in the nature of Reality Itself. He has further elucidated on the Sacred in saying that the manifestation of Divine Reality in the stream of becoming and the matrix of time is precisely that which possesses the quality of sacredness.

Let us examine the word ‘education’. The definition of the Latin root of education (*educere*) means to lead forth, to draw out, it can even

mean to tow. Metaphysically speaking, this means leading a soul from the periphery of relativity to the Centre, to approach the Absolute, the Divine. Now the Absolute, that is, the Divine Reality, can only be found within the context of a Divine revelation, from within a revealed religion. This is why education was never separate from religion or a religious tradition, until the modern period. The type of knowledge capable of truly leading a soul away from the periphery, from this world to the Center and towards the Divine Reality must be embedded in a revelation, because like revelation, the soul is eternal. Young souls who are not receiving at least a glimmer of the Truth from within a revelation in their education are therefore cut off from the Sacred, and are uniquely focused on this perishing world. Until recently, teaching and learning were never divorced from the Divine Principle, and knowledge itself was considered sacred because it ultimately comes from God, and leads back to God. So keeping the Divine Reality at the center of education and shaping young souls to be open to the Divine presence, to the Sacred, was the aspiration of all educational systems until the modern period.

The manifold faults and challenges of modern Western style public education systems can ultimately be traced back to the loss of a sense of the Sacred in instruction and learning. The same problems facing the project of imposing universal, mass education have been passed on to formally traditional societies who have adopted Western education models. These models were adopted either because of European colonization or through a country's own Westernisation process.

Again, from the metaphysical point of view, modern education absolutizes multiplicity, focusing solely on the periphery. This focus on the world without the Divine Principle translates into a loss of a sense of the Sacred in transmitting knowledge. A loss of a sense of the Sacred results in a loss of discernment in the souls of those students receiving knowledge. This ultimately means a loss of the center, and thus access to it. Following upon this is the inevitable loss of the close teacher-student relationship, characteristic of traditional systems, and resulting in a lack of respect for the wisdom of elders, and a diminishing sense of humility on the part of students. Modern educators uphold what is called "student centered learning" without understanding that all traditional systems were already "student centered", in a deeper sense. Teachers and students or masters and disciples worked in small groups, if not

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