

Nature as a Sacred Book¹

A Core Element of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Philosophical Teachings

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Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to present the main thoughts of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the idea of nature understood as a sacred book and to highlight the meaning and significance of these thoughts for the contemporary world. Nasr is duly acknowledged as one of the greatest philosophers and thinkers of the twentieth century.³ Still pursuing both teaching and writing right into the new century at a rather advanced age,⁴ he is perhaps the most prolific of all contemporary scholars of Islam⁵ and certainly one of the most intellectually influential. As for the idea of nature understood as a sacred book that he expounds,

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³ Nasr enjoys the unique distinction of being thus far the sole Muslim thinker to have the honour of being included in the prestigious series, Library of Living Philosophers along with such world renowned thinkers as George Santayana, Alfred North Whitehead, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Martin Buber, Karl Popper and Jean-Paul Sartre. The Library also welcomed Nasr into the series (in 2001) as the first traditionalist since its volume on Martin Buber (1967). Inclusion in the series would require the publication of a volume containing a number of critical essays with the chosen philosopher's replies to each essay as well as his or her intellectual autobiography and an up-to-date bibliography. On the volume on Nasr, see *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, The Library of Living Philosophers, vol. XXVIII, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr.

⁴ At the time this essay was written Nasr was eighty-one years old (b. 1933).

⁵ For the most updated version of the bibliography of the writings of Nasr, see *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*; pp. 835 - 964.

which we intend to discuss in the following pages, it is undoubtedly a key doctrine in traditional philosophy of nature. In particular, the idea is central to traditional Islamic philosophy and theology of nature. Significantly, in the minds of many people, Nasr the thinker and the captivating idea of the sacredness of nature seem hardly separable. Thanks to his numerous writings authored during the past half a century Nasr helps popularize the idea of nature as sacred and in particular as a sacred book. The growing popularity of the idea, especially in the contemporary West where the secularization of the natural order is widely viewed by its critics for some time now as having reached its terminal point, in turn helps establish the reputation of Nasr as an eminent representative of the traditional school of philosophy of nature in modern times.

The approach I propose to take in this article in establishing the salient features of Nasr's doctrine of the natural order as a sacred book is somewhat "autobiographical" in nature in the sense that it is based on my personal history of intellectual encounters with Nasr's books beginning with *Ideals and Realities of Islam*. This book has had such a profound impact on the formative period of my intellectual and spiritual thought that I have come to consider my first encounter with it as a major new departure in my personal life. Thanks to it I was led to the discovery of the Islamic tradition in its fuller dimensions, and having been intellectually led to the very heart of this tradition I gradually came to better understand the reality of the sacred both in its doctrinal and operational and existential dimensions. I became deeply interested in the quest for the kind of knowledge that tradition claims as having a saving quality and function to deliver man's soul from the imprisonment of the world.⁶ Related to this interest, I was also increasingly attracted to the idea of the world of nature as a sacred book. I view my deep interest in this idea as quite closely related to the numerous spiritual and moral lessons I learnt from my childhood experiences of living very close to the world of nature.

On this very auspicious occasion when we are dedicating this volume to Nasr in honour of his eighty-first birthday I thought it would

⁶ Interestingly, I was reading *Ideals and Realities of Islam* at about the same time that I was reading the book *Deliverance from Error*, an English translation of *Munqidh min al-dalal*, a semi-autobiography of Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, the famed classical Persian theologian and Sufi. The latter book also contributed to my quest for the kind of knowledge that promises salvation of the soul for all seekers of God.

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