

# The Legacy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

By Terry Moore

## Who is Seyyed Hossein Nasr?<sup>1</sup>

**A**s the famous American philosopher of religion Huston Smith has noted, it is rare indeed for both the highest accolade in philosophy and the highest accolade in theology to be bestowed upon the same individual.

The greatest honor the academic world grants to a living philosopher is the dedication of a volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers* to his work and thought; and the most prestigious recognition a thinker can receive in the field of natural theology is an invitation to deliver the annual Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. In the year 2000, the twenty-eighth volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers* was devoted to the philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, placing him in the company of Einstein, Sartre, Russell, Whitehead, and other luminaries of twentieth-century intellectual life. Fourteen years previously, Nasr had delivered the Gifford Lectures, and the text of these lectures became his magnum opus *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

Who is Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and what makes his work worthy of such international recognition? What does he have to offer our times that is so distinctive as to earn him such honors? This article is my attempt to provide an overview of Nasr's accomplishments.

Nasr's life's work has been to expound and defend Tradition. At first glance, the prominence he gives to Tradition may puzzle the typical reader, because the modern ear hears "tradition" as "nostalgia" and

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article appeared in 2010 as the introduction to Seyyed Hossein Nasr's book *In Search of the Sacred*

assumes that the worldview of the past is false simply because it is outdated. But lurking behind this view is the assumption that our own vision is not subject to any kind of blindness peculiar to our times.

What makes Nasr a revolutionary thinker is his ability to throw into relief, in light of perennial truths, the false yet unstated cultural constructs that frame our vision of the world. Our metaphysical assumptions about the cosmos, which constrain the way we see the world around us, are so pervasive that we do not realize they exist at all. We believe, perhaps only half-consciously, that other times looked at the cosmos through the filter of their own cultural biases, but that we moderns have no such filter. We think we simply see the world as it really is.

Nasr offers not only an exposure of our own false ideas, but a restoration of an unfragmented vision of Reality, including the cosmos, that is rooted in something more stable than the styles of thought peculiar to any specific age or culture. Nasr makes a sharp and crucial distinction between tradition in the accustomed sense of the word, something like “folkways,” which indeed simply means customs that have been passed down from generation to generation, whose value lies in their power to unify us with our ancestors; and Tradition with a capital “T,” which is our link with the Sacred, for which Nasr offers this definition: “the Sacred is the Eternal Absolute Truth as It manifests Itself in our world. It is the appearance of the Eternal in time, the Center in the periphery, of the Divine in the world of space and time. The Sacred is present in Itself and in Its manifestations.” It is this connection with the Sacred that anchors Nasr’s worldview.

The reader who believes in a religion whose claim to truth he accepts will understand the distinction between these two meanings of “tradition.” Religions claim not to be merely human inventions, but to have their source in revelation—a gift given directly by God to man. Now, if revelation is given at a certain point in time, but is intended to enlighten future generations as well, then there must be some means of transmitting its content through the ages. Nasr locates this vehicle of transmission not only in the doctrines, but also in the rites and sacred art of what he terms “true religions.” Thus the value of the past is not derived from its temporal distance from us, but from the connection it gives us, through revelation, to the Sacred here and now. For this reason, it is *only* through Tradition that we can be fully liberated from

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