

Knowledge and the Sacred: Intellectuality as Spirituality

By Patrick Laude

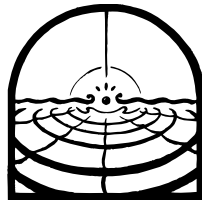
K*nowledge and the Sacred* is arguably Seyyed Hossein Nasr's most central, embracing and synthetic work. It focuses on the nexus of his entire *opus* and perspective, that is the ultimate vocation of mankind as created to know the Divine, and the presence of the latter as *the sacred* in the world and the soul. *Knowledge and the Sacred* considers the heart of the human condition, that is to say knowledge –or the possibility of knowledge, of the Absolute. Moreover, virtually all major areas and disciplines of human sciences and activities are encompassed within the fold of the book, and connected to the essence of knowledge, the *Sophia perennis et universalis* that is the core message of Nasr's contribution. These include metaphysics, cosmology and cosmogony, epistemology, natural sciences, philosophy, psychology and morality, religious institutions and practices, as well as the arts and crafts. Lastly, the synthetic quality of the volume appears in that the rich array of its objects is consistently related to metaphysical principles that shed light on their purpose in relation to the whole, and above all, in relation to the One without which they would be meaningless. In other words, it is a synthesis of sacred knowledge against the backdrop of the modern and post-modern process of desacralization of knowledge and human existence in general. Not unrelated to the previous characterizations of the book is a sense that *Knowledge and the Sacred* is the most explicitly *Maryamī* of Nasr's books, and one may daresay the most Schuonian one, given its relentless focus on the core of knowledge

and the sacred, this gnostic quintessence that Nasr describes as the entelechy of the human condition, and to which he does not hesitate to refer as esoterism, despite likely academic frowning upon this oft-misused term. The Arabic invocatory epigraph to the Holy Virgin, whom Muslims call *Sayyidatnā Maryam*, Our Lady Maryam, is a clear allusion to this lineage and *barakah*, and situates the book under the patronage of the Virgin as Holy *Sophia*, the Seat of Wisdom, or else the Mother of All Prophets. In this connection, one cannot miss the depth of Nasr's intellectual and spiritual debt toward Schuon –be it perhaps a source of discomfort or puzzlement for some, which is humbly and gratefully acknowledged by the author in his introduction: “We wish to express our gratitude especially to Frithjof Schuon whose unparalleled exposition of traditional teachings is reflected, albeit imperfectly, upon many of the pages which follow.”¹ It is also in this book, quite significantly, that perhaps the most strikingly expressive symbolic characterization of Schuon's intellectual function is to be found: “Schuon seems like the cosmic intellect itself impregnated by the energy of divine grace surveying the whole of the reality surrounding man and elucidating all the concerns of human existence in the light of sacred knowledge.”² In aptly suggesting a correlation between Schuon's intellective gift and the “language of the birds,” Nasr points to the manifestation of spiritual wisdom as an inner capacity to decipher the cosmic periphery in all its diversity from the sapiential vantage point of the Center. This is a Solomonic charismatic grace thus described in the *Qur'ān*: “and Solomon said, O mankind! Lo! We have been taught the language of the birds (*mantiq at-tayr*).” (VII, 16) Moreover, the traditional nexus between this gift and the illuminative grace of the invocation, the *mantra* or *dbikr*, is no less relevant in the context of a discussion of Schuon, who once declared, “I would not say like Hallāj that I am the Truth, but I would say I am the *Dbikr*.” One cannot but sense that, *mutatis mutandis*, Nasr's book participates in this *barakah* of universal gnosis in its all-embracing capacity of penetration of intellectual forms and spiritual traditions through the grace of the impersonal intelligence actualized by the *dbikr*, even though the idiom of exposition needed be academic in its modalities. The book was written in a matter of just ten weeks, and

¹ *Knowledge and the Sacred*, State University of New York Press, 1989, p. ix.

² *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p.107.

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