

The Psychology of Seyyed Hossein Nasr in the Tradition of Avicenna: A Preliminary Study

By Laleh Bakhtiar

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

It is an awesome task to speak to and about someone who has been your mentor since the age of 19. That was many, many years ago and as I stand here now, addressing my mentor and this impressive group of intellectuals, I realize that my entire life has been blessed by the presence of Seyyed Hossein, constantly guiding me to the way of illuminated realized knowledge on my return from whence I have come!

We are aware of Seyyed Hossein's Philosophy, he having been the first Muslim to be chosen as a Living Philosopher, but we are less familiar with Seyyed Hossein's Psychology that we call Perennial Psychology or should we call it "The Science of the Soul" as suggested by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos in his essay in *Sacred Web*?

This preliminary study is to situate Seyyed Hossein's Perennial Psychology as an essential sacred science of the traditional world. In doing so, we compare Seyyed Hossein and Avicenna's experiences of the arc of ascent and the journey when their souls wed their intellects in the presence of the light of illumination flowing, as it does, from the traditional arc of descent of the soul.

Why Avicenna? We shall explore their connection, recalling as we do that Seyyed Hossein chose to name his grandson Sina. Seyyed Hossein

has written extensively on the philosophy and psychology of Avicenna so it offers perhaps the best example from his many writings to compare his own Perennial Psychology with that of Avicenna, but there are other reasons for this comparison as will be shown.

As we travel this journey with these two great intellectuals, we will see that they both included a study of the same sciences as they took their intellectual journey towards realized knowledge or Perennial Psychology. Avicenna studied and wrote about traditional Metaphysics, Natural Philosophy, Physics, Psychology, Medicine, Ethics resulting in Gnosis (*irfan*) or Perennial Psychology. Seyyed Hossein: Metaphysics, Natural Philosophy as manifested through the macrocosmic Cosmology, to its microcosmic counterpart, Alchemy, Psychology with references along the way to the Science of Medicine and complete acceptance of the Science of Ethics resulting in Gnosis (*irfan*) or Perennial Psychology. Their journey to this sacred science begins, travels and ends at the same point, recognizing in the words of Seyyed Hossein: "It is always the path that chooses the person, and not the person who chooses the path."¹¹

Based on Seyyed Hossein's definition of a sacred science, we can include his and Avicenna's Perennial Psychology in this category. Seyyed Hossein says: "[A sacred science] is that science which includes the physical as well as the metaphysical, the natural as well as the psychological modes of knowledge."² He continues: "Not only are there many levels of reality or existence stretching from the material plane to the Absolute. . . but there are also many levels of subjective reality or consciousness, many envelopes of the self."³ "Thus, the various sciences become what can be called 'applied metaphysics,'"⁴ as so many signs. Does the Quran not say: *We will cause them to see Our Signs on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is The Truth?*⁵

This Psychology is also a manifestation of universal perennialism as Seyyed Hossein defines is: "A knowledge that has always been and will always be and which is of a universal character both in the sense of existing among peoples of different climes and epochs and of dealing

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1989). *Knowledge and the Sacred*, from Jeff Zalesky's "The Long Journey," *Parabola* 10, no. 1, 41.

² Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993). *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 15.

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993). *The Need for a Sacred Science*, p. 15.

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1993). *The Need for a Sacred Science*, pp. 1-2.

⁵ Laleb Bakhtiar (2007). *The Sublime Quran*, Quranic Verse 41:53.

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